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## African American Women Attaining and Maintaining the Position of Superintendent

Twyla Harris

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AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ATTAINING AND MAINTAINING  
THE SUPERINTENDENCY

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of  
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POSITION OF SUPERINTENDENT

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## ABSTRACT

There is an underrepresentation of African American women in the position of school district superintendent. The purpose of this research was to uncover the barriers and challenges African American women face both as aspiring and sitting superintendents. To gain a lived experience perspective on the problem, five African American women superintendents were interviewed. The primary research question was: How have African American female superintendents attained and successfully held the superintendent position? Using narrative inquiry, interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for the discovery of common themes. Findings include the value of networking for mentoring and support, accepting and bearing the burden of being “twice as good,” taking calculated risks, and always keeping in mind as an African American female you are not as likely to be afforded a second chance “do-over” as your White peers - you need to get it right the first time. Strategies, practices, and long-term solutions for ameliorating these barriers and challenges are proposed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Above all else, I thank Jesus Christ, my Lord, and Savior for seeing me through this journey. Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.” Anyone who knows my story, knows that this journey has been filled with tears, pain, and joy. It is because of Him that I live, move, and have my being.

My utmost thanks to my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Norman Weston, my Rock! Thank you for the sacrifices that you made to see me through to the end. Thank you for believing in my work and my voice. He, along with my husband, never allowed me to quit. I thank my three sisters for the many telephone calls, text messages, and words of inspiration. Our family adage is “blood is thicker than water.”

I thank the women who allowed me to share their personal experiences in this study. I am forever grateful to them for the pathways they have laid before me and other women of color who aspire to the superintendency seat.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my entire family. My boys were awesome! I especially want to salute my husband, Kenneth Harris, the memory of my father, Samuel Johnson, and the strength of my mother, Burdella Johnson. My husband promised my father that he would see me through to the end of all my educational endeavors. My husband kept his promise to my father. If it had not been for the LOVE and SUPPORT of my family, I would not have been able to make it through this journey.

Concerning my husband and his constant and consistent encouragement through the early mornings, late nights, and pep talks, he became my supreme motivator. Thank you for not allowing me to quit! His words were: “You can do this.”

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

It is morning; the alarm clock rings loudly, and the day begins. My husband and children are sleepy and anxious as they ask me for five more minutes to sleep. We start moving at a fast pace, and off we go. I am a wife, a mother, and the Director of Special Education for a south suburban Chicago school district. As I enter the school building and settle into my office, my superintendent asks that I attend a scheduled monthly meeting on her behalf involving our Superintendents' Consortium and the Director of our Special Education Cooperative. The Special Education Cooperative is formed of 17 superintendents from member districts. Serving as the governing Board for the Cooperative, the superintendents make financial decisions, set policies, and approve curricula, among other responsibilities.

Nervously, I walk into the boardroom, and I realize that I am out of my element. Although I hold a Central Office position, I am not a superintendent. As I look around the table of superintendents, I feel intimidated. I must make a quick decision: Where will I sit? I strategically sit near the door. Taking a closer look at the table, I notice that of the 17 superintendents, only three are African American females. The majority are White men, all of whom exude confidence. Their demeanors convey that they have a right to be at the table. I feel out of place, not just because I am not a member of this exclusive club, but also because there is a minimal representation of my race or gender.

Before ascending to any central office position, many aspirants in education begin their careers as classroom teachers (Katz, 2004). When I started my career in 1992, I was the only African American teacher in my building for seven years. I recall seeing very few African American women in positions of power and authority from then until now. Instead, I observed White males occupying most of the roles of Assistant Principal,

Principal, central office administrators, and Superintendent. Women who did hold administrative positions were typically directors or coordinators, and these were all or mostly White women. From my perspective, there was clearly an underrepresentation of African American female leadership at all school administration levels.

This lack of representation at the top is especially noticeable for the school superintendent's position. Glass (1992) reported that in the 1990s, women made up just 13% of superintendent positions while men made up 87%. During my seven years as a classroom teacher, I witnessed just one African American female superintendent in the south suburban Chicago area. She appeared strong, outwardly, yet she exhibited a certain fragility. Not only did she have to contend in a man's world, but a White man's world, with fewer women of color nearby from whom to garner support or strength.

Pruitt (2015) asserted that while more African American women are in principal and other district-level leadership positions, barriers prohibit African American women from pursuing the school district superintendent's role. However, for the African American women's population, the extent and nature of leadership ascension barriers remain hidden. Thus, the purpose of this study was to uncover how five current and former African American women superintendents rose above these barriers to successfully attain and hold the position of the school district superintendent.

### **Autobiographical Statement**

Throughout my educational career, I have served as a teacher, Dean of Students, Assistant Principal, Director of Special Education, and, for the past eight years, Associate Superintendent. As I advanced into those various positions, I observed the dominance of White males in the position of the school district superintendent. However, I have seen

African American males and White females further down the ladder, together with an extremely low representation of women of color, specifically, African American women.

I am the ninth child among nine children, raised in an impoverished community in East Saint Louis, Illinois. My father completed high school, and my mother completed two years of high school. At the insistence of my parents, members of our household acknowledged a few sacred cows. The first was everyone would graduate from high school. The second was everyone would attend college, enlist in the military, or be gainfully employed after high school completion. The third was everyone would have support within the family as expressed by the adage, *blood is thicker than water*.

The community in which I was raised embraced the Igbo and Yoruba African proverb: *It takes a village to raise a child*. As a young African American female within this community, I believed in my heart that I could be whatever I desired, no matter the roadblocks. In a practical sense, the Igbo and Yoruba proverb, which exists in many different African languages, has helped me to develop character, determination, and the ability to face opposition as I ascend through multiple positions within the field of education.

Once I transitioned from classroom teacher, I became interested in the leadership experiences of African American women. As I began to reflect on my career, exploring administrative options became a high priority for me. I discovered that I was confronted with internal resistance as I looked at administrative opportunities. Although I had been taught from childhood that I could be whatever I wanted to be, my aspirations reached only as high as the teacher's role and never included being a principal because no one ever told me that was an option for me. Needless to say, the idea of becoming a school superintendent was out of the question.

## **Statement of the Problem**

This research's premise was that African American women face resistance in their pursuit of a school superintendent's seat. Robinson and Ward (1991) suggested that African American women can consciously prepare for the socio-political environment they encounter by fostering a belief in self, which equips them to confront resistance. When internalized, this belief can provide African American women with the necessary tools to think critically about themselves, the world, and their place in it. According to Robinson and Ward (1991), "a belief in self is far greater than anyone's disbelief" (p. 87).

This study's objective was to explore African American women who have successfully attained and held the school district superintendent's position. In doing so, I explored the leadership styles of five African American women who aspired to and achieved and maintained the school district superintendent's role. With this research, I endeavor to tell the stories of successes and reveal barriers that prevent African American women from being successful. Another aim of this research is to show others how to overcome impediments to success.

## **Rationale**

This research was of particular interest to me because I recognized the need for African American women to aspire to the superintendent's position and maintain the position successfully. Very few stories have been shared by African American female superintendents who have acquired and successfully maintained their positions (Katz, 2008). These women have been underrepresented in the superintendent's position throughout their career journeys from classroom teacher to superintendent. This research will augment how African American women experience and maintain positions as the school district superintendent.

In 2000, women comprised approximately 13% of the nation's school superintendents, increasing in 2012 to 23% of superintendency positions (Wallace, 2015). However, the percentages of females continue to fall significantly short when compared to male superintendents. Katz (2004) uplifts lingering questions about the superintendency from the female's perspective. This research has addressed concerns by exploring the stories behind the successes of African American women who have been in their positions as superintendents within the same school district for a minimum of five years.

One assumption is that African American women face tremendous challenges and barriers and make personal sacrifices to acquire and maintain the position of the school district superintendent (West, 2018). Crenshaw (2009) states that African American women attempting to gain leadership positions are affected by three specific factors, gender, race, and class, which often destabilize their progressions toward leadership. The emphasis of this research was on how several African American women attained a school superintendent's position. Another emphasis was on the stories that should be shared of the physical, spiritual, and emotional sacrifices that African American women have made to compete in a White male-dominated career field.

### **Primary and Related Research Questions**

This study's primary research question was: How have African American female superintendents attained and successfully held the superintendent position? Related questions included:

- What barriers and challenges do African American female superintendents face?

- Are there certain strategies sitting African American female superintendents use to build their capacity as leaders while successfully maintaining their positions?
- What sacrifices have African American female superintendents made in order to maintain success?
- Is there a particular leadership style African American female school district superintendents must have to remain competitive in a White-male dominated field?



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

This study's primary research question was: How have African American women superintendents attained and successfully held the superintendent position? Research and literature encompassing and contextualizing this question were drawn from the following perspectives: Ways Women Lead, Women in the School Superintendency, Evolution of the Role of the Superintendent, Attaining and Maintaining the Position of Superintendent, and African American Women in the School Superintendency. In this chapter, each of these five perspectives is addressed in the order presented above, beginning with Ways Women Lead.

### **Ways Women Lead**

Much research has been performed on women's leadership traits (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Marshall, 1992; Shakeshaft, 1987). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) posited five ways that women typically tend to lead. These include:

1. Relational leadership,
2. Leadership for social justice,
3. Spiritual leadership,
4. Leadership for learning, and
5. Balanced leadership.

### **Relational Leadership**

Relational leadership implies being in a relationship with others horizontally rather than a hierarchal pattern (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). This horizontal dynamic is directly related to women's conception of power. Women tend to help others by building

relationships rather than through control or power, which can destroy positive and constructive relationships (Overall, Hammond, McNulty, & Finkel, 2016). Grogan and Shakeshaft asserted women, perhaps more than men, believe power is strengthened as it is shared.

However, for a school or district leader, leading relationally means consciously and consistently making and taking the time to notice, appraise, and promote others' work (Zhang & Yao, 2019)). Leading relationally indicates that power and authority are distributed and shared in the service of a broader co-created vision, direction, or goal of the organization or school district. When the concept of power is connected to value placed in and on relationships, this concept translates not to power *over* but to power *with*. Brunner (2000) stated that power used to aid other people strengthens relationships, while power used to control people damages relationships. Leadership power and authority used to control others inherently runs counter to a commitment to social justice, to which many women leaders subscribe.

### **Leadership for Social Justice**

In their research on school leaders, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) found that women, more than men, talked about having entered education to “change the lives of children, to make the world a fair place, and to change institutions so that all children have a chance” (p.11). These researchers discovered that women tended to report that they went into education to make a difference and change children's lives. Studies on educators, in general, have found that women, more than men, feel that the field of education is a career that lends itself to social justice work (Francis & le Roux, 2011; Osei-Kofi, 2018).

While the trend seems to be shifting, studies have shown that nationwide in K-12 education, women do not have a sufficiently broad entry portal into administration (Gardiner et al., 2000; Marshall, 1992). Women have been and remain much of the teaching force. However, they themselves are victims of systemic social injustice when it comes to having equal opportunity to seek and maintain K-12 positions of leadership.

Shakeshaft (1987) informed the readers that Ella Flagg Young was the first female superintendent in a large city school system, Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Webb and McCarthy (1998) reiterated that Young was able to enter the position in 1909 because the CPS School Board could not agree on a superintendent after the resignation of Superintendent Edward Cooley. The Board had interviewed five men before Young's interview, and they had to give her the same opportunity given to the men. The account goes on to state that the School Board was tired and hot.

Although well-qualified (she had worked alongside John Dewey in the creation and daily administration of the new University of Chicago Laboratory School), Young was not initially considered or sought out for the position. She only gained consideration and eventual entry into the position due to the Board's frustration and indecisiveness in recruiting and deciding on a candidate who would be the best fit for the job. Young went on to lead CPS under the twin umbrellas of social justice and leadership for learning (Smith, 1979).

Many women, both of color and White, are motivated by a powerful desire to transform learning conditions and opportunities for children and families who have been least-served by traditional educational policies and practices (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Education and leadership for social justice involve commitments to doing work that make a difference in underprivileged lives (Shields, 2017). For such teachers and

school leaders, an unrelenting promise to the empowerment of social justice becomes a driving motivator for their individual experiences.

I, myself, am from an impoverished community in East Saint Louis, Illinois. Throughout my schooling, I had female teachers and principals, both women of color and White women, who, through their commitment to social justice and equal educational opportunity for all, were determined that the students of East Saint Louis would not become victims of their impoverished circumstances. Many of these women had opportunities to work in more financially rewarding, safe, and secure environments. Still, they were instead driven by an overpowering belief in social justice. They chose to do their life's work in an environment struggling to overcome the effects of poverty, crime, and limited possibilities.

The urgency of my encounters with women in leadership made a difference in the trajectory of my life as an African American woman. I was raised within a dysfunctional household, where I soon learned that education was essential for my survival; it was my way out of the ghetto. "If change to bring about greater social justice is the end product for many women, then hope, spirituality, and belief in God is the motor that propels many of them to change the system" (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, p.13). As a woman of color, my current place in the world as an associate superintendent of a school district could not have been accomplished without the belief and vision of female leaders motivated by social justice.

### **Spiritual Leadership**

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) believed that spirituality was a vital component of women educational leaders, particularly for women of color. Spiritual leadership is an avenue of personal strength that allows individuals to connect to one another. On the

power and meaning of spirituality in women's lives, Bailey, Koney, McNish, Powers, and Uhly (2008) offered this:

Pulling women together to discuss spirituality, sustenance and breath has been a dream from way back ... pulling together women who are dealing with the same issues and who have developed strategies that are not written about in textbooks ... I always talk about spirit when I discuss leadership. People are starting to get it (p. 20).

As a teacher and school administrator, I have always operated with the belief that we are interconnected as one family, each responsible for one another. Research on women in educational leadership positions has found that spirituality for them is more akin to consciousness-raising rather than a search for peace and understanding (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Perumal & Edwards, 2017). Curry (2000) offered the concept of a leader persona. According to Curry, the leader persona reflects self-determination issues and the direction people take in their intellectual and cultural development. Spiritual leadership does not just happen; it occurs through distinct experiences that shape one's leadership characteristics.

In all my leadership positions, I have operated with the belief that my spirituality both evoked and sustained a positive leadership style, especially when the going gets tough, as it often does. My spirituality compelled and allowed me to see and operate beyond the self-centered universe of oneself and immediately catapulted me into humanity's larger relational sphere. Drawing upon aspects of relational, social justice, and spiritual leadership helped me primarily make decisions that honored and respected students' social and emotional well-being, teachers, and their families. Likewise, student learning and academic achievement are high on the list of my priorities as a woman, a mother, and a school leader.

## **Leadership for Learning**

Instruction is central to women in educational leadership positions. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) contended that female administrators were more likely to focus on teachers' instructional competence and to introduce and support professional learning to restructure instructional approaches in need of change. These authors stated:

The changes that women introduce in their organizations most often relate to the improvement of learning. Women have been associated with instructional leadership or learning-centered leadership in education because they have spent more time in the classroom than men before they take formal leadership positions such as principal or superintendent (p. 18).

Because women administrators have typically spent more time in the classroom than men before becoming administrators, Grogan and Shakeshaft discovered that women, after their ascension from teacher to administrator, were more likely to visit classrooms to observe and talk with teachers and students informally. Instruction is an area of practical experiential knowledge and expertise that most women administrators are comfortable with (Miller, Washington, & Fiene, 2006; Odum, 2010). Coughran (2016) notes that as instructional leaders, women are not hesitant to point out instructional weaknesses and are comfortable endorsing changes in curriculum and instructional techniques to improve teaching and increase student learning and achievement.

Leadership for learning has its roots in the many women who have served as district curriculum directors prior to their ascent into the superintendency. The leadership trait of strength as an instructional leader characteristic of many women in education leadership positions is directly tied to their prior experiences in the classroom (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

## **Balanced Leadership**

Most married professionals with families, including school leaders, both men and women, struggle to balance responsibilities of work and home (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Marsh, 2015). Women experience leading as “all-consuming, but unlike many men, many women leaders go home to another ‘day’s work’ taking care of family and home” (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, p. 21). Female educational leaders’ fight for work-life balance is similar to that of an individual walking on a tightrope with a pole in both hands elevated 20 feet above the ground. In order to survive and to avoid broken bones, the female must perform an astounding balancing act.

According to Merriam-Webster (2020a), *balance* means “to bring into harmony or proportion” (para. 10). It is further defined as “stability produced by even distribution of weight on each side of the vertical axis” (para. 2). Regarding balancing family and work responsibilities, Clark (2000) introduced the work and family border theory. Clark’s approach stated that many professionals, both men and women, are daily border-crossers between the two domains of work and family. However, men and women have vastly different life experiences balancing home and work responsibilities.

As an Associate Superintendent of a small school district, occasionally experiencing and maintaining work-family responsibilities, balanced leadership is a continual work in progress. In addition to my full-time job, I am a wife, a mother, and a First Lady of a church (of which my husband is the pastor). My days begin early, roughly at 6:30 in the morning, getting my youngest son ready for school and dropping him off. I then return home and prepare breakfast for my husband, kiss him on the head, and as I am walking out of the door, I am simultaneously fielding calls from the district office.

My husband has been retired for a few years as a city employee. However, like most men, when he got up for work, he did not have to concern himself with making lunches for the children or thinking about preparing dinner for the family once he returned home from work. Following traditional gender role expectations, his experience balancing the demands of family, home, and work was and still is quite different from mine. And this balance has gotten further out of order as public-school administrators nowadays are always on-call and on-alert, either by phone, email, or social media.

My heretofore motto and resolve have been to give 100% to home and 100% to work; I am now beginning to realize this is unrealistic and unsustainable. This is not to say I want to or will neglect my responsibilities to either work or family. Still, I now know that I am a habitual border-crosser between work and family on the balance beam of the life I lead as a female school district administrator. Something has to give as it is impossible to provide one-hundred percent to both work and home.

There are, of course, many similarities in the challenges facing men and women in the role of K-12 educational leaders, but there is also evidence that men and women respond to these challenges and lead in distinct ways (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Shakeshaft (1987) opined that the effective woman leader does not imitate the effective man; what works for him will and does not necessarily work for her. Of the 14 skills Henry et al. (2006) cited as being critical to the success of school district superintendents, be they men or women, the top five include being a vision/strategic thinker/problem solver, being good at communications and interpersonal skills, having a moral and ethical character, and having educational and instructional competency, all of which are women's strengths. They align with the five ways women lead found in the work of Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011). What this difference means for women already in, or



aspiring to, the highest level of K-12 educational leadership, the superintendency will be explored next.

### **Women in the School Superintendency**

*For most of history, anonymous was a woman.  
(paraphrased from Virginia Woolf, 1931, p. 51.)*

This section focuses on the role of the Women's Suffrage Movement in opening the door to the superintendency for women, notable early women superintendents, the evolution of the role of the school district superintendent, and research on the challenges and barriers women face in the superintendency and the strategies they use for getting there and staying there.

### **Women's Suffrage and the Superintendency**

Women rose to the highest level of education, entering the superintendency on the Women's Suffrage Movement's wave, 1848 – 1920 (Brunner, 1999). Blount (1998) informed that the Women's Suffrage Movement began with a women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. The convention was organized by Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and many other women. Although it was said that the movement had begun prior to the convention, the suffragettes used the convention to launch the movement.

The other two were the continuing fight for Black liberation and the labor movement. The thought was that if women gained the right to vote, it would ultimately lead to a radical transformation in women's lives relative to their role in the family, society, and the workforce. At the time, a woman's role in society was confined to her traditional role as wife and mother.

The leaders of the Suffrage Movement envisioned and called for a larger, more engaged, and satisfying life for women at all levels and occupations of society equal to that of men. While as gender-liberating and socially progressive as this stance was, not all women supported the movement (Brunner, 1999). Catharine Beecher, a prominent and outspoken advocate for women teachers at the time, was not in agreement with the movement and spoke out against it. Beecher believed women and society would be better off and better served if women stuck to and embraced what she termed “the feminine quality to nurture” in their traditional role as wives (pp.11-12). Conversely, the Suffrage Movement challenged Beecher’s and others’ assertions that the *natural* women’s *proper* role was limited to the family sphere. In contrast, men were more naturally-suited to engage and reside both within and outside the family sphere (DuBois, 1978).

Consequently, women were not, should not, and are not expected or trusted to contribute anything toward society’s betterment outside the sphere of domestic relations. The emergence of the Women’s Suffrage Movement changed those paradigms by catapulting the idea of gender equality across all aspects of society in a way that proposals focused only on domestic reform never could (Baker, 2006). That said, the goal of gender equality at home and in the workplace would not come easy. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a pioneer of the Woman Suffrage Movement, put it, “woman herself must do the work” (DuBois, 1978, p. 22).

Blount (1998) noted the Women’s Suffrage Movement’s launch began at a women’s rights convention held in Seneca Falls in 1848. The gathering was convened so that women could discuss their “myriad forms of oppression.” One of the forms of women’s oppression was not having full and equal access to higher education institutions

(p. 10). However, because women had access to higher education to become teachers, they used this as an opening and leverage toward suffrage. Blount wrote:

First, women's increasing property ownership opened the possibility for their suffrage. Because women teachers earned salaries, low as they may have been, and because women teachers usually were single, they sometimes possessed their own property. Property owners were entitled to vote; therefore, women teachers who owned property were thought to need suffrage (p. 65).

Eventually, this argument won out in part as a few Midwestern and Western communities granted women school suffrage, allowing them to vote in school-related elections. By 1910, 24 states allowed women school suffrage, according to Blount (1998). While it may seem striking that women at the time were viewed as not being capable or witty enough to vote beyond school suffrage, a foothold had been gained. Suffrage activists could now legitimately argue that if women could be trusted to exercise their citizenship responsibilities in school-related matters, they should also be granted full suffrage. It was even thought, given the extent of corruption within the political process at the time, that if women could be granted full suffrage, they would lend a voice to moral democracy (Brunner, 1999). In 1869, Wyoming's male citizens agreed with this reasoning and voted to extend full suffrage to women. Over the next 50 years, other Midwestern and Western states followed suit and allowed full suffrage to women. In the end, women's dominant role as public-school teachers helped pave the way and served as justification for their eventual full right to suffrage (Brunner, 1999).

As an African American woman, wife, mother, and school district administrator, I have benefitted in multiple ways from the vision, courage, and sacrifices made by these first suffrage activists. However, even after coming so far, I believe the goal of full equality has not been achieved and realized for all women. The work to achieve equality

begun by the suffragettes remains as relevant, right, and necessary for women around the world today as it did more than 100 years ago. Nevertheless, in challenging then-accepted assumptions and norms that perpetuated gender, race, and class discrimination, the Women's Suffrage Movement can be credited with knocking down barriers and opening doors for women in multiple arenas. It remains a bulwark against women's discrimination in the home and the workforce today (Noraian, 2009).

### **Notable Early Women Superintendents**

It was during the period of the Woman's Suffrage Movement (1848-1920) that women fought for and entered positions of superintendency. Brunner (1999) found that by 1896, women held 228 county superintendencies, two state superintendencies, and 12 city superintendencies. Over the next five years, the Commissioner of Education Report revealed that 228 women held county superintendencies, equating to a 26% increase (Anonymous, 1902). By 1913, there were 495 women county superintendents, more than doubling the 1896 figure in less than 20 years. Women had won state superintendencies in Colorado, Idaho, Washington, and Wyoming.

Research on ground-breaking women in the superintendency has been done by multiple researchers (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1999; Deegan, 2010; DuBois, 1978; Funk, 2004; Grogan, 2005; Noraian, 2009; Seigfried, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1987; Webb & McCarthy, 1998). According to Noraian (2009), the first female superintendent in the United States was Sarah Raymond. Raymond became the superintendent of schools in Bloomington, Illinois. She served as superintendent of the Bloomington School District 87 from 1874-1892 during the Woman's Suffrage Movement. Raymond is said to have been a woman leader who "learned to dare and then dared to lead to others" (Noraian, 2009, p. 32).

Raymond was not only a competent superintendent but was also a true reformer. During her tenure, she challenged discrimination based on gender and race when it was not popular (Noraian, 2009). Given her accomplishment, Raymond is still a hidden figure in the history of women's fight to attain and maintain superintendent positions. Reaching her leadership position was only a first step. Maintaining a sustainable balance between home, family, and work responsibilities weighed much more heavily upon women aspiring to or achieving a professional position outside the home than it did for men. While the doors were beginning to open, deciding to enter the professional workforce was not an easy choice for most women. As a result, it was felt that women had a choice to either marry or be professional; Raymond did both. She became a long-time leader in public education, functioning at its highest level, and acting as a lifelong advocate for social justice (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

Another notable early woman superintendent was Dr. Ella Flagg Young (Webb & McCarthy, 1998). Young was the first female superintendent of a large urban school district, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), from 1909-1915. She began her work as a primary teacher in a poor neighborhood ghetto school in Chicago, the Foster School. Young became the first woman president of the National Education Association (NEA) in 1910. Before she became superintendent of CPS, Young had been a colleague of John Dewey in the creation and day-to-day administration of the University of Chicago Laboratory School. Among her signature accomplishments as superintendent was instituting school councils, which gave a greater voice to parents and teachers in schools' administration (Webb & McCarthy, 1998).

However, Webb and McCarthy (1998) noted that Young's entry into the superintendency was not without controversy. Her rise to the superintendency occurred

during a time when women did not receive such elevations into professional public service. She was invited to apply only after five male candidates had been invited to interview and each rejected by the school board as not being the “right fit” for the job (pp. 232, 233). Her selection in 1909, Young’s superintendency began when she was 64 years of age. Young’s motto, as stated in McManis (1916), was: “Those who live on the mountain have a longer day than those who live in the valley. Sometimes all we need to brighten our day is to climb a little higher” (p. ii). It would be 75 more years before Chicago would appoint another female superintendent, Ruth B. Love (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Blount (1998) poses the question: Why has school and district leadership been so little associated with women throughout U.S. history? Blount proceeds to answer her question by explaining that before Women’s Suffrage, teaching was earmarked for women, and the school administration was work for men. Dr. Ella Flagg Young took that antiquated thinking and turned it around, asserting and demonstrating that “real power” does not lie in simply giving “input” (p. 23). In taking on the role and responsibilities of the superintendent of a major city, Young took hold of the reins of power and today remains a symbol of moral and just leadership for superintendents and mid-level leaders in public schools across the United States. Young was also a visionary, as cited in Blount (1998):

Women are destined to rule the schools of every city. I look for a majority of big cities to follow the lead of Chicago in choosing a woman for superintendent. In the near future we will have more women than men in executive charge of the vast educational system. It is a woman’s natural field, and she is no longer satisfied to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership (p. 1).

While notable women superintendents like Dr. Young and Sarah Raymond attained and held their positions on the strength and merit of their skills, knowledge, and experience, they would not have had the chance to do so without the active support of other notable women leaders in the Women's Suffrage Movement. In Chicago, there were five prominent and ground-breaking women in a network that worked to progress the women's movement during this period. The women included Jane Addams (1860-1935), Ida B. Wells (1862-1931), Margaret Haley (1861-1939), Catherine Goggin (1854-1916), and Ella Flagg Young (1845-1918) (Crocco, Munro, & Weiler, 1999).

Jane Addams and Ida B. Wells, both pioneers during the Suffrage era, worked in Chicago simultaneously as Ella Flagg Young. Addams, founder of the immigrant-serving educational institution Hull House, and Wells, an African American journalist and anti-lynching advocate, worked together to push back against condoned and established race, gender, ethnicity, and social class discrimination both in the city Chicago and around the country. Visible and outspoken progressives in thought and deed, Addams and Wells sought to move women forward educationally and politically as they fought against race and gender barriers. Crocco et al. (1999) argued that Addams and Wells were educated activists, using education as a primary pathway and vehicle to break down barriers and move marginalized people and groups up the social ladder. Both women used education as a means to foster social change (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

In addition to her work at Hull House, Addams was also a Chicago School Board member. She worked with Wells in the movement to end racial segregation in public schools. Margaret Haley and Catherine Goggin organized teachers in Chicago into a union (Chicago Teachers Federation). Ella Flagg Young became the first female superintendent for Chicago Public Schools. The combined efforts of these courageous

Chicago women and others like them in the Suffrage Movement opened the flood gates for widespread progressive social change. Crocco et al. (1999) wrote:

This alliance of labor, schools, and middle-class and African American women worked to implement wide-ranging reforms, including a variety of progressive programs such as women's suffrage, labor reform, direct primaries, child welfare, race relations, union organizing, health care, playgrounds, libraries, and the peace movement (p. 20).

These five women of the Suffrage Movement exemplify one of Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) Five Ways women lead: Leadership for Social Justice using education to motivate and advance marginalized groups. They gave voice, strength, and leadership to a women's movement that continues to struggle today to equalize and level the playing field for aspiring female superintendents in a traditionally White-male dominated position with considerably less representation of African American women in the superintendent's seat.

### **Evolution of the Role of the Superintendent**

In this section, I link and compare each of Kowalski's (2005) five developmental phases in the evolution of the superintendent position's role with Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) conceptual framework, Five Ways Women Lead. In *Evolution of the School District Superintendent Position*, Kowalski describes the evolution of the changing role of the superintendent position as taking place within five phases:

1. Superintendent as teacher-scholar,
2. Superintendent as manager,
3. Superintendent as Democratic leader,
4. Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist, and
5. Superintendent as communicator. (Kowalski, 2005, pp. 3-13)



Kowalski's five phases in the evolution of the superintendent position's description developed beginning in the 1830s through 1850 when 13 large city school districts had employed superintendents. Although the position has evolved over time, vestiges of each of the five phases can be found in varying degrees in the roles superintendents play in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century.

### **Phase One: Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar**

According to Kowalski (2005), the superintendent's primary function in the mid to late 19th century of a teacher-scholar was developing and implementing curriculum and overseeing teachers. The superintendent was responsible for ensuring that teachers delivered the prescribed curriculum with integrity and fidelity. This seemed right and natural at a time when superintendents were considered expert teachers (Callahan, 1962). Because their roles were so closely intertwined with those of the teachers, superintendents were opposed to being viewed as managers. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, superintendents had a very present voice in the National Education Association (NEA) membership. However, at the time, almost all superintendents were men, while nearly all teachers were women.

The superintendent as a teacher-scholar aligns with Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) Leadership for Learning characteristics in which the way women lead. Changes women leaders introduce are more often related to improving student learning. With a strong focus on instruction, women school leaders are more likely to introduce new instructional programs and provide professional development for teachers to implement the programs. That said, during the teacher-scholar phase of the evolution of the superintendent position, women were almost entirely eliminated from mid- and high-level educational leadership positions.

## **Phase Two: Superintendent as Manager**

As early as 1890, concerns were being expressed that the teacher-scholar role of the superintendent was not what was needed to run large urban school districts (Kowalski, 2005). The problems mainly centered on the perceived lack of managerial knowledge and skills among superintendents. When the nation was moving from an agrarian society to an industrial society, school boards, especially in large cities, began to demand and require a more business-minded managerial skill-set for its top leaders. It was also a time when business-related efficiency models of organization, with the goal of saving time while also increasing productivity, were rapidly being adopted and applied across large-scale business and industry sectors. Now known as Taylorism, after Frederick Taylor, who first touted the economic benefits of the efficiency/productivity organizational model, the thinking was if the model was working successfully in the world of big business and industry, why not apply it to large urban school districts to improve productivity (student achievement) and increase efficiency (scientific teaching methods and administrative, managerial skills) (Callahan, 1962).

The transition from agrarian to industrial society began a period of rapid urbanization resulting in fast-growing and ever-larger urban school systems. With education required on such a large scale, school boards felt the necessity for, and demanded, that superintendents infuse scientific management's tenets into school administration. During this shift from the role of superintendent as teacher-scholar to that of manager, the superintendent's position began to separate from teachers and teaching (Thomas & Moran, 1992). On the influence of adopting a business model for leading a school district, Callahan (1962) wrote:

The business influence was exerted upon education in several ways: through newspapers, journals, and books; through speeches at educational meetings; and, more directly, through actions of school boards... Whatever its source, the influence was exerted in the form of suggestions or demands that schools be organized and operated in a more businesslike way and that more emphasis be placed upon a practical and immediately useful education (p. 5).

### **Phase Three: Superintendent as Democratic Leader**

From 1930-1950, the superintendent's role as a political player became critical as public schools increasingly found themselves in fierce competition with other governmental services to acquire state funding (Kowalski, 2005). The political climate of this period includes the Great Depression and World War II. As the nation dealt with the gravity of this period, the role of the superintendent as a democratic leader emerged as their school boards. The public now asked superintendents to take responsibility for inciting policymakers, employees, and taxpayers to support school district initiatives needed to meet the demands of an ever-growing and diverse student population (Howlett, 1993).

Kowalski (2005) asserted democratic leadership is rooted in philosophy and enacted in politics, and the position and role of a democratic school leader can be equated to that of a statesman. According to Merriam-Webster (2020d), a statesman is versed in the principles or art of government and is considered a wise, skillful, and respected political leader. Political skill and expertise are a part of the requisite list of requirements for the superintendent position. While researchers Björk, Keedy, and Gurley (2003) did not believe the term *statesman* should be ascribed to the superintendent's position, they acknowledge being an astute political strategist as a big plus.

The superintendent's role as a democratic leader fits well with one of Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) stated five ways women lead by building strong relationships. Relational leadership is a leadership style that draws its authority, legitimacy, and ultimately political power from forging relationships with persons or groups that are spread out and function horizontally rather than top-down. Democratic leaders favor and strive for solutions to problems where everyone is included and everyone benefits. This approach to leading change is best made by creating and maintaining close relationships both within and outside the organization.

Grogan and Shakeshaft contended that women characteristically tend to lead relationally. Women conceptualize power differently than men. Rather than concentrating and wielding power from the top, women are more likely to distribute and expand everyone's power. If positive relationships have been built and maintained, when support is needed, financially or politically, the democratic leader has a better chance of galvanizing potential stakeholders.

#### **Phase Four: Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist**

According to Cooper and Boyd (1987), broadening the school superintendents' roles to include applied social scientists began in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Around this time, superintendents, researchers, and school-based practitioners were encouraged and expected to emphasize empiricism, predictability, and science's absoluteness in their research and practice. Kowalski (2005) stated:

In the former, superintendents are expected to have expertise necessary to research deficiencies and to recommend policy to ameliorate them. This expertise includes the ability to reshape institutional cultures that deter positive change. In the latter, superintendents are expected to have the expertise necessary to deal with social and institutional ills such as poverty, racism, gender, discrimination, and violence (pp. 10-11).

As an applied social scientist, the superintendent's role gradually evolved as expectations for the position took on ever-increasing societal and professional responsibilities and powers. The superintendent's role as a democratic leader or statesman was replaced with one focusing on ameliorating social and institutional ills. Merriam-Webster (2020c) defines *social science* as a branch of science that deals with human society's institutions and functioning and individuals' interpersonal relationships. For example, a branch of social science, behavioral science, was an area of expertise superintendents were now expected to be familiar with and use during this era. Skinner (2014) stated that social science is more than experiences that happen to people; it is an effort to determine why, the sequences, and the relationships to other events. Superintendents in this era were beyond being teacher-scholars, managers, and statesmen. They now had to deal with rapidly changing social norms, segregation, desegregation, race, and poverty when running a school district.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, WWII ended, soldiers returned home, married, and started families in what became known as the baby boom era. This massive incoming and ever-increasing wave of baby boom children caught both society and, particularly, public schools unprepared to deal with the overwhelming number and complexity of issues it carried along in its wake. In addition to the increasing demand for more space in existing schools and classrooms, more and better-trained teachers, and

planning, funding and construction for new schools, school districts were suddenly faced with having to deal with a wide range of societal ills. These difficulties included poverty, low wages, affordable housing, and lack of transportation. Moreover, there was inadequate or non-existent government funding for community social services to address all of these issues, adversely affecting incoming students' and their families' quality of life. It fell upon the schools to respond the best they could.

Especially hard hit were schools in poor rural and urban communities. Jean Anyon's (2005) *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement* discussed how the combined impact of these same societal issues and ills persists today, adversely affecting both the in-school and out-of-school lives of many poor rural and urban students. The phenomenon has now spread out to large city inner-ring suburbs and small towns and cities across the nation.

Schools are a mirror of the society and community in which they exist. In assuming the role of superintendent as an applied social scientist, superintendents in the late 1940s were quick to adopt new social scientific methods and business models seeking to address organizational inefficiencies. Theorists and behaviorists seeking to create a school of management included Egon Guba, Jacob Getzels, Charles Bidwell, and Joseph Letterer (Candoli, 1995). The pre-war inefficiencies within schools kept teachers and administrators from concentrating their efforts on the educational and instructional needs of ever-increasing numbers of students entering the school system each year.

However, what was and is harder to do, and remains so, is finding ways to address the broader "social and institutional ills such as poverty, racism, gender, discrimination, and violence" that Kowalski referred to (2005, p. 10). Anyon (2005) asserted that more equitable public policies to address past social and institutional injustices in the United

States have often been enacted due to political pressure brought to bear by social movements such as labor, civil rights, and women's actions. Perhaps it is time to rekindle the political power and pressure for social justice exerted by the broad-based coalition of women, as was seen during the Women's Suffrage Movement.

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) contended that women lead and manage differently than men. It is not that women in school leadership positions do not employ the tools of applied social science, empiricism, and research in their leadership; they do. But Grogan and Shakeshaft's model allows that women, more so than men, are likely to bring aspects of relational and spiritual leadership into the mix. These two distinctive ways women tend to lead and manage puts them more naturally in tune and in touch with the school's community, both within and outside the school walls. Relational leadership encompasses a broad spectrum of school and community stakeholders' inclusiveness and requires leaders' inter- and intra-personal communications skills (Pasque, 2013). Pasque further describes women leaders as attentive, communicative, investigative, and articulate. When a woman's relational leadership style is combined with a spiritual sense of inclusivity and oneness, the second part of Kowalski's two-part conception of the superintendent as an applied social scientist is better-served and achieved.

### **Phase Five: Superintendent as Communicator**

In an era when vast amounts of information are available on the Internet with the flick of a finger to open a search engine on your smartphone, the days of the "banking" model of education, where the teacher is charged each day with depositing incremental bits of information into the heads of her students, are long gone (Freire, 2000). Not to dismiss the problem of equal access to Internet resources, but for most people, even those in the most remote parts of the planet, having access to knowledge and information is not

the problem today, but what to make of and do with it is. Echoing Tony Wagner's "Seven Survival Skills" in *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need, and What We Can Do About It*, Kowalski (2005) states: "What matters in a time of unremitting global competition and availability of massive amounts of information are the skills of accessing and processing information and making decisions based on that information" (p. 11).

Kowalski's assertion applies not only to students but also to teachers, administrators, and school superintendents. Being skilled in written, oral, internal, and external electronic communication platforms and in interpersonal communication is necessary for school leaders at all levels. The world of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century is inundated with media distributed globally through interconnected communications' technology (Kellner & Share, 2007). Our hyper-connected world increasingly demands that school superintendents possess the knowledge, dispositions, and communication skills required to effectively converse, connect, and deliver information in a thorough, timely, accurate, and mindful manner.

An emphasis on intra- and inter-personal communication, both oral and written, is at the center of Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) model of how women lead. Prowess in seeking out, building, and sustaining positive relationships with groups and individuals both within and outside of the organization is the definition of Relational Leadership. Women's predilection for leading through learning (Learning Leadership) and spirituality (Spiritual Leadership) also comes into play in the superintendent's rapidly evolving position as a communicator. To effectively communicate her vision of what she believes is right for the students, the community, and the organization, a relationally-oriented school leader continually communicates with all stakeholder groups. Adelman and



Taylor (2007) maintained that the ultimate success of almost all major school district improvement initiatives beginning with hopes, concepts, strategies, and finally, implementation and evaluation depends on the superintendent's leadership abilities to share the vision and to work collaboratively with all stakeholders.

Across the nation, many states have adopted standards to guide the training, qualifications, and skills required for the superintendent's position - most stress communication competency (Kowalski, 2005). For example, the Illinois State Board of Education 23 Illinois Administrative Code 29:130 makes clear that communication competency is essential to the role, duties, and responsibilities of a superintendent. However, despite an emerging consensus on the importance of communication in the position of the superintendent, Kowalski warns that efforts to strengthen the communication competency of superintendents can be weakened by three deficiencies: (a) the failure to define competency in relation to this position, (b) the absence of curricular guidelines for achieving competency, and (c) the absence of criteria for assessing competency (p. 2).

While guarding against these deficiencies is the responsibility of each state's superintendent accreditation agency, being a skilled and multifaceted communicator is an accepted requirement for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century school superintendent. It is also a hallmark of Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) "5 Ways Women Lead." Grogan and Shakeshaft assert that a woman's ability to use her maternal instincts in a school leadership position is effective, just as is her penchant for nurturing, organizing, and listening, which have been traditionally marginalized as sources for fruitful leadership. Thus, I argue having women in district-level leadership positions is essential to create and develop a responsive, compassionate, and organizationally effective and efficient school system.

## **Attaining and Maintaining the Position of Superintendent**

An understanding of women and the superintendency informs it can be separated into three areas: getting there, staying there, and strategies for success (Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009). To achieve these goals, aspiring and existing superintendents must build coalitions *within* the district - with the school board, central office, unions, school leaders, and teachers (Booker, 2019). For the ambitious would-be superintendent, these alliances must also be developed *outside* the district with the broader community to include business and cultural institutions and leaders of key political offices.

### **Getting There**

For women to attain the superintendency, they must overcome several barriers, which Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) termed as the process of “getting there” (p. 13). Historically, women have been and remain underrepresented in district-level educational leadership positions such as that of superintendent (Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000). The realm of educational administration, traditionally a male-dominated system, is a system that has overlooked and thus perpetuated institutional barriers for women seeking high-level leadership positions (Miller et al., 2006). Among these barriers are issues around gender, lack of mentoring, relationships with school boards, finding a “right match,” difficulty in networking, and a perceived innate lack of skills in contract negotiations (Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009, pp. 9-57).

Kowalski and Stouder (1999) identified barriers that prevent women from obtaining superintendent positions, including gender discrimination or bias, traditional family role and commitments, inability to relocate readily, and a lack of mentorship. Women’s traditional roles, both in a marriage and raising a family, can serve as a powerful barrier to consideration for a superintendency position. Men are more readily

able to relocate, if necessary, for a new administrative position, while married women do not necessarily have that freedom or luxury (Miller et al., 2006). Historically, these barriers have remained the same over time and based upon the current rate of increase of women to the position, the nation will not see 50-50 gender equity for the superintendency until 2035 (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009).

Similarly, Noel-Batiste (2009) argued that women have been unable to infiltrate the highest educational leadership ranks because of barriers inherent in tradition-bound institutions such as family, schools, and churches. According to Noel-Batiste, these institutions perpetuate barriers and assumptions that predetermine that women are better suited to be in the classroom than in a top-level administrative chair.

In a case study entitled, *Lean In and Lift Up: Female Superintendents Share their Career Path Choices*, authors Kelsey, Allen, Coke, and Ballard (2014) identified three equally discouraging barriers to women “getting there,” including stereotypes of women, the good ole’ boy system, and the short or long-term goals of the system (p. 8).

Likewise, a survey conducted by McCord and Ellerson (2008), given to both men and women who were considering applying for a superintendency, identified the following disincentives expressed across aspirants of both genders:

1. inadequate funding for public schools (54%),
2. family sacrifices (46%), and
3. school board relations/challenges (44%).

Of particular note in the 2008 survey, was that women (52%) ranked family sacrifices as a disincentive more often than males (45%). While the two top disincentives were closely ranked (inadequate funding and school board challenges), the survey revealed that women, more than men, viewed the potential family sacrifices that come

with the position as a gender-related barrier to the superintendency. Most men do not have to consider this with the same gravity as women (McCord & Ellerson, 2008).

The traditional path to the superintendency is from teacher to principal to central office administrator, and then on to superintendent. However, for women, the path can be a longer and more winding road (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999). In *Are Women Prepared to be School Superintendents? An Essay on the Myths and Misunderstandings*, Brunner and Kim (2010) asked: Are women being prepared to be school superintendents? In other words, how did those who “got there” get there? Hodgkinson and Montenegro sort women’s preparedness modes into three categories: formal, experiential, and personal. Formal preparedness is defined as educational trainings and degrees from universities and colleges. Experiential preparedness constitutes the time and level of professional career experience. Personal preparedness is defined as the strength and level of the individual’s belief in herself while embarking on the journey to becoming a superintendent, the lived experience of it all.

As an African American female and Associate Superintendent in a low-income, mostly Black suburban school district in the Midwest, my credentials are: Professional Educator License, Learning Behavior Specialist 1, and both the General Administration and Superintendent endorsements. In the past several years, I have been approached numerous times to apply for an open superintendent position. These inquiries keep coming not because I hold the proper licensures, which I do, but because I have 17 years of district-level administrative experience, making me both a qualified and desirable candidate for a superintendent position. But which one? And where?

Of the barriers mentioned above, the most significant barrier that has prevented me from applying for these open superintendent positions is that I would have to uproot

my entire family and relocate. For me, and many other women school administrators aspiring to the superintendent's position, the problem of gender-immobility immediately jumps to the fore, especially when I have been invited to apply for a superintendent position. The issue of gender-immobility for many women administrators triggers a painstaking decision-making process around expected gender roles in the family structure. It has always been “she” who is expected to maintain a feeling of equilibrium, consistency, and balance in the family's daily lives.

Even as we are now entering upon the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, outmoded 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup>-century gender-related role expectations for both men and women still hold a tremendous amount of “that’s just the way it is” sway. The deleterious effects of traditionally-held assumptions and beliefs on women's proper roles within or outside the workplace cannot be underestimated, overlooked, or denied as a real barrier to aspiring to become superintendents.

On the influence of gender expectations, Shakeshaft (1987) argued that sex discrimination, both overt and covert, remains a barrier to women aspiring to become superintendents. According to Shakeshaft, overt sex discrimination might be suspected when women in the pool of applicants equally qualified, talented, and experienced as men are in the end not offered the superintendent position. While recent research (Wallace, 2015) shows a trending uptick in the number of women being appointed to the superintendent's ranks, gender bias, whether conscious or unconscious, still exists and plays a role in inhibiting or enhancing women’s ascendancy to the superintendency.

That said, overt and covert gender discrimination is something that many women deny. Erickson (1984) asserted that denying gender discrimination is a survival mechanism for many women in leadership. In denying sex and gender discrimination, a

woman does not have to face the issue directly; instead, deciding the best strategy eventually is to simply keep moving forward.

### **Staying There**

Once a woman has obtained the superintendent's position, her next goal is to maintain the position and stay there. In *Increasing the Proportion of Female Superintendents in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Wallace (2015) contended three imperatives aspiring or new female superintendents need always keep foremost in mind if they want to hold on to the position they have worked so hard to obtain: (a) learn how to do the job, (b) be aware of gender bias, and (c) prepare for job-related stress (p. 50).

In a study to understand what it is like to face and resolve complex issues raised by teachers, staff, and the local community from a female superintendent's perspective, Katz (2004) found that women superintendents do not have to deny who they are to be successful. They do not default to thinking or acting like men to provide leadership to resolve thorny issues and maintain their positions.

Kouzes and Posner (1995) identified five leadership best practices and strategies derived from research that make for a successful superintendency: challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart. As an aspiring female superintendent, I believe the practice most congruent with longevity, or "staying there," is challenging the process of these five strategies and practices. Developing the art of taking a calculated risk is a significant longevity and survival strategy for any superintendent, male or female, but more so for women.

As I reflect on my humble upbringing, I now see that my parents and teachers encouraged the males to take risks and to challenge the system, whereas females were

encouraged to be *ladies* (i.e., do not get dirty, play it safe, keep your head down, and follow the rules). Now, as an aspiring superintendent, I feel confronted with two unacknowledged but significant barriers that I have had to overcome: gender and race. I have come to realize I can no longer afford to “color within the lines.” The process of obtaining and maintaining a superintendent position must be challenged and opened up to provide equal access and opportunity for women and minorities seeking to build a superintendency career. However, this more equal and open approach will not come without a struggle and push back from powers that be. Nor will it happen overnight. Changing a long-entrenched societal system from within and without most often only occurs after a period of drawn-out arduous persistence and even conflict (Burns, 1961).

In *Women Superintendents and the Riddle of the Heart*, Brunner (2000) refers to women in superintendent positions and other district-level administrative positions, warriors in a field and profession where they have been traditionally underrepresented. Echoing Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), Brunner argued that when given the opportunity, women in top-level educational administrative positions typically step forward and engage in two battles: (a) that of being an unrepentant tireless advocate for children, and (b) at the same time fighting back against out-worn embedded cultural and institutional beliefs, values, and barriers that continue to prevent women from obtaining and maintaining top-level positions of leadership in education (ix).

### **Strategies for Success and Longevity**

Several researchers (Brunner, 1998; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Katz, 2004, 2006) have attempted to identify female superintendents' successful strategies to obtain and maintain their positions. In *Understanding and Reducing Stress in the Superintendency*,

Hawk and Martin (2011) identified five coping strategies a superintendent might use to ameliorate the stress of the position:

1. exercise,
2. getting away
3. mentoring,
4. relaxing, and
5. artificial means.

Male superintendents often cited personal pride prevented them from dealing with stress, while female superintendents believed that even to admit stress was a sign of weakness.

Specifically focused on women's experience in the superintendency, in *Women Superintendents: Strategies for Success*, Brunner (1998) identified seven strategies that successful female superintendents have used to obtain and maintain their positions. To be successful, Brunner (1998) asserts women superintendents need to learn to:

1. balance two sets of expectations. The first set is role-related; the second, gender-related;
2. keep their agendas simple in order to focus on their primary purpose: the care of children, including strict attention to their academic achievement;
3. develop the ability to remain “feminine” in the ways they communicate and at the same time be heard in a masculine culture;
4. disregard the old myth that they must ‘act like a man’ while in a male role;
5. remove or let go of anything that blocks their success;
6. remain fearless, courageous, risk-takers ‘can do’ people. At the same time, they need to have a plan for retreat when faced with the impossible; and
7. share power and credit. (pp. 160-182)

While these appear as a heavy load to bear, these challenges and strategies unique to women educational leaders are necessary to learn while also mastering adaptive



leadership strategies that all top-level educational leaders must adopt to successfully lead in an era of constant change (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

As an aspiring superintendent, when I consider Brunner's (1998) first strategy of "balancing expectations of role and gender" (p. 163), many thoughts surface, taking me back to my introduction into the field of administration. Even then, I was keenly aware of expectations that were predetermined for me, as a woman, in my multiple roles as wife, mother, and school administrator, on top of the unspoken expectation to flawlessly function in each role while balancing them all. Estler (1975) argued that the dominant societal view of men and women is inherently inequitable. Estler used the term "Women's Place," inferring that women should not be in leadership roles; simply put, it is just not their place. Estler contends that women still must maintain a balance between family and work to be a successful superintendent. At the same time, men until very recently have to balance only their duties and responsibilities in their work role as superintendent.

Brunner's third strategy, or admonition, to remain feminine while still being heard in a masculine culture is echoed by research on Brunner's superintendency (1998). Brunner found that those women who were successful in the superintendent position did initially struggle to remain feminine (or be themselves). In the end, all eventually found ways to ensure they were being heard in the traditional masculine culture of the superintendency. However, being listened to was not accomplished without conflict, which meant encountering and facing down barriers. The female superintendents in Brunner's study put names to the various iterations of these barriers:

1. being silenced by the term 'power,'
2. overt-silencing,

3. listening/silence, and
4. ways of communicating to be heard. (p. 166)

Being silenced by the terms power and overt-silencing refers to an almost instinctual reaction to the negative connotation attached to and directed toward women who have managed to attain and hold positions of power. The women in Brunner's study felt more comfortable using the term leadership style rather than power. A demurring persona traditionally assigned to and expected of a woman has the potential to silence her. Even after acquiring a superintendent position, she is still viewed as a lesser 'feminine' leader in what has been the traditionally 'masculine' position of superintendent despite her skills and knowledge.

Listening and silence refer to women leaders' preferred tendency to first listen for understanding and reach a consensus for action before moving ahead on a project. However, the tendency to listen first can sometimes backfire on a female superintendent. True, the position requires a keen skill-set in listening. However, the tendency for a woman leader to listen first can be perceived by others as not having a strong leadership voice of her own. Once again, a woman is required to balance power but not act powerful, to speak and listen simultaneously, to operate as a man but not be a man, and to communicate to hundreds of ears and speak without offending. In contrast, a man can simply be a man in the superintendent's chair.

And finally, for women, the use of the term power often brings the negative connotation of having control over someone or something. This runs counter to how women typically lead through sharing and distributing power (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). As Brunner (1998) found, women who viewed power negatively were prone to self-silencing in their position as superintendent. As an Associate Superintendent, I sit in

a power seat. This means that I have the authority, responsibility, and accountability that comes with the position, all characteristics of someone with power.

That said, I take care not to look, appear, or sound to be coming off as male or masculine simply because I am a female occupying a position of power. To be a successful woman superintendent, women must quickly find, embrace, and use their feminine voice in a position that has traditionally been viewed as masculine. However, while doing so, they are also continually juggling to maintain a healthy balance between home, family, and work roles and expectations. This, unfortunately, has been and continues to be the hand women are dealt if they want to be perceived as equal to a man in the position of superintendent (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). While women, in general, have had difficulty attaining and maintaining the superintendency, the barriers and challenges of African American women achieving and maintaining the superintendency are even more daunting.

### **African American Women in the School Superintendency**

Much research has been done on barriers and challenges specific to African American women, and women of color, in attaining and maintaining the superintendency (Alston, 2000; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Katz, 2012; Kingsberry & Jean-Marie, 2018; Phakeng, 2015; Shakeshaft, 1989). Research by Tillman and Cochran (2000) on the lack of African American female superintendents discovered reason for concern. Singling out recruitment and retention as significant barriers hindering African American women from entering and succeeding in the superintendent position, the authors maintained: “Recruitment is a factor in hiring practices; it is purposeful and intentional” (pp. 44-50). Similarly, Phakeng (2015) argued that Black African women are virtually invisible in leadership and that the “masculinity of power”- the White male, marginalizes Black

women (p. 10). Katz (2012), in *Border Crossing: A Black Woman Superintendent Builds Democratic Community in Unfamiliar Territory*, told how a Black female superintendent struggled daily having to call out and face down issues of racism, gender bias, and social inequality as she crossed over these long-entrenched invisible barriers when she assumed the superintendent position in a suburban, mostly White, community.

Not to say there have not been successful African American female school superintendents; there have, but their numbers and opportunities have been few, and their histories and accomplishments have been lost to history. For example, in *Pioneer Black Woman Superintendent, Velma Dolphin-Ashley, 1944-1956*, Revere (1988) uncovered and told the story of Velma Dolphin-Ashley, an African American female superintendent who found an opportunity to serve during and stayed on after World War II. As superintendent of the all-Black Boley Oklahoma School District for Delinquent Boys from 1944-1956, Dolphin-Ashley's efforts, like many other African American women superintendents before and after her, have gone unrecorded.

Building upon Tillman and Cochran's (2000) study, going a step further, Alston (2000) argued that the low representation of African American women in school district leadership positions, beyond that of building principal, must also be examined. Alston asserts that African American women are underrepresented at all levels of educational leadership and administration. Co-mixed with the barriers found in recruitment and retention, Alston points to a lack of mentoring, especially for Black women and women of color, to be a considerable roadblock. Leonard and Papa-Lewis (1987) wrote:

Black women from working-class backgrounds are more likely to be excluded from opportunities for mentoring relationships ... Other barriers within the area of mentoring that confront Black and other minority aspirants include lack of acceptance of cultural diversity, vague criteria, and the preference the white male has for the “good old boy” system (pp.188-207).

In *Seeking Representation: Supporting Black Female Graduate Students Who Aspire to the Superintendency*, Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000) asked the questions: “What is it like to be a Black woman who aspires to the superintendency? Where and to whom does a Black woman look when considering the position?” (p. 532). These are critical questions for any African American woman who is considering making a career of the superintendency. They require women aspirants to think beyond their personal desires, motivations, and capabilities, and assess and prepare for added the societal challenges she will inevitably face along the way on her journey, whether they be in the form of sexism, racism, social class, or some combination of all three.

Sexism, racism, and classism are formidable barriers, and when combined, contribute significantly to women's marginalization, women of color, and especially African American women, whose marginalization is staggering. For example, Kingsberry and Jean-Marie, in *Whiteucation: Privilege, Power, and Prejudice in School and Society* (2018), found that in the African American woman’s journey to the attainment of the position of the school district superintendent, she is confronted with barriers that intersect and interlock with race, gender, negative stereotypes, and isolation that force her to transcend to maintain the position. Davis and Maldonado (2015) asserted that due to Black women’s marginalization, their experiences of power, growth, and development are unique; other women do not undergo such experiences.

According to Merriam-Webster (2020b), to *marginalize* means to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group. As an aspiring superintendent, I have asked myself: Who do I turn to for guidance (mentoring)? Who can I trust with my insecurities as I pursue my quest? As an African American woman and a long-time professional educator, I am more than ever aware that I have been living and working in the margin all my professional life. Will honestly and confidently seeking answers to these questions be used against me, or block me from attaining a superintendent position by merely being a woman? Will it be an even deeper thrust of the dagger for being an African American woman?

In Patricia Hill Collins' (2015) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, the author looks back and reflects upon finding her voice at the leadership table while having to endure and fend off a dismissive culture of gender, race, and masculinity marginalization. Drawn from personal experience, Collins' story awakened within me the desire to seek my authentic voice, both in seeking and henceforth while maintaining a successful superintendency. Finding and developing a strong feminine voice in a traditionally masculine leadership culture is nothing new to women. Seeking and holding a superintendent position continues to be a struggle for women. However, the contexts, circumstances, and consequences of the struggle run far deeper for African American women (Gines, 2015). For instance, most African American female superintendents serve predominantly African American student populations, mostly urban and impoverished. Glass (2000) asserted that approximately 24% of all superintendents of color work in urban districts. One wonders, why is this?

The school district in which I am an Associate Superintendent is an intersection of suburban and urban characteristics. Suburban school districts tend to serve middle-class,

higher-income, and affluent students, whereas urban schools typically serve low-income students from low-income families. During the 17 years I have been here, the district has had two African American female superintendents; the past superintendent, followed immediately by the current superintendent. Before these two African American women were hired, the district had only White male superintendents. What had changed that allowed two African American females to be hired back-to-back? The answer is this: Over the years, at first slowly, and then suddenly, as if overnight, the community had become majority Black when the remaining White population fled the community. Today the community and school district are 95.7% Black and 100% low income.

Following a pattern, like others before them, these two experienced African American female school leaders were allowed and seized upon the opportunity to become a superintendent-- albeit in a mostly Black and poor community that had over time slid backward into the category of the socially and economically disadvantaged.

That said, this is not the end of the story for my district, and so many others like it; neither is it for the vast number of qualified African American women (and men) with aspirations of becoming a school district superintendent - far from it. There is hope even given this daunting reality. But hope alone cannot and will not change reality; persistence, dedication, and action are required to keep hope alive. While we may not be able to directly impact and improve the economic prospects of the communities and school districts we serve, as African American women educational leaders, we must commit ourselves to seeking out, welcoming, opening the door, and actively mentoring both current and aspiring African American women education leaders.

Anyon (2005), in *Radical Possibilities Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement*, asserted that real and lasting societal change is initiated not from

the top-down but the bottom-up emerging out of direct participation in the struggle. For African American women and men aspiring to become superintendents, educational leaders at the highest level, hope and inspiration can be found in the words of Maya Angelou, written in 1978: “You may write me down in history with your bitter, twisted lies. You may trod me in the very dirt. But still, like dust, I’ll rise ...” (Angelou, 1978, para. 1).



## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore and uncover those barriers and challenges unique to African American women aspiring to become school district superintendents. To do so, I interviewed five African American women who successfully attained and maintained the school district superintendent's position. Through hearing their stories, I hoped to shed light on the barriers female African American school leaders faced when aspiring to the highest office in public school leadership and better understand how they successfully navigated and overcame impediments to become successful school district superintendents.

Very few stories have been shared of African American female superintendents who have acquired and successfully maintained positions as public-school superintendents (Katz, 2008). Throughout their career journeys from classroom teacher to superintendent, African American women have been underrepresented in the superintendent's position. Through this research, I gained first-person and in-depth perspectives on how these five African American women attained, experienced, and successfully maintained positions as school district superintendents. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the method I used to explore African American women's stories as they crossed barriers and made personal sacrifices to successfully maintain their positions of school district superintendent.

## Research Questions

This study's primary research question was: How have African American female superintendents attained and successfully held the superintendent position? Related questions included:

- What barriers and challenges do African American female superintendents face?
- Are there certain strategies sitting African American female superintendents use to build their capacity as leaders while successfully maintaining their positions?
- What sacrifices have African American female superintendents made in order to maintain success?
- Is there a particular leadership style African American female school district superintendents possess to remain competitive in a White male-dominated field?

## Methodology

To better understand the lived experience of successful African American female superintendents, a qualitative methodology was used. Drawing upon *Narrative Inquiry* (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) and *Interview as Methodology* (Brenner, 2006), interviews were conducted with five current or retired African American female superintendents. Interview data were coded and analyzed for themes common to all.

Brenner (2006) stated the intent of the research interview is to understand the interviewees on their terms and how they make meaning of their own lives, experiences, and cognitive processes. Thus, the interviews become an interactional relationship,

where both the interviewee and interviewer are engaged in an ongoing process of making meaning of the journey (Kvale, 1996). This type of transactional interviewing is well-suited to researching another's experience. An individual's personal experience brought forth as a story by the participant, elicited by the researcher, is a way of reflectively thinking about the experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). As such, narrative inquiry focuses on human experiences in which "individuals lead storied lives that must be shared" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477).

I believe my experiences as an Associate Superintendent for the past eight years have equipped me with a storied life, which catapulted me forward to gather stories from the interviewees and capture their individualized journeys. My goal was to shed light upon and learn from these five successful African American female school leaders' experiences. In a seminal work by Malinowski (1922), he stated that the interviewer would "grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" (p. 19), which is critical to seeing through the experiential lens of the African American female superintendent.

Drawing from the research methodologies of the interview and narrative inquiry fit this study best. It allowed me to elicit and examine responses to my research questions through the reflective stories of these five successful African American female superintendents detailing barriers and sacrifices that solidified their position as school district superintendents in a White-male dominated field. "To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375). This study focused on the voices, perspectives, and stories of successful African American female superintendents will encourage other

aspiring African American female school leaders to seek to become a school superintendent.

### **Setting**

The geographical and demographic setting for this research is South Suburban Chicago, Illinois. Though suburban, the communities where the five participating superintendents served are urban and poor in nature. Three of the school districts are comprised predominately of African American and Hispanic students. Each school district is considered low income based upon the 2017 data from the Illinois Report Card.

### **Participant Selection Criteria**

This research focused on five African American female superintendents. (See Participant Biographies in Chapter Four: Findings.) Ten sitting or retired African American female superintendents were invited to participate. Five accepted the invitation. Participant selection was based on two criteria. The first criterion was the superintendent had to have served consecutively in the same school district for a minimum of five years. The number of years in the position indicates longevity. According to the AASA (2019), the *State of the Superintendency Study*, the mean tenure for a superintendent is five to six years. The annual turnover rate for superintendents is between 14 and 16%. The second criterion is having been recognized and known during their tenure for being successful by their superintendent peers and the communities in which they served (Henry et al., 2006).

### **Success Defined**

For this study, success was defined as meeting the criteria above in conjunction with capacity building. Fullan (2008) stated that capacity building includes competencies, resources, and motivation. Individuals and groups are considered high in

capacity if they possess and continue to develop knowledge and skills, if they attract and use resources (time, ideas, expertise, money) wisely, and if they are committed to putting energy to get important things done collectively and continually. The African American female superintendents included in this research had to have the ability to enlarge their capacity by breaking through systemic structural barriers as well as internal barriers.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through individual face-to-face and phone interviews. The interviews took place in south suburban Chicago. Critical to the interviews was having a space and mode that promoted trust and psychological and emotional safety (Williamson & Burns, 2014). Psychological safety can be described as individuals' perceptions of the consequences of interpersonal risks in their work environment. It consists of taken-for-granted beliefs about how others will respond when one puts oneself on the line, such as by asking a question, seeking feedback, reporting a mistake, or proposing a new idea (Kramer & Cook, 2004).

The women who participated in this research, from the very beginning, needed to feel and know that it was safe to share. Establishing trust was vital. Merriam-Webster (2020e) defines trust as “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something; one in which confidence is placed” (para.1). To create an atmosphere of trust, to allow it to take root and hold, a certain degree of vulnerability is required, both on the part of the researcher and the interviewees (Råheim et al., 2016). For this study to be considered accurate, valid, and, ultimately, meaningful, it was essential that I, the researcher, led with my own vulnerability.

My interview approach was to share my experiences as an aspiring African American female superintendent, which revealed my own personal vulnerability. When

someone is willing to admit they are vulnerable, they demonstrate a level of trust and respect with the person they are opening up to (Ogulnick, 2015). Great leaders recognize the importance of bringing vulnerability to work because it is the foundation for open and non-judgmental communications.

The individual interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes in length. The interview questions were sent to the participants in advance to allow them time to reflect upon the questions and help develop trust in the researcher and the process. Brenner (2006) emphasized the researcher needs to create an atmosphere of trustworthiness in interview research. Trust was paramount to this study. Receiving the interview questions beforehand, signaled to the interviewees that the researcher was both respectful and trustworthy. (See Appendix A - Individual Interview Questions.)

### **Data Analysis**

Data from the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Kvale (1996) stated that when working with interview data, the researcher does not wait to begin until after all the data collection is complete. The process is continuous and ongoing, starting with the first interview and continuing to the last. For this research, data were gathered and analyzed using aspects of Brenner's (2006) systematic analytic framework consisting of five phases:

1. transcription,
2. description,
3. analysis,
4. interpretation, and
5. display. (pp. 366-367)

Ochs (1979) stated that the act of transcription itself involves theoretical decisions. Theoretical decision-making was concerned with the choices I made as the researcher. Brenner noted that oral speech transcribed into printed text could not be replicated to give the same full flavor from the original oral experience to the written format. The researcher must portray the informants' essence in a manner that brings each participant's journey to life.

Transcription was practiced in multiple ways, using naturalism, in which every utterance is captured in as much detail as possible, and denaturalism, in which grammar is corrected, interview noise (e.g., stutters and pauses) is removed, and non-standard accents (i.e., non-majority) are standardized. Transcription is a powerful act of representation (Oliver, Serovich, & Mason, 2005).

The procedure of description included coding, thematic analysis, and identification of significant incidents. This process was aimed at identifying the content of the collected data. Analysis is the phase that the researcher looks for the relations in the data. Common themes and threads running through the data are identified. The interpretation phase requires the research to draw the connections between the results collected and the larger body of work. The final phase is display. The display phase involves determining how to present the data to the reader (Brenner, 2006). For this study, data are presented thematically.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of a study may be geographic or demographic in nature (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). As corroborated in chapter two's literature review, a limited number of African American female superintendents in geographic proximity met the participant criteria for the study. Time constraints affecting both the researcher and the participants,

demanding enough due to the nature of the superintendent position, were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (which occurred during the data-gathering phase of the study). This unanticipated crisis precluded a group interview with the participants coming together to discuss, reflect upon, and dig deeper into the findings' meaning. This added sifting of the data had been part of the original research design. The researcher and the participants were overwhelmed working beyond their typical 10-12-hour workdays responding to questions and demands from government officials, the school board, parents, teachers, and the community about whether, when, where, and how the schools in their districts would be opened or closed. Though eagerly awaited by all, the group interview will have to be conducted at a later date.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

This study was conducted to answer the primary research question, “How have African American female superintendents attained and successfully held the superintendent position?” Correspondences were sent to ten current or former African American female superintendents that met the study’s participant criteria; of those ten, five individuals responded. These five women, two former and three current superintendents, were interviewed. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. As a “member check,” also known as a respondent validation process, each interviewee received a copy of her interview transcript (Carlson, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 2006). The interview transcriptions were coded for themes.

### **Participant Biographies**

The following brief biographies of the five participants provide the reader with the contextual, personal, and professional background of each of the participants in order to differentiate their unique experiential voices. Four of the five participants hold doctorates in educational leadership; all five individuals hold the superintendent endorsement. To ensure their anonymity, all participants were assigned pseudonyms, and no actual names were revealed.

#### **Tracey**

Tracey has served as superintendent in her current district for ten years. She has been in education for 46 years. Her path to the superintendency took the traditional route of moving steadily up each rung of the K-12 educational leadership hierarchy (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999). Tracey began as a teacher, served unofficially as an

assistant principal, became a principal, followed by several central office positions before attaining a superintendency. A distinction of note was Tracey's involvement in the Afrocentric education movement in the early years of her career. Tracey has been an educational administrator in three Midwestern states on her journey to the superintendency.

### **Suzette**

When asked how and why she became a superintendent and a lifelong involvement with education, Suzette replied, "I think it's in my DNA." Her grandfather started a church in Mississippi and passed the torch of teaching, learning, and education to Suzette's mother. During the upheaval of federally mandated school integration across the United States and in Mississippi in the 1970s, Suzette's mother was a full-time school administrator but was not allowed to receive credit or acknowledgment for her work. It was not until her mother retired, as a result of a lawsuit, that she received recognition for her work as an African American female administrator in the southern state of Mississippi. This family history profoundly impacted Suzette's decision to enter the education field, a decision that ultimately led her to the highest level of school leadership, the superintendent position. Suzette's career path from a teacher to a central office administrator to superintendent was the traditional "up-the-ladder" path. But after serving over two decades in the same district, it took moving to another district for Suzette to obtain a superintendency.

### **Makayla**

Makayla has been an educator and school leader for 46 years. She also traveled a traditional upward path from being a teacher, then an assistant principal, a principal, a central office administration, and, eventually, a superintendent. Of note is that at each

level, Makayla quickly earned and established a reputation for action, change leadership, and increasing student academic achievement. Her reputation of being a “change agent” caused Makayla to be sought after for various leadership positions, both within and across school districts. Known for turning schools and school districts around from “failing” to “succeeding,” Makayla earned the right to sit at the highest leadership table once predominately made up of White males.

### **Shakaunya**

Shakaunya’s journey to the superintendency was equally traditional and familial, having grown up in a family of educators. Shakaunya was encouraged to consider a wide variety of career options, but ultimately, she chose education. As superintendent, Shakaunya recognized and seized the opportunity to step forward to head many professional committees and organizations that previously had been presided over by her White male superintendent counterparts. Shakaunya believes a person must find and walk her own “path.” This involves looking inward and outward, having faith in yourself, and holding true to your values. It requires operating in the reality of the present to realize a vision for the future, always being aware of what is going on around you and playing for the long-haul. Now in her seat at the superintendent’s table, it also means being ready to speak truth to power. Shakaunya confides, “I play chess, not checkers.”

### **Charlene**

Charlene did not take the traditional path to the superintendency. She grew up with the desire and goal of becoming a broker. While working as a broker, there was a significant disagreement between the owner and Charlene, which prompted her to resign. Charlene needed immediate finances to maintain her home and livelihood. She decided

to change careers and enter the fray of public education as a substitute teacher. Soon after starting on her new career path, Charlene realized she had found her inescapable love for education. She then decided to go back to school to obtain the proper credentials and endorsements to further her pursuit. Charlene believes it was destiny that carried her first to her original career, becoming a substitute teacher, a district administrator, and then becoming a school superintendent. Looking back, she said, “I’m operating in my calling.”

### **Themes**

The following themes were found in the interview data collected and analyzed from the five African American women participants who had successfully attained and maintained the superintendent's position. Four major themes emerged from the data.

1. Need and Importance of Networking,
2. Having to be “Twice as Good,”
3. There Are No “Do-Overs,” and
4. Taking Calculated Risks

#### **Theme One: Need and Importance of Networking**

Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) classify women’s modes of preparedness for the superintendency into three categories: formal, experiential, and personal, defining personal preparedness as the “strength and level of the individual’s belief in herself” (pp. 12-15). Networking with other African American superintendents can help fill the gap in an “individual’s belief in herself.” The five African American study participants felt that successfully attaining and maintaining a superintendency was predicated on networking. Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) assert that having the ability and a variety of ways, means, and opportunities to access a network of peers is essential to the success of all

superintendents. Successful networking is critical for African American women. Whether it be the importance of consequences or pressure and anxiety felt due to the lack of networking, the ability to network came up often in the interviews. The importance of networking was connected to professional development, mentoring, and issues around race and gender. In the exchange below, Tracey linked networking with professional development and race.

Tracey: It's really important to participate or engage in various types of professional development that's offered through some of the national organizations to position yourself to find other African American women superintendents. There's another African American woman superintendent down the road.

While proximity is a plus, just having the opportunity to network is essential. Tracey added:

Just having an opportunity to talk to other people and listen to some of their struggles and talk through things, share information, and that's important. I have a network of people that have left Chicago to become superintendents in other areas, and we keep in contact and maintain a network.

Researcher: You say having a network of African American female superintendents to dialogue and network with is important. How does this relate to building capacity for an African American female superintendent?

Tracey: I think that in most cases, in fact with those that I've encountered, there's a level of understanding that we may in some cases having other hurdles or obstacles to deal with and that, it's like a sisterhood.

Networking with individuals who have gone through like struggles affords Tracey a new understanding that helped build her capacity and strength as an African American female educational leader. She also mentions how important just having the “opportunity” to network is. To meet and network with other African American women superintendents is not something easily or readily available. It is rare. Tracey’s description of her own experience, “it’s like a sisterhood,” is profoundly telling. When a networking opportunity presents itself, it is viewed as a precious gem.

Any superintendent is presented with opportunities to build a support network, join and participate in national professional organizations, and take advantage of state, local, and regional professional development opportunities. However, you can’t just “sign up and show up.” You also need to be proactive on your own in seeking out and initiating strong, long-lasting interpersonal relationships that will be a ready and trusted source of help, advice, or encouragement when you need it most. That said, this can be much harder for African American women superintendents. Barriers of distance, race, gender, and scarcity come into play. Beyond participating in professional organizations, Shakaunya and Makayla had this to say about the value and importance of seeking out and connecting with possible mentors,

Shakaunya: The other strategy is probably building relationships outside of...or with mentors. I have some powerful mentors that I make sure that I maintain those relationships. And I’m always purposeful about maintaining them and listening because I think it’s been critical to my success.

Makayla: The key for me as an African American, I’ve connected with other African American leaders...connecting with people can just be so, so

important, because they can help... just give you that guidance and relieve stress.

Suzette recalled, “My first mentors were White men. Because in my classes, there wasn’t anyone who looked like me.” Feeling isolated because of her race and gender continued and followed Suzette into the early years of her career. Suzette had had one-to-one mentoring, but all were White males. As an African American woman in a field dominated by White males, she did not have anyone with whom she could share her innermost struggles, joys, frustrations, glory, fears, and accomplishments - both as an aspiring and later a sitting superintendent.

As someone who survived emerging out of isolation, Suzette stresses how vital and essential networking is. I could hear and feel the hurt and oppression in Suzette’s voice when she talked about not having had the opportunity to connect with other African American women superintendents. She said, “When I say my first mentors were White men, I tell that story because that’s the only story I can tell.” At that moment, during Suzette’s interview, I became keenly aware of the weight which can be lifted when an African American female superintendent or assistant superintendent, a unique individual, shares her struggles and fears with another in the same position. That individual’s experience looks and feels like *you* in both race and gender.

While the barriers of intentional or unconscious race and gender discrimination may seem to have disappeared, or at least lessened, since Suzette’s introduction to the superintendency, its lingering effects can be seen today in the small number of sitting African American women superintendents. According to the Illinois Association of School Administrators (IASA), for the 2019-2020 school year, there are 18 African American female superintendents out of 854 superintendents in Illinois (personal

communication, August 2020). This equates to 1% of the superintendents in Illinois that are African American females. This means that as Makayla explains,

Makayla: The superintendency is populated by White males. And so, you have this barrier where we aren't there. We aren't in positions to help each other, so you don't have that. And you have to work really hard at connecting with others. The one barrier in just sheer numbers are very small. And I believe that's intentional...

When Makayla says, "you have this barrier where we aren't there," it is as if as an African American female superintendent, even when seated at the table with other school superintendents for a meeting, you are invisible. That or your mere presence at the table obliges you to be a spokesperson for your race or gender. Either way, you are perilously close to being reduced from an individual with free will to a symbolic representation of your race and gender. This insight came from Charlene,

Charlene: And I'm the only Black person in the room all the time. The only African American woman in the room all the time...I feel like I'm carrying the whole race on my shoulders...

Davis and Maldonado (2015) asserted that Black women have different experiences with power, growth, and development that other women do not, contributing to African American women's marginalization. Marginalization is a means to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group. To combat marginalization, Black women must, in Makayla's experience, "work real hard at connecting with others." Coupled with the fact that "just [the] sheer numbers" of African American female superintendents "are very small," makes networking for aspiring and



current African American women superintendents even more difficult.

The participants' individual and collective experiences in this study speak to the need to connect and network with other African American female superintendents to build and reinforce emotional strength and give support. It also affirms the work of Gilmour and Kinsella (2009). They found difficulty in networking, coupled with a lack of mentors, places African American female superintendents in a fraught and fragile position as far as support.

Upon reflection, I found it to be a sobering reality check when Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000) asked the questions: “What is it like to be a Black woman who aspires to the superintendency? Where and to whom does a Black woman look when considering the position?” (p. 532). These very questions echo my personal lived experience. Expressed lived experiences allow one to create a window into the soul. As an African American woman, I live in a state of dual consciousness, knowing I am qualified to attain my pursuits and simultaneously aware that my qualifications are not enough.

### **Theme Two: Having to be “Twice as Good”**

In *Border Crossing: A Black Woman Superintendent Builds Democratic Community in Unfamiliar Territory*, Katz (2012) tells how a Black female superintendent struggled daily having to call out and face down issues of racism, gender bias, and social inequality as she “crossed-over” these long-entrenched but heretofore invisible barriers after she assumed the superintendent position in a suburban, mostly White, community. Each of the superintendents interviewed in this study have longevity in the field of education. As shown in the chart below, all have met the State’s qualifications to be a superintendent and have successfully maintained their positions for several years. That

said, each of these African American female superintendents knows within themselves that having the qualifications is not enough.

Table 1.  
*Participants' Years of Experience*

Names	Years in Education	Years as a Superintendent	Retired	Current
Tracey	46	10		X
Suzette	38	15	X	
Makayla	46	11.5	X	
Shakaunya	24.5	9		X
Charlene	21	5		X

As I know from experience, they know an African American woman administrator must continually demonstrate and prove her preparedness and qualifications to perform the superintendent's duties and responsibilities. She also knows that her qualifications and, ultimately, her performance must not only meet but must exceed the expected level required to do the job. This means she must possess, acquire, and show competencies that supersede those of the previous status quo. And, she must do, be, and accomplish this while daily encountering and dealing with leftover and long-entrenched invisible, but real, barriers of racism, genderism, and classism (Anyon, 2005). This scenario and set of internal and external expectations come with being a Black female in a White male-dominated society and profession. Working twice as hard to be “twice as good” personally and professionally is built into Black children's mindsets early on. This insight is from Tracey,

Tracey: My mother and grandmother told me ...being “twice as good” is a part of my psyche. When you do things,

you keep in mind that yes, you have to be better, stronger more confident in everything that you do. Be twice as good and twice as careful.

On the inner pressure wrought by always feeling you have to be twice as good, even after attaining a superintendency, Makayla stated, "... you have the challenge of just getting a foot into places where decisions are made, in addition to your superintendency." Even for Makayla, an assertive, intellectual, and skilled administrator of 46 years, the pressure of having to be twice as good is always there, whether at work, or out in the community running errands, or enjoying some downtime with your family on weekends. For African American women administrators, even after attaining a superintendency, the feeling of having to be twice as good never leaves you. In fact, it increases.

Makayla: I'll say that at the superintendent level, three times as good. You just have to know that eyes are on you all the time. This is why I believe we have to dress a certain way. We have to look a certain way. We have to look the part always. You don't get Saturday to run around in grubby pants. You don't get that. You don't get that...

Finding ways to maintain both an inner and outer balance amidst a daily shifting of personal and professional roles and expectations can be exhausting. Still, it is essential for mental health and success. I asked Charlene how she deals with the internal and external pressures of high expectations, especially in her "twice as good" persona. As an example, she recalled a time amid a heated meeting in which being the only female and only Black female in the room, she felt ignored and shut out of the conversation because her voice was not being heard. To be heard and to get her point across, she had to switch gears. She explains,

Charlene: In that moment, I learned how to handle my message and still get my point across, because ultimately, I still got my point across because it's the best revenge. But here with these, especially these men here and how they talk to these women, I had to develop a standard of how you will deal with me and go back to the games...I always make sure there are more people saying my message than there are yours.

To be true to herself, to be present, speak in an authentic voice, and effectively function in a White, male-dominated arena, Charlene had to maintain a balance between being constantly aware of and attuned to the issue of her blackness and gender. She needed to be careful not to allow her passion to be misconstrued as the “angry Black woman” phenomenon. She recalled another encounter involving the county board chairman. After making a quick assessment of a tense situation, Charlene decided that moment in time was best to let someone else carry her message.

Charlene: So, I remember when the county Board Chairman then, and I met (with her team). I said, we were getting a psychiatrist here and trying to do tele psychiatry. And he said, “Let's give her the money.” And I had another White male just say, “No, she didn't say that. That's not what she said, you're lying.”

Charlene asked me a question, reflecting on a previous question by me: Do you see political undercurrents and issues more of a struggle because you are a woman or more of a struggle because you are African American? Charlene's response, “so what is it? Black? Is it female? It's all of it.” Charlene had to find her voice and secure a place at the leadership table while having to endure and fend off a dismissive culture of gender, race, and masculinity marginalization (Gines, 2015). To some, it may appear Charlene

bowed in weakness by allowing a White male to carry her message. However, as a savvy and experienced African American female superintendent, Charlene assessed the situation. She made a strategic decision that, in this case, it was better to “play the long-game” to ultimately realize a long-term goal by manipulating and using the *power levers that be*.

The “twice as good” phenomenon presents at times like a childhood game played within the African American culture known as “Mother, may I?” In this game, the player is trying to gain access to a specific place. The mother, whoever that player was, controlled the other players' moves when they could step, how many steps, and in what direction they could move. For African American women superintendents, the “mother” position at the table of the highest level of the leadership game has typically been occupied by a succession of White males. When asked what she saw as being the greatest challenge to the African American woman superintendent, Makayla, who for much of her life has been an activist, offered this,

Makayla: I would say as far as the African American female superintendents’ challenge, most of the committees at the State level and such are held by White men...So you have to combat all of that. And then it’s just the overt racism. Especially in this climate that we are in now, they make no bones about it: ‘we don’t want an African American.’ Given the makeup of the district or given who’s on the Board. So, all those things you have to just work at and overcome.

For both recent and veteran African American women superintendents, always having to be on-guard and ready to demonstrate and prove your qualifications for the position manifests in the feeling and perceived reality of having to be twice as good as

your White superintendent counterparts. It can be displayed in daily relations with the school board, the staff, the community, and even the students. Planning, managing, and overseeing new construction projects in the district is not a skill taught or a topic covered in most superintendent preparation programs. For most superintendents, working and dealing with architects and contractors is an on-the-job learning experience. As the one ultimately responsible for the success and on-time completion of the project, the superintendent must make himself or herself knowledgeable and up-to-speed in a brief period. This represents a challenging task for most superintendents, but it can be especially so for a female African American superintendent when conscious or unconscious genderism and racism enter the picture. Shakaunya recalled a meeting between herself, her district building and grounds supervisor, and a White male architect.

Shakaunya: So, the architect comes in and [starts]... engaging in conversation with my supervisor, and so my supervisor tells him, and I quote, 'you might want to inform the superintendent that the cost of...What are they called? Freight. We're trying to get more storage. The cost of the storage units will be \$20,000.00, and depending upon what's in the building, she might want to take this into consideration on whether or not it is worth the cost.'

The architect turned to Shakaunya and quickly proceeded to tell her what she needed, why, and the cost leaving no room for questions. The architect had initially ignored or dismissed Shakaunya's position of authority. He went around her to speak with her White male building and grounds supervisor. Why did this occur? Was it due to her gender, race, or because she had what might be considered an "ethnic" name? Did he surmise that she had nothing to bring to the table? It is unfortunate he confidently felt he

had a right to do what he did. In a calm, confident voice, Shakaunya responded by demonstrating her knowledge and qualifications to lead and make such decisions. She demanded respect both for herself and the position she held.

Shakaunya: I responded... first of all, the cost might be \$20,000.00, but I never said I needed 20 [units]. I only need 10. Which means half my cost is now \$10,000.00...and number two, I had a garage sale a year ago and raised \$5,000.00. So, I've now covered the cost of my storage units. I've already done a cost analysis of what it's going to cost. *I don't ever need you to do homework for me. I'm going to do it, and typically bring it to you to question you about it.*

As an African American woman and as a superintendent, for Shakaunya, this encounter had implications beyond the field of education. To demonstrate her skills, knowledge, and qualifications, Shakaunya conveyed her message in clear and decisive terms. If the architect's issue was with her blackness or with her femaleness, if he spoke and acted from either implicit or explicit bias, Shakaunya wanted to make sure that he left the meeting with an entirely different view of Shakaunya. Shakaunya went on to share that she and the architect's relationship was quite different after this encounter. As she leaned back in her chair and smiled, she recalled her last words to the architect as they concluded their first meeting together: "I have been able to sit in this seat because I do my homework and I am very good at strategizing."

Like Shakaunya, Tracey, with 46 years in the field of education and ten years as superintendent, had made it to the superintendent's chair yet felt alone and almost invisible when seated around a table of her superintendent peers. Tracey had already proven she deserved her seat at the leadership table and was very visible in her district

and community but was shunted off to an island alone when among other superintendents. As the first African American female to serve as the superintendent in her district, Tracey shared an exchange she had had with a neighboring superintendent:

Tracey: Perhaps if we got together and tried to order supplies together so that we could get a smaller bulk rate for what we're ordering. And the response was, 'Oh, we would never do anything with your district.'

Tracey's voice remained steady as she shared the verbal interchange with me, as she reflected on this example of what she has endured as a highly qualified and experienced African American woman superintendent. She recalled after a meeting someone coming up to her marveling at how articulate she was. To this particular individual, Tracey replied, "I don't think you would've said that if I were not an African American woman." Having to be twice as good is the price you pay to protect yourself from and ward off or at least minimize these kinds of hurtful misperceptions and remarks. On what "twice as good" meant to her,

Tracey: "twice as good" means that you have to know your stuff. You've got to be up on the research. You've got to become whatever task you're involved in or whatever organization you're involved in. You've got to know the background information so that you can clearly communicate in a meeting as to your knowledge of the situation.'

Suzette, who felt that education was in her DNA, and now with 15 years as a superintendent under her belt, echoed Tracey's sentiments, adding,



Suzette: I think you must be twice as knowledgeable. I think you have to (be) more research-based. It's not about being twice as good. It's being twice as knowledgeable.

Suzette would not have gotten to where she is now without having a firm resolve and an unflappable belief in herself. However, as an African American and a woman, it also required being twice as prepared, up-to-date, and knowledgeable as her White peers on educational issues and trends. As an African American woman superintendent, you are not given the luxury of being a “run-of-the-mill” mediocre educational manager. Today, sadly, it remains an imperative that both aspiring and current African American school leaders take heed of the cultural lesson and belief that we must be “twice as good” if we are to attain and maintain a seat at the highest leadership table.

One might argue that any superintendent should be prepared in this manner. However, for the African American female superintendent, preparing for an upcoming professional organization meeting or presentation, or a critical faculty, staff, board, or community meeting, or a meeting with vendors to discuss a construction project or the purchase of a new district-wide reading program, the pressure of preparation is at a much higher level. As you begin to prepare, command an audience's attention, be listened to and respected, you and your presentation must be beyond what is typically expected. You need to be twice as good, twice as ready, knowing this may be your first and last opportunity to get your message across. On this depth and level of preparation it takes to be twice as good, Makayla had this to say,

Makayla: The other strategy I would say is always thinking through whatever it is you're getting ready to do in terms of your plan. And whatever the initiative is, understand that you need a plan A, B, and C. By that I

mean, ‘okay, this is what you’re going to do...if plans X, Y, and Z happens, this is what we want to do think it through all the way... Because again, as African Americans, we don’t get second and third chances.

In *Whiteucation: Privilege, Power, and Prejudice in School and Society*

(Kingsberry & Jean-Marie, 2018) found that in the African American woman’s journey to the superintendency, she is confronted with barriers that intersect and interlock with race, gender, negative stereotypes, and isolation which force her to transcend the norm, first in order attain a superintendency, and then to maintain the position. In African American culture, we are raised from childhood that we must be twice as good. This goes beyond the notion of a fair and even playing field of competition. The African woman has to compete against the White male, the Black male, the White female, the stereotypes cast against Black females, and disregard to her intellect. This is my lived experience. “Twice is good” is neither a made-up notion nor an irrational concept; it is the reality for the African American female. Pruitt (2015) contended that today there are more African American female principals and district-level leaders or superintendents. Nonetheless, there remain invisible barriers prohibiting African American women from pursuing and assuming the position of superintendent. The extent and nature of these invisible barriers to leadership ascension remain but are hidden out of sight.

Whether experienced singularly or in combination, race, class, and gender barriers for aspiring and veteran African American women superintendents with the requisite qualifications and experience for the position still exist. I believe these barriers are veiled and unseen only to those *who choose not to see*. Robinson and Ward (1991) contended African American women can consciously prepare for the unjust socio-political environment they will at some point encounter by fostering and nurturing a “belief in

self,” which will equip them to recognize and confront resistance. These authors assert: “A belief in self is far greater than anyone’s disbelief” (p. 87). While the environment of which Robinson and Ward speak may have improved incrementally over the decades, listening to the voices of the women in this study told me to be successful in the superintendent position, African American women must hold on to the notion and strategy of being “twice as good.”

### **Theme Three: There Are No “Do-Overs”**

*“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” James Baldwin (1962).*

No “do-overs” was a powerful, almost palpable theme expressed by all five African American female superintendents who participated in this study. This theme is a profound lived experience of each of these women, so much so that the day-to-day reality of its premise can be felt in one’s soul. In interviewing each of these women, it often felt as if they and I were re-living significant U.S. history periods. I was reminded of the fight against inequality, injustice, and racial discrimination of Blacks during the Civil Rights Movement and the fight against systemic racism and marginalization of groups such as the poor, ethnic people of color, and women, especially African American women.

Having no opportunity for “do-overs” involves being prepared, doing your research, and being quick to spot and take advantage of opportunities to use and demonstrate your knowledge and skills so that your voice is heard. It requires a detailed and comprehensive plan A and a plan B and C ready to address possible bumps on the road ahead. For these and other African American women superintendents, having no

“do-overs” means having to get it right the first time. As Makayla said about having to be twice as good, “...as African Americans, we don’t get any second or third chances.”

Below, Charlene talked about the constant pressure she felt because of the added time and effort it took to make sure that she had gotten it right:

Charlene:       What it takes and the relationships you have to know and the players of the game, to begin to orchestrate that. I have so much of that to get under control that I didn’t have the time [to play any games].

Charlene soon learned she had to be the conductor of her own orchestra in order to maintain her position as superintendent. But with that came the need to present a flawless concerto leadership baton confidently in hand. Suzette stated how she had to work on and with her school board to gain confidence as a new first-year African American female superintendent.

Suzette:       I spent the first year listening, which is so crucial. I had no knowledge. I was coming from a city to the south suburbs. I had no reference, but I spent time with and listening to each of the seven Board members.

Finally, I asked one member to take me to his favorite [lunch] place, because I knew absolutely nothing about the suburbs. [Later] He smiled one day and said, ‘you know you weren’t my choice.’

I said, ‘really’? But you voted for me [in the end, although reluctantly]. He said, ‘that’s because I was outvoted.’ I said ‘you know what, before it’s all over, I’ll be your choice and I was.

Starting with her first year on the job, Suzette was keenly aware that there was no room available to have a “do-over.” Whenever she saw a window of opportunity to gain their trust and confidence, she took it. Then things gradually started to change.

Suzette: When they started realizing that this woman really knows what she’s doing, they started to let go...Even though they voted for me, they [all seven Board members, especially the member that reluctantly cast the unanimous vote] had this thing in the back (of their heads), ‘you were not my choice.’

Consciously nurturing and developing a powerful sense of self-confidence is crucial for African American female superintendents' success. According to Robinson and Ward (1991), “a belief in self is far greater than anyone’s disbelief” (p. 87). As Makayla stated, “you do have to have a strong constitution and a strong philosophy of who you are.” Having a strong constitution and strong philosophy of knowing who you are, of which Makayla spoke, provide a bulwark against unacknowledged systemic norms of racism and sexism hidden within the organization's very structure. These qualities also serve as everyday reminders that for African Americans, especially African American women, the premise of being denied second chances or “do-overs” is a reality that must be faced and overcome both in attaining and maintaining a superintendency. Makayla shared words to encourage me as well as other African American female aspiring superintendents, saying:

Makayla: ... understanding that you can’t do what your White counterparts can do. You can’t do it. And every time we try, we get in trouble. And by that, I mean, understanding first and foremost, you are an African American female. Don’t shy away from that. Don’t

shy away from your culture, your background  
...celebrate it.

Why does Makayla so forcefully assert that a strong constitution is required? Why did she feel the need to remind the African American aspiring female superintendents that they cannot do what their White counterparts can do? Perhaps the answer harkens back and can be found in *The Negro's Place in Nature: A Paper Read before The London Anthropological Society* (Hunt, 1868) wherein the author, a White male, offers a summation of the “everlasting facts,” fixed and ordained by the “Almighty,” apparent for all to see that Whites, by virtue of a superior “organic structure,” are at the pinnacle of the power and pecking order of humanity, while Blacks are at the very bottom.

The human family is composed of a certain number of species or races, just as all other forms of being, which are generally alike, but specifically unlike. The white or Caucasian, is the most elevated, and the Negro the most subordinate of all the races in their organic structure, and therefore in their faculties. This is fact, unchanging, immovable, everlasting fact, fixed by the hand of the Almighty, but whether so at the beginning of all things, or by subsequent decree of the Eternal, mortals or not permitted to know (Hunt, 1868, p. 2).

This kind of thinking, while dampened and submerged over the years, has remained transfixed in the hearts of too many, passed down from generation to generation, periodically resurfacing to reveal itself over and over repeatedly, even now in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. This deep-rooted racism has commandeered African Americans' thinking that we cannot err as a White man might without immutable consequences.

Echoing Suzette and Makayla, Shakaunya contends that not only must you feel confident within yourself, but to win over the confidence of the Board, you must exude confidence. This does not mean being a pompous know-it-all, but being prepared,

knowing your stuff, and communicating it in a way the Board will understand. This way, the Board becomes increasingly confident in your ability to lead while negating any need for a “do-over.”

Shakaunya: In order to lead, they [the Board] have to be confident in your ability to lead them. Which means that you have to be articulate. You must be able to express your intelligence in a way which they can understand and know that you know what you’re talking about. You need to lead with confidence in your own abilities. *And then perhaps you might stand a chance.*

As Shakaunya spoke, I could feel her statement tangibly. It was visual. It was alive. She exuded confidence in the very way she described it. It was as if Shakaunya needed to present herself and her personal, professional knowledge with exacting confidence, or she might not be afforded another opportunity. Some might say this is an extremely individualized and therefore narrow way to think. I would argue you “must live it to know it.” Philosopher Michael Polanyi (1962) maintains that all objective knowledge has its start in personal experience or knowing. Jean Piaget’s research on cognitive developmental psychology elucidates four stages of development:

- Sensorimotor. Birth through ages 18-24 months.
- Preoperational. Toddlerhood (18-24 months) through early childhood (age 7)
- Concrete operational. Ages 7 to 12.
- Formal operational. Adolescence through adulthood (Piaget, 1983).

In their analysis of Piaget’s cognitive psychology model, Huitt and Hummel (2003) stated:

Assimilation is the process of using or transforming so that it can be placed in

preexisting cognitive structures. Accommodation is the process of changing cognitive structures in order to accept something from the environment. Both processes are used simultaneously and alternately throughout life (para. 7).

Cherry (2020) asserted that cognitive psychology encompasses internal mental processes, including perception, thinking, memory, attention, language, problem-solving, and learning. All of these have a bearing on the development of self-confidence. It is also what drives Shakaunya's thinking, struggles, and lived experience as an African American woman superintendent when she avers, "...and then you might have a chance."

Shakaunya: Competency. Articulation. Intelligence. You might stand a chance. In any other arena, there's no question that you're fully capable of doing the job. As an African American female, you might stand the chance of them listening, allowing you to lead, following your lead, and you being successful at it.

Because basically what occurs is, we are women, and we are African American women, and there's this assumption that we are emotional creatures who don't have the intellect to be able to make decisions that are of a strategic nature.

There's the assumption that we're the angry (Black woman). So, we are fighting the Angry Black Woman syndrome. So, with that syndrome comes this idea that we are inept, incompetent, unintelligent, and overly emotional.

The dual consciousness within the African American female resides in her mind in order to attain and maintain a superintendency requires a keen sense of self-efficacy, or a combination "can do/must do" attitude. The sheer weight of the threat of no "do-overs" cannot be measured, but it is certainly felt and, therefore, must be acknowledged and



massaged with a daily evaluation of oneself. Makayla had this to say about the need for and value of critical self-reflection.

Makayla: You have to be truly committed to who you are and not waiver. I tell people all the time, have a bathroom mirror conversation with yourself. Sometimes it's looking in the mirror in the bathroom, and you close the door nobody's in the bathroom but you, and just say, 'Okay, Makayla. Now what you did right there...what you did yesterday, that was really stupid. That was stupid, Makayla. Or, Makayla, that was fantastic girl! You hit it out of the park!' Be honest about who you are and what you have done.

Makayla and Tracey both realize that you must simultaneously be honest with yourself about the good, the bad, and the fact that you can only lean on yourself for encouragement and the necessity to remain grounded.

Tracey: They'd look out for their friends where I know I have to toe the line. I know I have to be on top of things. For example, there are a lot of things that could come out of my budget. Or if I buy something for a meeting or some of the tickets that I buy to [professional] events, I could do it out of a corporation type of thing. But I don't want anyone having any reason to point it back to anything that I may have done incorrectly or inappropriately. So, I don't do it.

In *Ruminations on Twenty-Five Years of Patricia Hill Collins's Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Gines (2015) reflected on the long history of African American women having to stand up against and fend off a dismissive culture of gender, race, and masculinity marginalization. The

African American female superintendent, to attain and ensure she sustains her position, has to: acquiesce to the King's speech (be articulate); dress in "appropriate" expressions (neck, hands, and physical posture), all external prerequisites before she can even begin to avail her intellect and talent. You cannot let this protective though fabricated guard down, not even on weekends when running errands about town.

That said, knowing who you are, knowing the cultural norms of the community you serve, and using the strength and softer power inherent in the way women lead, much can be accomplished without having to adopt and mimic the traditional White male leadership model falsely.

Suzette's childhood framed her approach to her career in education, even as she ascended to the superintendency. Born and raised in Mississippi, her grandfather and her mother were educators. Her mother was an administrator without the title, although the expectation was there. Even then, as an African American woman, her grandmother knew that neither she nor her grandchild was allowed a "do-over." They had to get it right the first time. "My mother was my teacher for third and fifth grade," Suzette recalled; "after class would talk to me and say 'Why are you acting like this? You don't act like this!' I didn't have an answer. But she would say to me, 'Do you know people expect me to make differences [exceptions] for you? And I won't do that. I will make it harder for you.'"

Suzette took the lessons she learned from her mother (and grandmother) as a child and put them to use from her early years as a teacher, in various district central cabinet positions, and within her superintendency. She used her power as a woman and an African American woman to handle all kinds of situations. Here she talks about how she

learned to deal with an upset parent without adopting the approach or behaviors that would normally be expected from a White male in the same position.

Suzette:           There was an old guard that said a woman had to scream, cuss and have a temper tantrum to be successful. I found that if a parent, for example, is calling and yelling, I would go softer. Because women, and maybe others, I'm only a woman. You can feel like if I'm not boastful, yelling, screaming, and throwing, that I'm not then powerful. [However] 'Power is not in the voice. Power is in the approach.'

Holding and wielding power is essential to the superintendent position. For the female superintendent, more precisely the African American female superintendent, it is critical that she maintain and balance power and its delivery to ensure she is not perceived negatively for being either too masculine or too feminine. If she gains a reputation, either way, she loses ground and may not be given the latitude to regroup.

In a study of female superintendents, Brunner (1998) found that "being heard" was not accomplished without conflict, which may include being silenced by the very term 'power' (p. 166). In a White-male-dominated culture and society, being seen as having power is a positive attribute typically reserved and ascribed to men. For women who have managed to attain and maintain positions of power, the term 'power' holds an almost instinctual negative connotation; women *should* not hold power because they cannot do so. Though this belief has been proven false repeatedly throughout modern history, if a woman subconsciously believes it to be true, she may become self-silencing, too easily deferring to men conditioned to seek power for power's sake. For the African American female superintendent, the price of being heard is having to maintain her balance on a narrow and tight rope, managing power strategically.

#### **Theme Four: Take Calculated Risks**

*“Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.”*

*- Booker T. Washington*

Merriam Webster defines risk as a possibility of loss or injury; someone or something that creates or suggests a hazard. Calculated risk is defined as a hazard or chance of failure whose degree of probability has been reckoned or estimated before some undertaking is entered upon; an undertaking or the actual or possible product of an undertaking whose chance of failure has been previously estimated. When interviewed individually, the five superintendents who participated in this study all stressed the value, if not the necessity as African American females, to take risks first to attain and then again, many times later, maintain their hard-won superintendent positions.

Double Dutch jump-rope is a jumping rope game that has been historically played amongst inner-city African American girls. The game consists of a minimum of three players, one player on each end turning the rope, and the third player who jumps into the rope as it is being turned in a rhythmic motion. A song or a rhyme usually accompanies the game. The one who jumps in takes a calculated risk as to “when” to enter the ropes as it turns. I remember swaying back and forth, coming close to the ropes, and pulling back, waiting for the right moment to jump in. The realization is if you jump in too soon, you mess up, or if you wait too late, you never get in, resulting in an automatic loss. Anyone familiar with the game will feel the intense pressure from reflecting on the nature of reward or consequences of jumping Double Dutch rope.

The superintendents in this study collectively have 175.5 years in education and 50.5 years in the superintendency. They have had to take calculated risks on numerous occasions for survival, respect, livelihood, further career aspirations, and self and family

care within their tenure. When an individual takes a calculated risk, she must weigh the possibility of a future benefit against the real chance of failure. For superintendents and school leaders at all levels, the price of failure can be high. For African American female administrators and superintendents, the cost of failure weighs heavier when making such decisions. Their reputation as a school leader is at stake, and the pressure to “get it right” the first time is always there. The odds of being given a second chance are slim for an African American female superintendent; she has learned there are no “do-overs.”

That said, for an African American female leader, the price of “staying put” and “playing it safe” is not a safe option or recipe for maintaining a superintendency. In fact, looking for or cultivating opportunities to take calculated risks is part of keeping current, professionally connected, and sustaining within the profession. Makayla had been an assistant superintendent for 13 years. When her superintendent was ready to retire, he told her, “it’s time to leave...when administrations change, boards change.” Charlene, a single parent, had to roll the dice about her professional future, thinking, should I relocate or remain safe? In the end, Charlene and Makala both stepped out on faith. At one point in her career, Suzette realized that she would be at risk of becoming stagnant if she did not move. Makayla, Charlene, and Suzette all took calculated risks in deciding to pull up stakes and relocate from one state to another state to take their first superintendency.

All at different points and times in their careers, these three African American women took the risk and made a life-altering decision. Relocating with a family was a risk that they decided to take, which meant that their children had to make significant adjustments. The inevitable question looming, what if I fail? For a mother, the thought of leaving security and familiarity to move into the uncertain is unnerving. Making the tough decision to uproot and move your family, as life-altering as it is, is only the

beginning. You have to prove yourself fairly quickly, capable of making the needed change or difference the school board brought you on to do. Often, this means being ready, willing, and able to take on the superintendency of a district with a long history of unresolved challenges. This from Makayla:

Makayla: I have always been described as a change agent. Always someone that would take on basically tough tasks. Tasks that needed strong leadership, needed someone to institute reform and make high level changes that a lot of people wouldn't want to take the risk.

Makayla did not make this statement with ease of heart. Every decision she made through her superintendency was made against the backdrop of the intersectionality of race and gender bias and what it could cost her (emotionally and professionally) to stay relevant. Chase (1995) asserts that individuals strive to achieve success despite discrimination and the intended hurdles against gender and race. However, deciding to take a risk that involves both relocating and taking on a challenging job others may shy away from can have a significant unexpected upside. It can propel an aspiring or a sitting superintendent's career and help establish a reputation as someone who can get things done.

Makayla: Don't short change an area or part of the country that you see sometimes might not be what you like, because it can really propel your career. And so, I took the job, and that was one of the best five years of my career. The dominant, Hispanic school district, about 72% Latino, all White school board. But the support I received, especially from the Hispanic community, was really awesome.

I asked Charlene what she felt about the calculated risk she took moving her entire family. She stated the following about her fears and her posture concerning the moving...

Charlene: Relocating out of necessity. Being unprepared yet prepared. Risk of building your own team with people from another state.

Don't ever be afraid to walk away. Come into this game knowing your worth. Know what you bring to the table. Stand in that truth. I bring too much to this table, and I can walk away from it.

Suzette's calculation was timed to perfection relative to her children being a certain age, and the fact she had to take the opportunity that presented itself because that opportunity or chance may not come around again.

Suzette: I was single. My children were graduated from high school and were in college. Coming to the suburbs, that I knew absolutely nothing about, you become a risk-taker.

But I knew I could not do anymore where I was; they weren't ready for me. I either had to make that leap or stay there and wait for the hand to be dealt to me.

Once again, after several years, Makayla moved to another state to take another superintendency. According to Osler and Webb (2014), African Americans are historically known as people who endeavor against the odds, mentally and physically, which has produced a culture of relentlessly rising above obstacles and oppressors. The tenacity to continue to push and evidence your worth to people or institutions opens doors. Makayla shares proof of decisions that she has made built a positive and sustaining reputation.

Makayla: I was superintendent [in this new state] for eight years...The majority of my career has been about connecting with people...And I think the lesson or the message in that is if you do good work, people notice.

Calculated risk is common in administrative positions. However, the scarring or the accolades that result from the risk/aversion decision-making calculus is different for school administrators of color, especially African Americans. Makayla shared an incident during her tenure as a superintendent that should have been a proud moment because she was an American, an African American. The incident was negatively charged with overt racism, which Makayla could not ignore, especially coming from her area regional superintendent colleagues. To make things easier on herself and her superintendent colleagues, Makayla could have simply shut down, remained silent, appearing to “go along with the crowd.” Instead, in the words of civil rights leader John Lewis, she decided to “get in the way.”

Makayla: When I was working in Illinois, President Obama was elected. I was a year in [as superintendent of a district]. He put out a speech that he wanted all the children to hear in schools about the importance of education.

It [became] a controversy because a lot of superintendents, especially if they were Republican, didn't want their students to hear it... [as superintendent] you had to send out a permission letter for parents to sign if they didn't want their kids to participate.

Of the 12 school districts [in the regional area I serve in] 11 were White superintendents, male and female. None of them were going to offer the speech. We met



once a month as a group [area superintendents], and I basically said, ‘Excuse me, you mean to tell me that because the president is Black, you’re not going to let your kids hear the President of the United States? Because if he were White, this wouldn’t be a question.’

I didn’t even send home the permission letter. I just said to all my principals, ‘You are going to show the speech.’ What you will do is send something home telling parents we are going to show the speech...I don’t need your permission to do that. But if you [the parent] don’t want your child to see it, you can send a note and exclude them, and we’’ take them somewhere else. That’s what I did.

I said, ‘because as an African American, I am not going to sit by and not let my kids hear the African American President; Black and White and all the rest.’

The stark reality of the situation and the decision Makayla made risked creating an irreparable divide between her and the 11 other regional area superintendents. Even as a superintendent, for an African American female administrator, conscious or unconscious racial and gender bias figured into the equation. Makayla took a stand she believes in to this day. The questions one must ask are, would the strain of that decision be the same for a White male (or female) who decided to allow his or her students to listen to the President of the United States’ speech because it was the right thing to do? Would those White male and female superintendents be open and ready to take a step back and stand alone as Makayla did, or to avoid conflict go with the flow? It gives one reason to pause. I am reminded of Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), who found women, more than men, talked about having entered education to “change the lives of children, to make the world a fair place, and to change institutions so that all children have a chance”

(p. 11). When will this dream be realized? If not now, then when?

Makayla also reflected on her district's academic progress, which is of high importance for any superintendent. Again, there is a different level of scrutiny given to an African American female superintendent, especially when the underperforming subgroup is African American. As a district-level administrator, I cannot say if increased scrutiny of academic performance is a reality or if I make more of it because I am an African American. Still, there certainly seems to be added pressure. Makayla states, "When my test scores were presented, I often talked about it very openly in town hall meetings. Our Black kids, especially when I first started, were not doing as well."

Upon hearing this from Makayla, the question I asked myself about her open and honest approach to reporting achievement results both to the board and to the community was "Was she shooting herself in the foot to discuss the 'Black' issue, or should she be taking the safer approach and quickly move past it." Makayla soon answered my unspoken question.

Makayla: We have to have more of an understanding of culture. I was purposeful about who I was, who my kids were, and what they needed.' As African American females, sometimes we try to skirt around it or try to be politically correct. I'm not saying that you have to be bodacious about it, but I am saying you have to be purposeful about it.

In leadership positions, African American women are constantly engaged in a chess-like battle of posturing, positioning, deciding when to be bold, establishing and affirming power, and creating internal and external alliances through relationship building. Women tend to use their power to help others and the organization by building

strong, long-lasting relationships rather than top-down control of power, which can destroy positive and constructive relationships (Overall et al., 2016). However, building these kinds of relationships also involves taking risks. Suzette speaks of how she immediately set out to cultivate, develop, and nourish relationships as a first-time superintendent.

Suzette: You've got to have courage to step out on faith. And you've got to be 'willing.' If you're not willing to take risks, you don't need this job. My first year in the district [as superintendent] I listened, the one thing I heard, 'the union ran the Board.' The principals, the administrators were without the covering or support of a superintendent. Because the teachers would go to the Board, the Board would come to the administrators, and they [the administrators] had no cover.

All my administrators were numb. They were all just trying to protect themselves. I knew that I had to build trust with my cabinet and my administrators [building level administrators], because there was no trust.

In *Women and Educational Leadership*, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) asserted that a woman's ability to use her maternal instincts in a school leadership position is significant, just as is her penchant for nurturing, organizing, and listening, which have been traditionally marginalized as sources for fruitful leadership. Suzette took a risk using her maternal instincts and inclusive communication skills to create relationship bridges with all involved stakeholder groups: School Board, administrators, staff, students, community, and the media.

Suzette: Coming in after [the previous superintendents], the district was in the newspaper every week. Before we had all this social media, you picked up the paper on

Fridays and read about the district. They would get to the media; the newspapers would get to the [Board] meetings before you [the superintendent] got there.

As the new incoming superintendent, Suzette needed to disrupt this dysfunctional communications loop where all-too-often in the past, the superintendent had been the last one to know. She needed to change the external public narrative about the school district.

Suzette: I started talking to the media. It was a female [reporter]. I said, ‘If you come on board, I know that you have a job to do. But if you would just give me an opportunity to respond, at least you will have both points of view in the paper.’ She agreed to do that. That was establishing a relationship with the media to say, ‘You’re not just going to print what you think. At least you’re going to hear from [both] sides.’

She also needed to change the internal “head hanging down” negative vibe and narrative, which had been long going on within the district. Suzette began by going directly to the building principals and teachers to create new relationships and communication bridges. Suzette recalls:

Suzette: Let’s get out of the media. Let’s sit down and talk about our issue. Not at a Board meeting. So, I started setting up labor-management meetings with the union...We all want what’s best for children. We all want to be out of the newspaper. So, my challenge was navigating these two opposite sides of the table.

The risks of displaying her cards on the table paid off in the end for Suzette. The media allowed her to express and share the district’s side, which ultimately created a bond of trust for all parties.

In *Women Superintendents: Strategies for Success*, Brunner (1998) identified seven strategies that successful female superintendents have used to obtain and maintain their positions. Suzette utilized many of these strategies when she took the risk to step in and use her power to change the negative perception of the school district. It was then presented in the local media, which began the process of building trust and better communication within the organization around a common set of goals. As revealed in Brunner's successful female leadership strategies, Suzette:

1. balanced two sets of expectations. The first set role-related; the second, gender-related;
2. kept agendas simple in order to focus on their primary purpose: the care of children, including strict attention to their academic achievement;
3. developed the ability to remain "feminine" in the ways women communicate and at the same time be heard in a masculine culture;
4. disregarded the old myth that a woman must 'act like a man' while in a male role;
5. removed or let go of anything that blocked her success;
6. remained a fearless, courageous, risk-taker 'can do' person. At the same time, had a plan for retreat when faced with the impossible; and
7. shared power and credit. (pp. 160-182)

As females and as African Americans, Makayla, Charlene, and Suzette each had to face and overcome a barrier to success, particularly to women superintendents identified by Brunner (1998) as "being silenced by power." Knowing that to be successful and long-termed, each made sure they were heard and not silenced. This also meant making sure they handled power respectfully. As defined by the individual who possesses it and those on the receiving end of it, power can be perceived differently. Deciding where, when, and how to wield power is a risk each individual has to calculate precisely.

Tracey describes how she had to be both respectful and quick in handling the media. Like Makayla, Charlene, and Suzette, Tracey risked stepping forward to demonstrate and affirm her power and authority as superintendent on more than one occasion.

Tracey: There were a couple of things that happened, and I would say that especially some very conservative White individuals in the community would write an article negatively about either me or the school system or say that I was hiding something. I became much more aggressive in [getting in front of the article]. If there was something that was going to hit the paper or something that was going to become public, making sure I was out in front of it.

As an aspiring superintendent, Shakaunya's entry into the superintendency also required she take a calculated risk. When the superintendent's position became available in her district, Shakaunya was encouraged by her mentor to take the risk saying:

Shakaunya: 'Sweetie, what are you going to do?' And I said, I'm just going to stay and see, see who the new superintendent is, and we'll see what happens. She says, 'oh really, that's your plan?' Yes, that's my plan...She said, 'I think you're confused about where we are. I think you're confused about your position. You are the assistant superintendent, so you've now entered upper management. So, you've got a decision to make. Either you're going to apply for the superintendency, sweetie, or you're going to seek employment elsewhere, because most superintendents bring their own team in.'

I decided to throw my hat in the ring. Because I figured, either you're staying or going. If you're going to stay then why not stay on your terms, versus somebody else's.

Once again, a woman is required to balance power, but not to act powerfully, to speak and listen simultaneously, to operate as a man but not be a man, and to communicate to hundreds of ears and speak without offending. In contrast, a man can simply be a man, a unique outspoken individual in the superintendent chair. "Never forget who you are" is a powerful reminder and reality check for any aspiring or sitting African American woman superintendent. From day one, the African American woman will be under intense scrutiny from within and outside the organization. You are and will be seen and judged by your race and gender.

Shakaunya: I'm very cognizant of making sure that my tone is modulated, and that what I am saying to them is clear. At the end of the day let's just be extremely clear: 'I do not work for you, you work for the district.' So, it is, I am on fire, but I cannot ever, you cannot ever risk becoming what they want you, or their assumption of who we are.

The five African American female superintendents who participated in this research poured their hearts and souls into the interviews. The perspectives and life experiences they shared were tangible, heart-wrenching, inspiring, sad, and, yet, hopeful. Thus, I am not without hope in the pursuit of a superintendency as an African American female. I am inspired by the life and legacy of Mary McLeod-Bethune (Jones, 2020). On the purpose for founding Bethune-Cookman College (now Bethune-Cookman University):

The state's neglect of public education for Black youngsters left a void, and Bethune-Cookman filled it by training students to assume the dual responsibilities of black womanhood and citizenship, as Mary Bethune explained in a 1920 speech: "Negro women have always known struggle. This heritage is just as much to be desired as any other. Our girls should be taught to appreciate it and welcome it." Bethune had many roles at the school: teacher, administrator, fund-raiser, and civil rights advocate (para. 6).

As an African American female educator, administrator, and political activist, McLeod-Bethune did not allow external power-wielders and influencers to silence her. She sought, managed, and balanced power as she operated within her limited range of influence. Mary McLeod-Bethune remains an inspiration for African American female superintendents and aspiring superintendents on how to serve with grace, dignity, and strength. Whenever you see a void or a social injustice, it is not enough to say something; step forward and fill it.

### **Summary of Findings**

Four themes emerged from the interview data analysis and interpretation. They are:

1. The need and importance of networking;
2. Having to be "twice as good;"
3. There are no "do-overs;" and
4. Taking calculated risks.

These themes consolidate and attest to the knowledge gained through the experiences of the participants. For aspirants or sitting African American superintendents, pro-actively networking is essential for success and longevity in the position. Without a network of peers, an African American female superintendent is



alone and isolated. While White female superintendents report feeling marginalized in the White male-dominated superintendent profession, an African American female's race adds another barrier to contend with and overcome. This research suggests that aspiring and sitting African American female superintendents have much to gain from formal or informal mentoring from Black female superintendent peers.

More than their White male and female counterparts, African American female superintendents often find themselves subject to intense scrutiny from parents, the school board, and the community to deliver immediate results. Given little time to settle into the position, an African American female superintendent soon realizes because of her race and gender, she is unlikely to be given the luxury of "do-overs." She has to "get it right" the first time. This added pressure of an already-stressful job triggers the African American survival strategy of having to be "twice as good" to be invited to have a seat at the leadership table and to be able to stay there.

Similarly, being in the superintendent position, especially today, one cannot afford to become complacent, to sit and stagnate and expect to be re-appointed year-after-year. This is especially true for African American female superintendents. The timeline for proving your qualifications and worth is both short and never-ending. Staying professionally involved, keeping up-to-date on new teaching and learning modalities, developing and honing your leadership skills, and expanding your knowledge are all essential for career longevity and advancement. This means being willing and prepared to take risks, calculated risks, within the district when a need arises or when an opportunity for career advancement presents itself in another district. Success for the African American female superintendent rests upon being informed, purposeful, and intentional in both thought and action.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Introduction

In this chapter, implications from findings that surfaced researching the experiences of three current and two recently-retired African American female superintendents are discussed. The primary research question was: How have African American female superintendents attained and successfully held the superintendent position?

The four related research questions will be used as a framework to dissect and address the primary question due to the all-encompassing depth and breadth of this guiding research question. I conclude with a reflection on what the experience of engaging in this personal form of research has meant to me, an African American female administrator aspiring to become a superintendent. The related research questions of the study were:

- What barriers and challenges do African American female superintendents face?
- Are there certain strategies sitting African American female superintendents use to build their capacity as leaders while successfully maintaining their positions?
- What sacrifices have African American female superintendents made in order to maintain success?
- Is there a particular leadership style African American female school district superintendents possess to remain competitive in a White male-dominated field?

## **Related Research Question #1: What Barriers and Challenges do African American Female Superintendents Face?**

The five participants' barriers and challenges are the same barriers and challenges for aspiring or sitting African American females. Crenshaw (2009) cites three specific obstacles and challenges: gender, race, and class, which often intersect to destabilize an African American woman's entry into and progression up the leadership ladder of educational administration. While these barriers and challenges arise in a context-specific to the superintendent's race, gender, and the culture of the community in which she serves, at one time or another, most African American female superintendents are likely to have experienced one or more of the following in their careers:

- Gender bias,
- Racial bias,
- Class bias,
- Family commitments,
- Lack of mentoring,
- Recruitment and retention,
- Lack of networking,
- Social inequality,
- Lack of acceptance of cultural diversity, and
- Being negatively stereotyped.

As noted, this list of barriers and challenges currently for African American females in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century is beyond daunting; however, these barriers adversely ground the individuals who experience them. When we examine the barriers of gender, race, and

class, there are many implications. One can extrapolate that these are impossible barriers to overcome if you give credence to believing that one's gender, race, and class are barriers to your dreams, aspirations, and hope. Robinson and Ward (1991) shared that the implication that this barrier can be devoured through self-belief. I am a woman. I am African American. I was in the class of the lower- economic status. I dared to dream what some felt was impossible. To this day, I am staring down the enemy who attempts to place barricades against me because of those factors.

The research has made it lucid that gender, race, and class exhibit as barriers and challenges. It is a genuine struggle for women, but more specifically, it is a struggle for the African American woman. However, it is not the end of the story. I reflect once again on the words from Mary McLeod-Bethune's 1920 speech, "Negro women have always known struggle." This struggle, we turn into energy to keep us fighting to break the glass ceiling. We cannot change our gender, race, or class. The only solution for the African American woman is to continue to move past those barriers through education, persistence, tenacity, courage, self-perseverance, and internal strength.

We have found that family is a barrier for any woman. I stated in the research that women have a different challenge than men when it comes to family. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) assert that women experience leading as "all-consuming" because we leave work to go home and work another day when we walk through the door. As the associate superintendent in my school district, it is common for me to work 10-12 hours. I leave the workplace, go to the grocery store, and cook dinner for my family in an effort for us to engage as a functioning unit. We are fighting to balance the workplace and family. It is a significant challenge that requires the woman to walk on a suspended elevated tight rope. Is there a resolution for such a challenge? one that the typical male

does not experience, as she dares to venture into Clark's (2000) introduction of the family border theory? The only resolve for the woman is to continue to be in motion and balance the workplace and family to the best of her ability. Brunner (2000) calls women in the district-level administrative positions "warriors in the field." The realization of the "border-crossing" for the woman is her indelible strength.

The lack of mentoring, recruitment, and retention are barriers and challenges that leave one bewildered. Many researchers have addressed these obstacles (Alston, 2000; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009; Katz, 2004, 2012; Miller et al., 2006; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). As a district-level administrator and an aspiring superintendent, there are no mentoring or networking organizations specific to my gender or race. There is the National Association of Black School Educators (NABSE) that hosts annual conferences. NABSE created a remarkable space and opportunity for educators of color to communicate, celebrate, and honor each other. I have also taken part in the Aspiring Superintendents Institute (ASI), founded by two brilliant and forward-thinking African American female superintendents. The institute was influential for women and men of color. ASI's purpose was for participants to learn strategies designed to achieve the superintendent's position, develop skill-sets necessary to maintain the superintendent's job, expand their knowledge base in leading and facilitating successful educational change, and experience networking opportunities, and to receive an assigned mentor for one year.

ASI allowed me to network. However, the networking was limited due to the vast number of district-level administrators who needed to be divided among a limited number of African American female mentors. I think we have to create a more robust network or networking opportunities for African American administrators to ensure that aspiring

individuals have mentors for creative feedback on thoughts, emotions, strategies, and fears and receive guidance as individuals pursue their aspirations.

Society's ills, such as social inequality, lack of acceptance of cultural diversity, and negative stereotypes, are barriers that have to be dealt with. How do you overcome or erase these particular barriers? The nation would have to go through a cleansing or an exorcism. There is no reason that, as an African American female, I should be barricaded from moving upward in my career or even dare to dream of being a superintendent of a school due to social inequities or because of a lack of acceptance of cultural differences or because of negatives stereotypes.

Ida B. Wells and many other African American women fought against women of color's marginalization to foster social change. The fight continues to gain access to the room for a fair opportunity to be considered for a superintendent position. Wallace (2015) asserted that we could move past these barriers by doing three things: a) learn how to do the job; b) be aware of gender, bias, and c) prepare for job-related stress. Once we get past the hurdles of social inequities, lack of acceptance, and harmful stereotypes, we must do the job through demonstration and evidence that proves we have a right to be at the table.

Why should my gender, race, or class prohibit or hinder my ascension to leadership roles, specifically, the superintendency? These factors should not be a defining barrier or challenge, but they are. Having to be aware and constrained in what you say and how you say it stifles creativity and problem-solving, which can subconsciously feed into a soul-crushing self-silencing. One of the participants of this study, Shakaunya, had this to say, "It's so deep to the point where you have to be purposeful many times, when you're sitting in a room, of what you're going to say and

how you're going to articulate a thought." She feels this way because of the barriers of her gender, race as well as class.

As a school administrator, I am in my 21<sup>st</sup> year, my 18<sup>th</sup> year as a district central office administrator, and am now an Associate Superintendent in my ninth year. I give the years in each position as evidence that sex, race, and class barriers have had a stagnating effect on my career. I must take a stark look at the factors of gender, race, and class. I am a woman. I am African American. I was born and raised in an impoverished community in southern Illinois. I am fighting against the factors, against the odds, for my attainment and maintenance of the superintendency.

**Related Research Question #2: Are There Certain Strategies Sitting African American Female Superintendents Use to Build Their Capacity as Leaders While Successfully Maintaining Their Positions?**

According to Overall et al. (2016), successful women superintendents are strategic in cultivation, nourishment, building, and use of internal and external relationships to be both effective and long-lasting in the superintendent position rather than relying on the authority, power, and control that inherently comes with it. The strategies the African American superintendents in this study employed were many and might be biased, not so much on race as on gender. That said, the complex intersection of race and gender creates and causes a heightened sense of awareness, responsiveness, and perseverance in African American female administrators at all levels. Below are some of the strategies used by most or all the participants.

**Build Relationships, Engender Trust**

Suzette learned to employ a bedrock strategy throughout her lengthy career to encourage her leadership team and be transparent. In doing so, she built strong personal

relationships while engendering a sense of trust and a feeling of camaraderie within and among members of her team. As associate superintendent, I have discovered the value and importance of taking the time to build personal, authentic relationships with my staff.

Other administrators within the district have referred to me as “Olivia Pope,” the television character who solves critical issues in the TV series *Scandal*. They can come to me to discuss or resolve issues because of our trusting relationships. This relationship of trust I am speaking about says, “we are in this together.” When I think of building relationships as a strategy, I view it as a moral imperative. As such, one may think I overly accentuate the significance or magnitude of relationship-building. However, my personal experience as an associate superintendent and, more specifically, as an African American woman aspiring to become a superintendent, has taught me that building relationships is an essential strategy one must possess in her arsenal to have a strong leadership team that will stand with her and help propel her forward.

### **Think Things Through Thoroughly**

In *Women’s Rights, Racial Integration, and Education from 1850–1920*, Noraian (2009) wrote that Sarah Raymond, the first female superintendent in the United States, is said to have been a leader who “learned to dare and then dared to lead others” (p. 1). It takes strength to lead and then to have the courage to look behind you and see who is following. Makayla used the strategy of always thinking things through:

Makayla: I had certain what we call isms first and foremost. Did you put your eyes on? Did you talk to the people involved? Have you done your research? Because again, as African-Americans, we don't get second chances and third chances. You don't get those. White superintendents get those.



So, you have to be very, very strategic about anything that you put in place in the district. In terms of what anything might happen if it goes very positively, if it goes negatively, plan it through. So, that has always benefited me. And then the other thing is inspecting what you expect.

In my position, I have learned it can be catastrophic to decide on the fly without considering each situation. Thinking things through also includes seeking sound, trusted counsel. Over time it has become a framework for my decision-making. I try to look at situations and make decisions from as many perspectives as I can. The ultimate advantage of this approach is it immediately takes a lot of the pressure or emphasis away from “you” and re-directs it toward a more inclusive strategy with a focus on the needs of the primary stakeholders; the students, their families, the community, as well as the future. The intentional and purposeful response of thinking things through inevitably builds capacity for a leader, especially a leader who always seems to have a doubting set of eyes watching her every move simply because she is African American and female (Fullan, 2008; Lambert, 1998).

### **Cultivate and Practice Self-Discipline**

Shakaunya stressed practicing self-discipline to build leadership ability and increase longevity for African American women in the superintendency. Both a short and long-term survival strategy, cultivating and practicing self-discipline guards against overt and creeping marginalization. It requires always maintaining a rational, even temperance, especially when strong emotions are stirring within and all around. Shakaunya shared how she must present herself, which is her “true” self...

Shakaunya: At the...table, I am going to speak the King's English and ensure that I have a subject-verb agreement. Still, I am going to be strong, but I am going to be extremely thoughtful about what my responses are and how I address things.

In nine years, I have come to this conclusion; it's never going away [negative stereotyping]; it's a reality. And I don't care who tells you differently; here is the reality. People, let's just say people, people are always waiting to see, "Is it an angry Black woman behind this face?

What's really going on? Is she going to yell, scream, cuss, fuss, roll her eyes, roll her neck, hand movements?"

For African American women in a wide-open public leadership position, like the superintendency, leading a meaningful change initiative in a confident and controlled manner helps negate being dismissed as just another "angry Black woman," a derisive stereotype applied to impassioned African American women (Williams, 2001).

I have experienced the benefits of practicing self-discipline over the years to build leadership capacity as an African American female leader steadily. In *Women Superintendents: Strategies for Success*, Brunner (1998) named seven strategies that successful female superintendents have used to obtain and maintain their positions. Three of Brunner's methods speak directly to cultivating self-discipline, especially for African American females. They are:

1. Be prepared to balance two sets of expectations. The first set is role-related; the second, gender-related;
2. Remove or let go of any expectation that may block your success, and
3. Remain a fearless, courageous, a risk-taker, a 'can do' person. At the same time, have a plan for retreat when faced with the impossible (pp. 160-182).

These three strategies have encouraged me to look inward, self-assess, and think things through before acting. This kind of self-discipline requires taking care of oneself, believing in oneself, and continuing to press on no matter the situation.

### **Related Research Question #3: What Sacrifices Have African American Female Superintendents Made in Order to Maintain success?**

As I reflect upon the sacrifices made by the five African American women superintendents in this study, and others like them, as they continue to maintain success, I am left with a sense of sadness. As a woman in a school district central office administrative position, I know that most women, Black or White, have to make similar sacrifices to compete and succeed in the White-male-dominated superintendent position. In *Women as Leaders in Public Education*, Estler (1975) uses the term "Women's Place" to describe the general sentiment that women should not be in leadership roles; simply put, it is just not their place. Over the past few decades, this sentiment has faded from the public discourse as increasingly more women have sought and entered professional leadership careers and positions. However, old traditional expectations and the day-to-day lived reality of career-minded women, especially those in high-level leadership positions, has not kept up; things have changed but not enough. Thus, Estler contends women today still must find, maintain, and preserve a balance between family and work to be a successful superintendent. Until recently, men have *only* had to find ways to mitigate superintendency's stress on their health and personal lives.

Now in my 18<sup>th</sup> year as a central office administrator in the same school district, and Associate Superintendent since 2012, I am the one who gets my children up and off to school each morning, makes breakfast for my husband, and washes the dishes before I walk out the door to go to work. In the time given to my morning duties as wife and mother, a massive amount of energy has already been exerted and spent. I take pride and pleasure in my role in the family while keeping open and alive my dream of becoming a superintendent.

However, as I enter my workplace, I am reminded and made aware that the scope of sacrifice required of men and women in the superintendency is not fair (McCord & Ellerson, 2008). “It’s just ridiculous,” Shakaunya exclaimed when recounting the sacrifices she has made and continues to make to maintain her seat as superintendent. She told of sacrificing personal time with her family and not being able to attend after-school events with her children. Shakaunya painfully recalled an incident with her daughter, who was in college at the time. She was in a school play, and Shakaunya missed seeing her due to a school board meeting. Her daughter still holds that painful period in her memories. No one can give you your time back.

Shakaunya had a sorrowful look on her face during this conversation that I can hardly put into words. “I’ve *tried* to strike a balance,” she said. “The sacrifice is just not worth it. Time cannot be redeemed.” Nonetheless, Shakaunya does have a ritual she has managed to maintain with her children, which is every night, no matter the time, she reads them a story. Looking back, she stated, “I was not willing to sacrifice that ... it was important to me, and I realized it was important to my children.” A point of wisdom Shakaunya shared about women’s penchant for leading with head and heart, “When you realize your value in honoring yourself, that means you are doing what is in your heart.”

In *African American Women in New York State Who Overcame Barriers to Become Superintendents of Schools*, West (2018) asserts that for a superintendent with a family, the irreparable cruelty that accompanies sacrifice of personal time with family is harsh on the family. Its adverse effect goes beyond the person in the superintendent position; it spreads out and attaches itself to all the other family members. It can even harm one's spirituality unless you take a proactive stance to lean into your spirituality. I consciously decide to balance my family life, work-life, and spiritual life to remain healthy and positive.

For an African American woman superintendent or district-level administrator with a family, sacrificing time with family to demonstrate your commitment to the position is doubly burdensome (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Makayla talked about how complicated it is for African American women superintendents to sacrifice time with family to maintain their positions and how this sacrifice adversely affects their physical and emotional well-being and their family.

Makayla: Especially for females and female African American superintendents and administrators, we tend to take care of everybody else, kids, husbands, partners, brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. All of that is good, [but] ...we lack taking care of ourselves.

I recall watching male administrators in district-level positions leave work at a reasonable hour to make it home for dinner, a quick game of golf at the end of the day, or whatever the case may have been. As an African American female trying to move up the administrative ranks and stay there, I felt I had to continually be present and available in the office to prove my commitment and professionalism. Looking back, founded or unfounded, this ever-present feeling or belief caused me to lose many family memories.

For example, my oldest son was in the band in elementary and high school. For band members, senior year of high school culminated in a special recognition ceremony during the homecoming football game. He was the lead for the band. On this night, all the seniors' names in the band were called so they could pin a flower on their parents and give their mothers a bouquet. During a school board meeting, I received a text message from a colleague whose son was on the football team. She asked me where I was because they were about to call my son's name. I told her where I was, and she said, "Oh..." That night, I asked my son why he did not tell me. He said he knew I had a school board meeting and knew I would not be able to attend. It makes me want to cry to this very day. Looking back, in the end, I now understand that that sacrifice of family time was not worth it for my family or me.

Suzette also told of having to work long hours well into her career to maintain her superintendent position, longer than what might be expected from a White male superintendent at the time. Her sacrifice was essentially a "no choice" issue mirroring those made by Makayla and Shakaunya. For an African American woman, especially those with a family or who plan to have a family, Suzette had this to say about what sacrifices may lie ahead:

[On relocating] If your family says, "No, momma. We are still in school." Or, "My husband said I can't leave my job." Are you willing to make that sacrifice? That is number one. You have to be willing to take a risk and relocate. The one thing I tell superintendents all the time, "Your integrity is all you have."

Though stern and demanding, Suzette's advice is realistic. It leaves me hoping that I *can* achieve my dream of becoming a superintendent and have a "win, win"

experience by acknowledging the reality of the situation and listening to my family's voices, which will lessen the burden.

Working long, inconvenient family-unfriendly hours has been an expectation of the superintendent position since its inception, increasingly more so today with the proliferation of real-time, smartphone social media apps and platforms. These days what begins as a seemingly ordinary day in a middle or high school can suddenly turn into a public relations crisis management situation precipitated by a hand-held smartphone video gone viral. Within the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, past social, cultural, and economic societal mores have changed dramatically, seemingly out of nowhere. They have come crashing down, around, and over a “steady as she goes” public education system (Kellner & Share, 2007). Reacting and making adaptations to meet the needs of a new “now,” though typically put in place until years later, served U.S. public education reasonably well in the decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. However, now two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what is different is the scope and speed at which many new communications and information technologies have outpaced and overwhelmed our public education system’s ability to absorb, analyze, and make adaptations.

Today’s business and financial profit-driven world, comes with quick technological fixes and solutions to “problems.” But can profit-driven technical business solutions be used to “fix” public education? Specific to this research, in our current rush to embrace technology in K-12 education, are we also risking losing or diminishing the social, emotional, and relational aspects of schooling in which women possess due to their significant role in raising a family?

At some point, a superintendent who has achieved a modicum of success may decide it is time and worth the risk to give up the security of his or her current position to

pursue a long-held dream or career goal. It often means pulling up stakes and relocating. Weighing the joy of raising a family against advancing in your career first to apply, and then be taken seriously for a superintendent position is more challenging and stressful for women superintendents, especially for those of color (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Many in the superintendent position, men and women alike, go through the hardship of sacrificing time with their family. However, it is a more heart-rendering hardship for African American females because we have been taught from an early age that we must be better than the rest to be accepted as equals. This is no less true when seeking to be invited or welcomed to sit at the leadership table.

This raises the question: How can the superintendency be re-imagined and re-defined not to be detrimental to women's physical and emotional health? (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006). For example, some woman-friendly changes in the position might include: building into the job description daily, weekly, or monthly time for mindfulness practices to enhance focus and allow one to de-stress; mandating the provision of a 1-2 year mentoring program for novice superintendents that takes into consideration race, class and gender; or providing on-site resources or additional compensation to cover the cost of childcare. All will require added funding but will be well worth it eventually.

In the superintendent role, we need more women of all hues to lend and apply their feminine nurturing and community building leadership skills to the position. As Ella Flagg Young said in (1909), "Women are destined to rule the schools of every city. It is a woman's natural field, she is no longer satisfied to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership" (Blount, 1998, p. 1).



**Related Research Question #4: Is There a Particular Leadership Style African American Female School District Superintendents Possess to Remain Competitive in a White Male-Dominated Field?**

*“A leader is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along that they are being directed from behind” (Nelson Mandela, 2001, p. 18).*

Merriam Webster defines leadership as the office or position of a leader, the capacity to lead, and the act or instance of leading (Merriam-Webster, 2007). What is a leadership style? Merriam Webster defined leadership style as a distinctive manner or custom of behaving or conducting oneself. Newstrom and Davis (1993) explained leadership style in much the same way but added that a leadership style concept could be further scrutinized and nuanced as explicit and implicit actions executed by the leader. Lewin, Lippit, and White (1939) developed a leadership framework many decades ago, which supplied the foundation of many approaches that followed afterward. During the ensuing years, a variety of researchers and behaviorists have identified several common leadership styles displayed in Table 2 (Khan, Nawaz, & Khan, 2016; Lewin, Lippit, & White, 1939; Marques, 2013; Metcalf & Morelli, 2015; Newstrom & Davis, 1993; Northouse, 2016).

Table 2.

*Leadership Styles*

Style Name	Description
1. Autocratic	A strong fundamental leadership style which provides absolute power and authority to the leader/boss/manager
2. Authoritative	Illustrative of assured and assertive leaders who plan the work and set expectations for goal-achievement while energizing and motivating followers
3. Democratic	An all-inclusive and cooperative leadership style in which the leader includes team members in the decision-making processes
4. Laissez-faire	Considered a <i>hands-off</i> approach to team management in which the leader entrusts responsibility to their team members with minimum or no interference.
5. Transformational	Associated with worker engagement and other successful organizational outcomes, including creating and maintaining an overall positive climate.
6. Transactional	Distributes instructions to team members and uses various rewards or consequences depending on the outcome of the team members' successes or failures.
7. Servant	These leaders embrace the motto: <i>Serve first and lead second</i> . Rather than thinking about ways to get people to follow their lead, servant leaders channel most of their energy into encouraging and empowering their staff to look for and realize their own leadership potential. To achieve their goals, servant leaders prioritize others' needs above their own.

Do the leadership styles of the five African American female superintendents who took part in this study correspond to this leadership-styles framework? How did they become the successful long-tenured superintendents they are known to be today?

Makayla's mottos with her staff have always been, "How does it benefit the students?" and, "it's all about the children." To enact her mottos, Makayla works collaboratively with her staff for the benefit of the students. Every member of her

leadership team has one goal in mind: to advance students both academically and emotionally. Makayla's success and longevity may be attributed to her democratic leadership style, which affords staff a voice in decision-making. Woods (2005) contends democratic leadership fosters power-sharing and enhances understanding. It evokes an atmosphere of partnership resulting in a heightened feeling of value within the individual and organizational community. Makayla's leadership style is also purposeful and intentional, tending toward the transformational when she offered this caution at the end of our conversation: "As an African American female superintendent, you have to make sure that you have the pulse of your district consistently and *always*." A reminder to herself that African American female superintendents do not have the cushion of being afforded a second chance to get it right.

Charlene had to "grow up quick" when she applied for and was awarded her first superintendency in her own words. She felt the training she received in her former district, as an assistant superintendent for ten years, did not necessarily or entirely prepare her for the superintendent position she now occupies. Continuing to mature in her tenure as superintendent, Charlene discovered that her preferred, natural, and most effective leadership style is democratic. Kilicoglu (2018) described a democratic leader as one who encourages involvement, suggests direction, and participates in the group. Charlene looks for and invites her staff's input, perspectives, and expertise before embarking on significant change initiatives. After processing her staff's input, Charlene allows her department heads to lead as she actively participates in the process.

Democratic leadership is also relational; it requires a leader committed to seeking, nurturing, and maintaining strong personal and organizational relationships. In practice, to lead relationally means consciously and consistently making and taking the time to

notice, appraise, and promote others' work (Zhang & Yao, 2019). The findings of this study suggest that a democratic, more inclusive approach to leadership is effective. Some might argue, it is a more natural in-sync way for African American women superintendents to achieve success and maintain longevity in the position. Along with the democratic leadership style, the transformational leadership style is the partner intrinsically built-in for the African American female (Alston, 1999; Alston & McClellan, 2011). From childhood until the superintendency, some of our lives and upbringing prepared us for a superintendent's role.

But creating a more inclusive leadership and organizational culture neither happens overnight, nor does it come easily; it requires time, knowledge, and intentionality on the part of the superintendent. She is responsible for doing the groundwork and laying the foundation upon which a more democratic organizational leadership and governance structure have a chance to take root, begin to grow, and flourish. Suzette took an entire year listening to her school board, administrative team, the staff, and the community. As a superintendent, sitting lonely atop the highest rung on the organizational ladder, Suzette has learned it helps take some of the pressure off by admitting, "You don't know everything." However, she goes on to say that when taking over from the previous more autocratic superintendent, "I knew that I had to build trust with my cabinet because there was no trust." She began by constructing a knowledge-base about the district's challenges, building relationships with her cabinet and other administrators, and displaying a more open democratic leadership style by listening intently.

Suzette would not have been as successful as she has been in leading and instituting needed change if she had used an autocratic leadership style. If so, it would

have been seen and felt as just “more of the same,” which would have furthered the district's demise.

During our interview, when asked about her leadership style, Shakaunya shared much of the same democratic leadership style as did Makayla, Charlene, and Suzette, stating, “I think in order to cultivate an organization [where people want to come to work] like that, you cannot use power to wield over people. You’ve got to collaborate with them. We’ve got to build together.” Shakaunya’s philosophy and approach to leadership is at the very heart of democratic leadership. She does not feel the need to rely on or feed into her power or authority but instead tries to provide the kind of leadership and direction others *want* to follow. As an African American female serving in the highest superintendent position, Shakaunya realizes she can get more from her team by showing and letting them know she is in it with them.

While decidedly democratic in her leadership approach, Shakaunya taps into aspects of transformational and servant leadership styles. Both leadership styles seek to address and amend broader societal ills, such as individuals and groups unable to realize their potential who lose hope for a better future due to institutionalized social injustice. As an up-and-coming African American woman in the superintendent position, Shakaunya is also a leader in a much broader older fight for race, class, and gender equality. However, she does not go into battle alone, but as a warrior among many warriors, past, present, and future. In this mantra lies hope (Brunner, 2000).

As I reflect on the African American female superintendents who participated in this study, I realize all were keenly aware of the many eyes that rested heavily on every action, word, step, and breath they took. One may say, every superintendent feels this way. I would argue that the intensity of this scrutiny for a Black woman in the

superintendent's position is far greater. I have seen first-hand the adverse effect of autocratic leadership. It is a flawed approach, soulless, heartless, and self-centered. The African American female superintendent, who chooses to lead in an autocratic manner, is removed early in her career. The one who takes a laissez-faire approach is considered lazy and not invested. As Makayla said, the superintendent's position can be a “lonely” one and even lonelier for a Black woman.

Tracey shared that she was very Afrocentric, and she is an individual who always wants more. Her background as a community leader bled into her superintendency as well. Tracey's leadership style may have been hard for me to perceive initially. However, I pondered on a statement from her, “it takes time to build trust. Transparency and communication are really important.” Tracey is a transformative leader. The combination of her past experiences with community building and her Afro-centric persona lead her to her transformational leadership style. She was my first interview, and the day of the interview, my sister-in-law passed a few hours before the interview.

The five women's leadership style in this study fell mostly within the democratic category of the leadership style framework. It is an approach that also allowed them to become transformational leaders. All participants felt it was essential to seek out and invite ideas and expertise from faculty, administration, staff, the school board, and the community. Democratic leadership brings along with it a feeling of being a valued and respected member of a family-like community, all pulling together with a collaboratively created mission and vision to realize a common set of goals. I am incredibly inspired by the work and labor of these five women.

This time and season of life I now live in as a Black woman, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's suffrage, and being able to see the first African American female

vice-presidential nomination, Kamala Harris, I feel there is hope for all women, especially for women of color and African American women. The trials and tribulations we have had to overcome just to get to the leadership table have not been all in vain.

### **Personal Reflection**

As I reflect upon where I am with this research, I am reminded of a statement my father often said to his daughters: “Pretty girls come a dime a dozen, but a woman with a brain can write her own ticket.” For me, the journey has been transformational both personally and professionally. Though it has not been easy, no one said it would be, I have drawn inspiration from it. I have been challenged. At times, I have found myself laughing, crying, and saying, “Oh my God.” I have been forever changed.

This research has enhanced and expanded my ability as a leader. When I began, I was Director of Special Education, a position I had served for eight years. Along the way, I transitioned into the role of Associate Superintendent. Looking back, I did not realize I would be embarking on a career and research journey at the same time. Had I not taken on this study, I would not be where I am professionally today. The path ahead was not always clear, straight, nor smooth. I had terminated myself multiple times from this work, starting and stopping, and starting again when an unrelenting voice inside that lit a spark of hope kept saying, “You can do this.” I am glad I listened to that voice. When I look in the mirror now, I see a different woman, a strong leader, a leader with an unwavering determination to be the best I can be, for myself and others, giving to and serving the profession that I love.

At the same time, I have found that I have become more intentional, purposeful, and more at ease with the vital role I play in my family. As before, each morning begins with preparing my family for the day. After this research, the difference is I now cook

breakfast with love and purpose before I leave to be intentional and purposeful at work. I have begun to assert and live a more balanced work and family life to maintain my mental and physical health necessary for those aspiring to or in the superintendent position. At the beginning of this research, I did not believe such a balance was possible. Today I am clear in my thinking and approach to situations both at work and at home. In doing this research, I discovered this it is possible when one is intentional and purposeful. In demonstrating and asserting that a balance needs to be maintained between work and family, I have evolved into an unofficial mentor for African American females aspiring to administrative positions at all levels.

I am filled with tremendous hope as I look to the future to one day becoming the next African American woman superintendent, having broken through the barriers of race and gender. “What won’t kill you will only make you stronger,” my parents drilled this into us children. I now have an internal strength that was born through this dissertation process. I tapped into my faith to continue to fight. I am not the same person who started on this journey. I have identified my strengths and now consider my weaknesses “potential strengths.”

I realize I am now standing on the shoulders of all the African American women who fought and died for racial and social justice, equal rights, and suffrage, such as Ida B. Wells and Mary McLeod Bethune. I hope to pull other women of color into the ranks. I created a bridge, and I crossed over my bridge. Brunner and Peyton-Caire (2000) asked, “What is it like to be a Black woman who aspires to the superintendency? Where and to whom does a Black woman look when considering the position?” The answer I have found begins by looking inward and tapping into the hope that times are changing.



My journey of transformation is found in the words of Marianne Williamson's poem, *Our Deepest Fear*:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God*  
(Williamson, 1992, p. 165).

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## **Appendix A: Individual Interview Questions**

1. Tell me how you got into education and how did you become a superintendent?
2. Were there any barriers or challenges that you faced as an African American woman in attaining a leadership position and the superintendency?
3. Were there any sacrifices specific to an African American female superintendent that you had to make?
4. Are there certain strategies that an African American female superintendent can use to build capacity as a leader?
5. Do you think African American female superintendents have to be “twice as good” as it is often stated in our culture? Do you find the statement to be true?
6. Have things changed in that regard?
7. Is there anything else you want to share or tell me as an aspiring superintendent?

## Appendix B: Individual Interview Informed Consent

My name is Twyla Harris and I am a doctoral student at National Louis University, Chicago, Illinois campus. I am asking that you participate in my dissertation study, “African American Women Attaining and Maintaining the Position of Superintendent.” I aim to explore and uncover barriers and challenges unique to African American women aspiring to become school district superintendents. The purpose of the research study is to not only shed light on the barriers female African American school leaders face when aspiring to the highest office in public school leadership, but to share how they successfully navigated and overcame impediments to becoming successful school district superintendent.

By signing below, you are providing consent to take part in a research project conducted by Twyla Harris, doctoral student at National Louis University, Chicago, Illinois campus.

Throughout the career journeys from classroom teacher to superintendent, African American women have been underrepresented in the position of superintendent. Through this research, I hope to gain a first-person in-depth perspective on how African American women attained, experienced, and successfully maintained the position as school district superintendent. To better understand the lived experience of successful African American female superintendents, a qualitative methodology will be used. Recorded interviews will be conducted with five current or retired African American female superintendents. After an analysis of these interview data looking for themes common to all, the five participants will be invited back to participate in a group interview to discuss the researcher’s thematic findings. This two-tiered interview process helps to not only refine and clarify common themes but also serves as “member check” on the researcher’s findings.

Only I will have access to the recordings and transcript notes. After the research is concluded, I will delete and destroy all information that was provided to me from participants. The purpose of informing participants is to ensure trust and integrity with my research project.

Your participation with this research project is voluntary and can be discontinued at your request without consequence or judgement. The results of this study may be published or otherwise used to support aspiring African American females in leadership positions. The participants’ identity, however, will not be revealed through any identifiers. There are also no anticipated risks for this research that would go beyond day-to-day experiences.

The participants may receive a copy of the digital transcription upon request. You may request a copy of this completed study by contacting me at [tharris16@my.nlu.edu](mailto:tharris16@my.nlu.edu). If you have any questions or concerns before or during participation that have not been addressed by the research, you may contact:

- Dr. Harrington Gibson, Assistant Professor/NLU Director for Educational Leadership Doctoral Program, by email at [Harrington.gibson@nl.edu](mailto:Harrington.gibson@nl.edu) or by phone at (224) 233-2290; or
- Shaunti Knauth, Co-Chair of NLU’s Institutional Research Review Board (IRRB), by email at [shanti.knauth@nl.edu](mailto:shanti.knauth@nl.edu) or by phone at (312) 261-3526; or
- Carol Burg, Co-Chair of NLU’s Institutional Research Review Board (IRRB), by email at [cburg@nl.edu](mailto:cburg@nl.edu) or by phone at (727) 412-0800. The IRRB co-chairs are located at National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Thank you for your consideration.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant’s Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher’s Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date