ABSTRACT

LANGLEY, SHELTON GRAY. Navigating the Crossroads: An Exploratory Qualitative Case Study of Intersectionality's Influence on African American Female Superintendents in North Carolina. (Under the direction of Dr. Jennifer B. Ayscue).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe the current conditions faced by African American female superintendents in North Carolina by exploring the experiences of former African American female superintendents. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, the study dove into participants' working conditions, focusing on their interactions with professional mentors and networks, to assess whether the limited number of African American female superintendents in North Carolina impacted their work environment. It also examined how these leaders perceived their mentors and their access to formal or informal professional networks throughout their careers. Second, the study explored the career opportunities available to African American females after they left the superintendency, investigating whether these opportunities differed from those available to their peers.

The underrepresentation of African American females in superintendent roles results in a unique experience that is only encountered by those who hold this position. To learn more about their unique experiences, the framework of intersectionality was utilized to study the intersection of participants' race and gender.

The study focused on former African American female superintendents from North Carolina to provide an in-depth exploration of their unique experiences. By concentrating on North Carolina, the study aimed to uncover the specific dynamics of race and gender within the state's educational system. Former superintendents were chosen for their ability to offer reflective insights into their leadership challenges and opportunities, as well as their post-superintendent experiences. This approach was used to reveal valuable lessons for current and

future African American female superintendents and to enhance understanding of both career and post-career phases in educational leadership.

The study found that former African American female superintendents in North Carolina faced significant impacts from the intersection of their race and gender on their professional experiences. Participants reported encountering challenges related to discrimination and bias, with many indicating that gender discrimination was more pronounced than racial discrimination. The intersection of race and gender created unique difficulties not experienced by superintendents of other races and genders. Regarding mentorship and networking, the study highlighted the complexity of these aspects in their careers. Some participants preferred mentors who shared their race and gender, while others valued a broader range of perspectives. Study participants also reported that their race and gender affected their access to professional networks, with some feeling excluded from the "good old boys club." In terms of post-superintendent career opportunities, experiences varied widely. Some participants felt that their race and gender influenced the support and opportunities available to them. However, a few did not perceive any impact from race or gender. These findings underscore the critical role of intersectional identities in shaping the professional and post-superintendent experiences of African American female former superintendents in North Carolina.

The study provided significant implications for policy change and future research. Suggestions for changes at the state and district level are intended to address bias and enhance post-career opportunities. Recommended further research could explore the experiences of different marginalized groups and the impact of researcher identity on my findings.

Navigating the Crossroads: An Exploratory Qualitative Case Study of Intersectionality's Influence on African American Female Superintendents in North Carolina

by
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APPROVED BY:

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my incredible wife, whose unwavering support, patience, and love carried me through every step of this journey. Thank you for believing in me, even on the days when I struggled to believe in myself. I thank God all the time for bringing you into my life.

To my children: this is for you. May you always remember that with hard work and perseverance, anything is possible.

To my parents: To say I've been blessed in this area is an understatement. Thank you for always supporting me throughout my life. From little league baseball, to completing my doctoral work, you have been there every step of the way. I love you and hope I can do the same for my kids.

I also want to express my gratitude to my coworkers for their flexibility and support, enabling me to dedicate the time necessary to complete this research.

To my committee members, I would like to thank you for your guidance throughout this process. I would also like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Jennifer Ayscue. Your structure and support made this possible. Anyone who has the opportunity to work with you is truly blessed indeed.

Finally, to the remarkable women who participated in my study, thank you for sharing your stories and trusting me with your experiences. This work is a reflection of your strength, resilience, and leadership.

BIOGRAPHY

Shelton Langley was born and raised in Edgecombe County, North Carolina. He earned his bachelor's degree in English from North Carolina State University in 2005. Over the course of his career in the classroom, Shelton served as a both a high school English teacher and a Health and Physical Education teacher. In 2020, Shelton earned a Master's in School Administration from Barton College. This led to his appointment as an assistant principal in Greene County, where he gained valuable leadership experience. During his tenure in Greene County, he worked as an assistant principal at both the middle and high school level. In January 2024, Shelton returned to his roots, accepting the principal position at SouthWest Edgecombe High School, his alma mater, where he continues to inspire and guide the next generation of students.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The history of public education in this country is one filled with the pursuit of equal access and equal opportunity for all (Alston, 2000; Brown, 2014; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). Many times this quest for equality focuses on the gender or race of the student. However, this struggle for equal access is not just for students, but it is also for school staff members. Men have traditionally held educational leadership positions (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 2000). The 2016 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) gathered demographic data from over 90,000 public school principals. The survey found that 46% of all public school principals identified as males and 54% identified as females. This ratio is disproportionate when compared to the gender of teachers. This same survey found that 77% of teachers were females. Over time, the gender gap has very slightly closed. In the 2021 NTPS, 56% of all public school principals were females. However, this is still not proportional to the percentage of classroom teachers, 77% of whom identified as females on the survey.

The gender disparity is more evident when focusing on the position of school superintendent. Very few women rise to the rank of school superintendent and even fewer of the women chosen for this position have been African American (Alston, 1999). Overcoming the dual challenges of racial and gender discrimination, these African American women have navigated a complex path to ascend the ranks of school leadership (Brown 2014; Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Kingsberry & Jean-Marie, 2022). The career experiences and obstacles that these women have encountered are unlike those experienced by any other school superintendents.

This exploratory qualitative study of female African American former superintendents in North Carolina describes their experiences while holding this leadership position (Creswell,

2013). Emphasis is placed on understanding the relationship these African American females had with their professional mentors and the professional opportunities they were afforded once they stepped away from the role of superintendent. The qualitative approach is the best way to capture the richness and complexity of their experiences, highlighting the nuances of their journeys. The findings of this study could be used to better understand the experiences of these leaders to improve the professional experiences of the next generation of African American female school superintendents.

Statement of Problem

A school superintendent is selected to act as the head administrator for an entire school district. These school leaders are selected by the board of education to implement the board's vision for the district and to enforce district policy (Bush 2016; Davis & Bowers, 2019; Edwards, 2007). Traditionally, these positions have been held by men (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). The gender gap among superintendents has decreased somewhat over the last four years, with men making up 74% of superintendents in 2019–2020 and 72% in 2022–2023 (White, 2023). In 2000, only 15 females served in the role of superintendent in North Carolina (Hart et al., 2022). These numbers have improved in recent years, but the trend remains the same. In 2021, out of the 115 superintendents serving in North Carolina, 85 were men and 30 were women (Hart et al., 2022). These numbers show that women have increased their presence in the role of superintendent, but these figures do not match when compared to the number of women in the field of education.

The teaching profession is predominantly female; however, women are underrepresented in administrative roles even though they can be found in most classrooms as teachers. The National Center for Education Statistics (2016) reported that in the 2015-2016 school year, 76.6% of the teachers in American public classrooms were women, but only 54% of all

principals were women. Even fewer are the number of schools led by African American female principals. The same 2016 survey (NTPS) found that in the entire United States, only 7% of principals were African American females, while 41% were white females.

The representation of females, and more specifically African American females, shrinks even more when focusing on the role of superintendent. In 2021, 30 of the 115 superintendents in North Carolina (26%) were women (Hart et al., 2022). African American females accounted for only eight of the female superintendents, which equates to only 7% of the school districts in North Carolina being led by African American females. The number of African American superintendents has risen over recent years, but this increase appears to benefit African American males more than African American females. In 2000, there were only a total of nine African American superintendents in the entire state (Hart et al., 2022). This number more than doubled by 2021 when 25 of the superintendents in the state were African Americans. However, out of 25 African American superintendents, 17 were male and only 8 were female (Hart et al., 2022). These figures do not match the data seen in principal positions across the United States. There are more African American female principals than there are African American male principals. The NTPS (2016) reported 6,340 African American female principals and only 3,210 African American male principals. With almost twice as many African American female principals as compared to African American male principals, the ratios are reversed when examining the gender subgroups in the superintendent position.

The lack of representation of African American females in the role of superintendent creates a dynamic that is only experienced by those African American females who attain this position (Alston 2005; Hinds 2016). Having so few African American female superintendents means there are not many networks of other African American females to rely on for recruitment

and retention. Mentors and sponsors play an important role in attaining leadership positions and many times white males, who hold most of the positions, do not sponsor African American females for superintendent positions (Allen et al., 1995). Having limited representation in the field also means that there are few mentors of the same race and gender for the next generation of African American females who seek to become superintendents (Brown, 2014). African American female school leaders often seek advice from mentors who look like them because these mentors have faced the same challenges and experienced the same conditions they have in their careers (Enomoto et al., 2000). Previous studies have also identified that mentees who worked with a mentor who shared their race reported having more support than mentees whose mentor was from a different race (Ensher & Murphy, 1997).

The job of a superintendent is difficult. These African American women face all the on-the-job challenges of their white and male counterparts; however, they also face challenges that are distinct for African American females. Many African American females refer to this distinct phenomenon as “double jeopardy,” or double whammy, when describing the fact that they are dual minorities (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). They must deal with the fact that they will receive different treatment due to their gender, their race, and the combination of the two (Brown, 2014).

Beyond research examining the path for African American females to become superintendents (Cox, 2017), a wide range of research has focused on the perceptions others have of these leaders once they attain the job (Goines-Harris 2020; Kingsberry & Jean-Marie, 2022). Many African American female superintendents report different treatment, even when exhibiting similar behavior to other leaders (Alston, 2000; Brown, 2014). This means these women are viewed as cocky or arrogant, or as angry Black women when merely asserting themselves in a similar manner that is accepted by their male counterparts (Bush, 2016). Other studies report

these women feeling trapped between two stereotypes (Alston, 2005; Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). They are either too feminine and not taken seriously or they are too firm and seen as combative (Hinds, 2016). This creates working conditions that are specific to only African American female superintendents.

African American females must also deal with constant microaggressions (Goines-Harris, 2020; Williams et al., 2020). Examples include skepticism when they showcased their academic prowess or articulated aspirations for a successful professional career (Williams et al., 2020). Other data suggest that African American female superintendents perceive that they are often compensated at a lower level when compared to Whites, male or female, who are working in similar districts (Goines-Harris, 2020). There is no set scale for superintendent pay in North Carolina; therefore, it is possible, and even likely, that African American female superintendents in North Carolina are also paid less than their White counterparts.

The superintendency is a job with a relatively short average tenure. In 2021, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) reported that 70% of all the superintendents in North Carolina had served five or fewer years in their position and 15% of all superintendents in the state had not completed their first year (Hart et al., 2022). Another factor that plays an important role in superintendent tenure length is the years in education served by the individual before attaining the role of superintendent. NCDPI records indicated that in 2021, 85% of the superintendents in the state had over 21 years of service in public education (Hart et al., 2022). Many former superintendents go on to work in the private sector, serve on boards, or work for universities (Brunner, 2000; Glass & Franceschini, 2007) Little research has been conducted to see if the opportunities following their departure from the position are equal for all former superintendents or if superintendents of certain races and genders have more opportunities.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative case study is twofold. First, as more African American females have become superintendents, this study seeks to describe the recent conditions for African American female superintendents. By taking an exploratory qualitative case study approach, this study focuses on describing the shared experiences of former African American female superintendents and seeks to understand the essence of this leadership experience (Yin, 2009). The study emphasizes their working conditions with a focus on professional mentors and professional networks. In doing so, this study begins to identify if having so few African American female superintendents in the state of North Carolina affects the working conditions of those who serve in the role. The study seeks to understand who these women identify as their mentors and how they describe that relationship in their own words. This study also identifies if they were a part of any professional networks, whether formal or informal, that might have provided them with mentoring during their careers.

Second, this study seeks to examine the post-superintendent career opportunities for African American females. More specifically, the study describes whether former African American female superintendents felt the opportunities afforded to them differed from their peers after their time serving as superintendent ended.

Research Questions

This exploratory qualitative case study is designed to provide an in-depth description of the experiences of former African American female superintendents in North Carolina and to answer the following:

1. How do former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the impact that their race and gender had on their experiences while fulfilling their job responsibilities?

2. How do former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the impact that race and gender had on their relationship with their professional mentors, sponsors, and access to networking opportunities during their careers in education?

3. How do former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the impact that their race and gender had on the professional opportunities afforded to them after their retirement?

Definition of Terms

The definition of terms is included to establish a shared understanding of the key vocabulary and concepts that will be used throughout the study.

African American: An American citizen with ancestry traced to any of the African racial groups categorized as Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

Female: an individual who self-identifies as female, as well as how social institutions respond to the person based on their gender presentation (Mazure, 2021).

*Former superintende*nt: an individual who has held the primary executive office of the entire school district, but has since stepped away from the position.

Intersectionality: a way of analyzing how multiple forms of social inequality and oppression intersect and interact with each other, leading to unique experiences of discrimination and disadvantage for individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups (Crenshaw, 2013).

Professional mentor: any person who provides professional guidance and/or support throughout a career (Allen et al., 1995).

Professional network: groups used to cultivate and sustain connections that have the capability to support individuals in their professional career (Forret & Dougherty, 2004).

Sponsor: an individual who helps to open the door for future positions and promotions. This person "signs off" on the credibility of an applicant to be successful (Allen et al., 1995).

Superintendent: primary executive officer of the entire school district (Edwards, 2007)

Significance of Study

Numerous studies have focused on different perspectives of African American female superintendents. Some focused on the lack of representation of African American females in the position (Alston, 2000; Angel et al., 2013; Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Muñoz et al., 2014; Osler & Webb, 2014) to explain why so few of these women are serving in the role of superintendent. Other researchers sought to describe the experiences of the few African American women who can attain the position of superintendent (Bush, 2016; Cox, 2017; Johnson, 2021). This study is significant because it delves into the lived experiences of these superintendents and into the challenges, opportunities, and dynamics they encounter while being the minority in their field. Specifically, it seeks to better understand the role of mentors and networks in their professional growth. In the context of African American female superintendents, the significance of mentors and networks becomes even more pronounced due to the intersectionality of race and gender. This study can reveal how these mentor and professional network relationships aid in navigating the professional duties of African American female superintendents, making inroads in predominantly white and male-dominated spaces, and fostering resilience against adversity.

The implications of this study could impact the way African American female superintendents are trained and supported. Superintendent preparation programs at universities could use these findings to reflect on their programs and even perform an equity audit to ensure that African American females are just as prepared as other superintendent candidates after completing their programs. Professional organizations such as the North Carolina School Superintendents' Association (NCSSA) would also be able to use the findings of this study to make certain that African American females in North Carolina are provided the support they need by intentionally examining and strengthening the mentoring and networking opportunities provided to African American females.

A study that investigates the post-superintendent career opportunities for African American female former superintendents is significant because it can provide insight into ways that these school district leaders can continue to have an impact after stepping away from the superintendent position. Retirement from the superintendency can often create a new career opportunity in which district leaders can continue to contribute to the field of education in ways, such as consulting, mentoring, or working in superintendent preparation programs (Alston 2005; Glass & Franceschini, 2007). It is desired that this study provide insight into improved methods of connecting African American females with mentors and networks, both formal and informal that could assist them in pursuing post-superintendent career opportunities. This information will assist African American females who are serving in the role of superintendent and those who are aspiring to do so in the future.

Findings will also help universities and professional organizations that train and support superintendents, ensuring that their programs are meeting the needs of African American females. They could also use the findings to support the addition of staff positions that focus on

equity. Additionally, understanding the professional environment that helps or hinders their post-retirement options would guide policy decisions, such as hiring practices and post-career professional mentoring, that would create a more inclusive and supportive environment for African American female superintendents beginning this phase of their career.

Organization of the Study

The first chapter laid out the problem being addressed by this study and the purpose of the research. The chapter emphasizes the significance of the research, both in terms of understanding the experiences of African American female superintendents and in shaping policy decisions and support systems for future leaders. It provides a comprehensive overview of the research's purpose and objectives, setting the stage for the subsequent chapters that will delve into the narratives and experiences of these educational leaders.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review encompassing the theoretical framework utilized in the study and background information on the topic of African American female superintendents. Chapter 3 includes a positionality statement for the qualitative study and a detailed description of the study’s research design and rationale for choosing the approach.

In Chapter 4, the findings of the study are presented. The implications of the findings are summarized in Chapter 5. Included in the final chapter is a discussion of limitations, areas for future research, and final insights into the study’s significance.

Summary

This exploratory qualitative case study of African American females serving at the level of school superintendent in North Carolina examines the unique experiences they encounter due to the intersection of their race and gender. The study identifies common themes in the experiences of the women who have served in this role. The stark disparities in the number of

superintendent positions held by African American females create the need for further investigation into this issue. The under-representation creates distinct challenges faced by African American female superintendents, such as limited access to mentors and sponsors of the same gender and race.

The research seeks to illuminate the lived experiences of African American female superintendents, their challenges and opportunities, and the pivotal roles of mentors and networks in a profession dominated by white males. The study also addresses the critical issue of post-superintendent career opportunities for African American females. Findings are beneficial for organizations that train aspiring superintendents and other organizations that provide professional support.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Throughout American history, women and people of color have fought for equality in various aspects of society, from civil rights to professional opportunities (Alston, 2005). This struggle for parity extends to the field of education, where women have made significant strides in classroom teaching but continue to face barriers when aspiring to leadership roles, particularly at the level of school superintendents (Jacobson, 2007; Lomotey, 1990). While women represent a substantial majority of the teaching workforce, their representation dwindles significantly as they ascend the administrative hierarchy. This discrepancy becomes even more pronounced for African American women who aspire to become superintendents (Alston, 2005). This literature review explores the multifaceted challenges and experiences of female African American superintendents by focusing on their underrepresentation in leadership, the discrimination they experience, perceptions others have of them, self-perceptions, mentoring, sponsorship, and the role of superintendent preparation programs.

This chapter begins by introducing the theoretical framework of intersectionality and how it is used in this study. The review of literature includes other studies that utilized this framework and why it is best suited for this study on former African American female superintendents. Also included is a section detailing the superintendency position and the expectations for individuals who hold that title. Next, previous studies on African American female superintendents are introduced and examined for information that is pertinent to the research questions being answered in this study. This includes literature on the lack of representation of females in school leadership positions, race and gender discrimination, perceptions of African American female superintendents, professional sponsors and mentors, superintendent search consultants,

superintendent preparation programs, and post-career opportunities. Finally, the researcher examines what gaps exist in the literature and how this study seeks to address those gaps.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013). The theory of intersectionality emphasizes that individuals can experience multiple forms of discrimination at the same time. Multiple social categories, such as race, gender, and sexuality, can overlap to create a unique form of discrimination known only to individuals who belong to all the same groups (Crenshaw, 2013). Intersectionality explains how individuals who belong to two groups, such as individuals who are both African Americans and females, experience distinct discrimination that cannot be understood by simply focusing on one element of their identity in isolation. This concept also acknowledges that individuals can experience privilege and discrimination simultaneously simply due to the intersection of their social categories. By utilizing this theory, I will explore how the intersection of gender and race shapes the experiences of African American females serving in the role of superintendent.

A study of African American female superintendents grounded in the theory of intersectionality allows for the participants to reflect on their multiple identities. A study focusing on female superintendents, or one that only explored African Americans, could not adequately express the nuances experienced by school superintendents who are both African American and female. Because these superintendents are both African American and female, a study focusing only on one aspect of their identity would not be sufficient.

Previous studies have utilized this theory to analyze aspects of the superintendency. Some have focused on how the intersectionality of race and gender affected African American females who were seeking the superintendency and the barriers they faced on this career path

(Kingsberry & Jean-Marie, 2022). African American females must overcome all the same barriers that African Americans and females deal with when seeking the superintendent position; however, they face many prejudices due to the intersection of their race and gender. Findings from this type of research are beneficial for future generations of African American female educational leaders who are seeking to overcome the barriers that hinder these women from attaining the position of superintendent. Other studies have used the theory of intersectionality to examine leadership development and how the personal and professional experience of females created their leadership styles (Morillo, 2017). Experiences and perceptions help mold an individual's leadership style. Studying the intersection of female and African American experiences creates the opportunity to better prepare future school leaders.

Another study utilized the theory of intersectionality to analyze the efforts made in the field of education to close the achievement gap between white students and African American students (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). This study suggests that strategies for addressing the racial achievement gap have typically not considered the unique experiences of Black girls. Additionally, the study suggests that gender and race issues are often examined from a limited perspective that does not adequately address the intersectionality of Black women's experiences in educational settings (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). These same concepts could be used to address the gap that exists between female African American superintendents and all other races and genders.

The theory of intersectionality guides this study as the researcher seeks to better understand the effects of intersectionality on African American female superintendents as they find professional mentors, build professional networks, and seek professional opportunities after retiring from the role of superintendent. This framework is most appropriate because these

leaders are operating in a field that is dominated by white males. Proponents of intersectionality stress the importance of amplifying the voices of individuals who face discrimination due to the intersection of their race and gender, specifically African American females (Crenshaw, 2013). Movements and policies that have focused on one aspect or the other, such as the feminist movement or the civil rights movement, do not address the specific forms of discrimination faced by African American females. This study seeks to amplify the voices of the few African American women who have ascended to the role of superintendent in North Carolina and better understand the professional environment experienced by these African American women due to the intersectionality of their race and gender. Engaging in these efforts yields valuable and contextually relevant data that could assist researchers, educators, and institutions in enhancing their support for the advancement of African American female superintendents. Failing to undertake these initiatives would likely perpetuate the state of invisibility that African American females currently face within the position of superintendent.

The Superintendency

The school superintendent's role is a critical leadership position within the educational system. Serving as the chief executive officer of the school district, the superintendent is responsible for managing both educational and operational aspects of the district (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Jacobson, 2011). Their duties include establishing the vision and direction for the schools, formulating and executing policies, and ensuring compliance with educational standards (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). As the top administrator, the superintendent faces complex challenges and must make decisions that significantly affect students, educators, and the wider community.

The superintendent's role involves various key responsibilities crucial for the effective administration of a school district. They are responsible for creating and managing the district's budget, which requires careful allocation of resources to support various programs aimed at enhancing student success (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Additionally, superintendents oversee the hiring, training, and evaluation of staff to ensure that qualified educators and administrators are in place (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). They also play a vital role in cultivating a positive school culture and climate, which is essential for the well-being and motivation of both students and staff (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Mavrogordato & White, 2020). This position demands strong leadership abilities, strategic insight, and collaboration with diverse stakeholders, including school boards, parents, and community members.

There is also a component of community involvement in the superintendent's role. Superintendents often act as representatives of the district, advocating for the interests of the schools within the community and seeking resources and support (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Glass & Franceschini, 2007). They must establish and nurture relationships with local organizations and stakeholders to promote collaboration and improve educational opportunities for students (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Jacobson, 2011). Superintendents must also manage the growing pressures due to accountability requirements and the necessity for data-informed decision-making (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Jacobson, 2011). The role of the school superintendent is multifaceted, demanding a combination of educational knowledge, management skills, and community engagement to lead a school district successfully.

Low Number of Female Leaders

The 2021 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) revealed that 56% of public school principals were women. However, this figure does not align with the 77% of classroom teachers who identified as female in the survey. This number shrinks to 13% when focusing on the role of the district superintendent (Alston, 2005). A glass ceiling exists in the school building and it appears to block the path to the district office (Moran, 1992). The lack of female superintendents may create an environment that is less welcoming or supportive for aspiring women (Muñoz et al., 2014). While women have seen improvements in access to positions of power, these improvements appear to benefit white women more than African American women. One study found that out of around 15,000 superintendent positions, only 5% are held by African American women (Alston, 2000). It is difficult to find updated or detailed data because an official national database of superintendents has never been created (White, 2023). Another study reported that a quarter of African American females who were actively seeking the superintendency indicated that they had to wait for five years or more before being selected to serve in the role, in contrast to just 8% of white women and 9% of white men who experienced a similar delay (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Figures such as these indicate that there is something different about the career pathways of these African American women.

Many possible explanations are offered for why women are underrepresented in leadership positions. Some women may self-limit their chances of reaching the level of superintendent by prioritizing lifestyle choices over professional advancement (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Muñoz et al., 2014). This includes not being willing to relocate or commute long distances to advance professionally. Women are also more likely to consider their spouse's needs before accepting a promotion (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Spouses could feel like the main income for

the family should come from the man or feel as if it is a woman's job to take care of the kids. Women frequently face discouragement, particularly when their spouses oppose their pursuit of administrative roles, and they lack support from their home environments (Enomoto et al., 2000). For many women, becoming a superintendent clashes with their effort to fit into society's gender norms (Muñoz et al., 2014). This could include wanting to keep their spouses happy or feeling guilty for missing time with their children. Gender stereotypes tell society that men do not need to worry about who will take care of the children if they take on more responsibilities at work. This is the mother's job. However, women who take on the role of superintendent will inevitably be away from home more often, and along with this comes guilt (Collins, 2002). A previous study of African American female superintendents found that these women felt pressured to prepare a home-cooked meal at least once a week and 90% of the study's participants expressed guilt that their professional obligations took away from their family obligations (Collins, 2002). Many of these African American females face an internal struggle between chasing their professional goals and meeting the societal standards for women.

It is not just personal decisions that keep women out of the top leadership positions. Hiring trends show that high school principals are more likely to transition into the role of superintendent (Davis & Bowers, 2019). Men are more likely to be placed in high school principal positions, while women are more likely to hold these positions in elementary schools (Tallerico, 2000). The result of hiring committees favoring high school principals is more men becoming superintendents. Many women also report losing out on superintendent positions to men, even though the female had more experience and more education (Robinson, 2014). Nationwide, white men dominate the superintendent position while making up a small portion of the teacher workforce (Davis & Bowers, 2019). There are so few African American female

superintendents that when one does attain the position, their rarity makes them stand out, and this rarity brings with it extreme visibility (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). With visibility comes expectations. An African American female superintendent who is unsuccessful would undoubtedly garner a lot more attention because they stick out from the majority. In fact, African American females have identified fear of failure after achieving the role of superintendent as the leading cause of not seeking the position in the first place (Escobedo, 2011). African American females who wish to become superintendents must not only overcome gender discrimination, but they must persist against racial discrimination as well.

Race and Gender Discrimination

Previous studies indicate that African American females felt race was a bigger obstacle to their career advancement than gender (Allen et al., 1995). African American females believe this differs from views held by women from other races. Many African American women think white women see gender as a bigger factor when it comes to how they are treated (Enomoto et al., 2000). These views held by African American females also differ from the view of older generations who felt that sexism in the workplace was a bigger barrier (Allen & Hughes, 2017). Acquisition of leadership positions has been more difficult for African American females than any other group, including African American males (Alston, 2000; Revere, 1987). Even when African American females are picked for a superintendent position, the perception is often that they were only hired due to affirmative action (Allen et al., 1995). When the choice of an African American female is perceived as being motivated by affirmative action, this can lead others to view them as inadequate or not belonging in the position. In fact, many men, both white and African American, see these women as taking positions that should belong to them (Arnez,

1982). This perception, which may have changed some over time, perpetuates a myth that African American females do not deserve or have not earned these leadership positions.

Getting hired as a superintendent does not mean someone is not being discriminated against. African American female superintendents who were interviewed as part of a previous study expressed that they were offered lower salaries than males (Collins, 2002). These findings are even more surprising when combined with the fact that these women are more likely to be selected to lead districts that others would view as difficult. African American females are more likely to be hired to lead schools and districts with a higher population of students with socio-economic needs (Ffolkes-Bryant & R. Coppin, 2020). African American females report being disproportionately placed in high need schools and not being selected for positions in the more affluent areas (Ffolkes-Bryant & R. Coppin, 2020). These types of positions increase the likelihood of African American females being placed at schools with an increased likelihood of not performing well on school assessments. Previous studies have identified a correlation between the percentage of students who qualify as low-income and the academic performance of the school (Rector, 2011). Being placed in positions where success is unlikely does not help African American school leaders who report feeling like they must be twice as good as their white male counterparts (Fields et al., 2019). Since they are the minority in their field, their performance would garner a lot of attention if it was deemed poor.

A former African American female superintendent who served in Memphis agreed that discrimination based on race and gender is more subtle now than it once was, but it will always be the elephant in the room (Gewertz, 2006). This elephant will continue to exist until more research is completed to understand the discrimination faced by these leaders due to the intersectionality of their race and gender.

Perception of Others

Many public perceptions of African American female superintendents are built upon stereotypes and ignorance. This requires African American female leaders to hold themselves to a higher standard to ensure they dismiss these myths of being inadequate (Brown, 2014). These leaders express dealing with the perception that everything they do is viewed through the lens of race. There is a feeling that they are unable to meet the needs and concerns of all children because they only focus on the needs of Black students (Nozaki, 2000; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). Many African American school leaders express feeling they were solely hired for their ability to bring together the Black and white communities in their district (Brown & Beckett, 2007). This sentiment speaks to their perceived abilities to bring different social groups together but dismisses their skills of leading a school district.

Another stereotype that African American female leaders must face is the idea that they should be in subservient roles and not leadership roles; this results in episodes of mistaken identity. One assistant superintendent reported visitors assuming she was the secretary and not the superintendent (Enomoto et al., 2000). The same study included an African American female principal who also dealt with this form of stereotyping and often had parents assume her white secretary was the principal and that she was the secretary (Enomoto et al., 2000).

Previous studies have indicated that female African American superintendents do not feel like they get the same level of respect as their professional counterparts (Bush, 2016). Decisions as simple as closing a school district due to winter weather are scrutinized so severely when made by an African American female that the process for making the decision must be shared with the public (Bush, 2016). Many African American female superintendents express having to explain simple decisions that had they been made by a white male would not garner a second

glance. Others have reported not being taken seriously by men they work with in the field of educational leadership. One superintendent shared that a male principal she was mentoring shared with her that he thought she was joking with him when she first showed up to mentor him (Bush, 2016). It is hard for some men to think that a female leader could teach them something about leadership. Another African American female superintendent was once asked if she would be able to handle a $500,000,000 budget (Gewertz, 2006). She remembers the white male smiling while he made his comment but could not help but wonder if he would have made the same comment to a white male (Gewertz, 2006).

When African American female leaders do become assertive, many times this is perceived as trying to show others that they have more power than them (Bush, 2016). A male superintendent could make an executive decision and no one would second guess it, but if an African American female were to say the exact same thing, she is viewed as being aggressive or called an expletive (Bush, 2016). Robert Peterkin, who was at one time director of the Urban Superintendents' Training Program at Harvard University, feels that many people find it difficult dealing with a strong African American female superintendent and remembers one African American female superintendent being asked her thoughts on the perception that she was a b**** (Gewertz, 2006). These perceptions and the treatment they bring along with them are tied to the intersection of these leaders' race and gender.

African American female superintendents are also perceived as being unprofessional if they do not fit the mold of what a superintendent is supposed to look like. Their clothing and choice of hairstyle are discussed more than their white male counterparts (Kingsberry & Jean-Marie, 2022). In addition to not dressing like their predecessors, African American female superintendents do not look like stereotypical school leaders. This results in many cases of

mistaken identity because many community members are not used to working with Black female school leaders (Enomoto et al., 2000). Often these women are treated like secretaries or asked to call the principal (Enomoto et al., 2000). Another superintendent who wore her hair in dreadlocks and often wore dresses with African patterns shared that her community thought her look was too Afrocentric (Gewertz, 2006). Not only do these women have to overcome society's perceptions, but they must also face their own preconceived notions.

Another perception issue is that African American female leaders are only seen as a combination of their gender and race. This view minimizes or ignores qualities such as their education, professional background, and leadership skills. When coworkers or the community look at them, they only see them as African American females. In a study of the media coverage of an African American female superintendent's hire, Nozaki (2000) found that the media representation of the new hire often focused on her being the first female or the first African American superintendent. The media coverage focused on the new superintendent's rare gender and racial qualities; however, the media also insinuated that she should not allow her gender or race to influence her leadership.

Self-Perceptions

Many female superintendents sense they must possess and project masculine characteristics to become a superintendent; however, they retain their jobs because of stereotypical feminine characteristics, such as being nurturing and empowering others (Osler & Webb, 2014). Female superintendents share many perceptions of how they must lead, but African American females' perception of how they must carry themselves is distinct in many facets. In fact, they often describe the intersection of their race and gender as being a double whammy against them (Angel et al., 2013; Enomoto et al., 2000). There is also a feeling of

always having to prove oneself to others. This can take many forms. One researcher found that African American females expressed the thought that even minor complaints filed against them would find their way to the desk of their superiors (Enomoto et al., 2000). Not only do they face prejudices due to their gender and their race, but also prejudices faced due to the intersection of their race and gender.

They may be both female and Black, but they view themselves as people of color first and then as women (Enomoto et al., 2000). The fact that they are Black makes them shy away from identifying many racial issues because they fear being seen as paranoid (Brown, 2014). When they do address situations involving race, they must deal with the fact that their involvement will be perceived as being solely motivated by the fact that other Black people are involved (Fields et al., 2019). When issues of race must be dealt with, African American female superintendents have mastered the skill of being tempered reformers. These types of reformers seek to promote change but realize they must work within the confines of the educational system to accomplish these goals (Allen & Hughes, 2017). One female African American superintendent described this duality as always remembering that she is wearing the superintendent's hat, but she is in African American skin (Dailey, 2015). This skill is vital because African American female superintendents are twice as likely as any subgroup to think they were hired to create change (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). These women do not see their job as merely being the lead change agent in improving schools, but more importantly they think they were hired to lead social change in the district and to help improve things for African American students (Escobedo, 2011; Johnson, 2021).

When asked what guided their decisions and inspired them, many African American women spoke of spirituality as being a guiding force (Robinson, 2014). One study reported that

80% of the African American female superintendents interviewed felt that the influence of a higher power during the interview process helped them attain the position (Collins, 2002). Spirituality was also referenced by many of these African American female leaders in connection to their resiliency while serving in the role of superintendent. A connection to a higher power enables them to create a sense of balance in their life (Johnson, 2021). Spirituality is also linked to how these school leaders treat others. A faith grounded in spirituality enables these leaders to treat everyone with respect, regardless of how poorly they are treated (Johnson, 2021). Many African American female superintendents have a strong faith in God, believing in His timing and providence in their lives. Some of these superintendents attribute their positive outlook and success to their faith, emphasizing its sustaining and guiding influence (Kingsberry, 2015). Mentors and sponsors are also major guiding forces in the career tracks of African American superintendents.

Networks, Sponsors, and Mentors

As stated in Chapter One, a professional mentor includes any person who provides professional guidance and/or support throughout a career (Allen et al., 1995). These mentors are trusted individuals who can be called upon when advice is needed. A sponsor is an individual who helps to open the door for future positions and promotions; this person can confirm the credibility of an applicant to be successful (Allen et al., 1995). Professional networks are groups of individuals who can act as both professional mentor and sponsor. These groups can consist of formal professional organizations or an informal group of professional acquaintances.

Many African American women who seek to become superintendents express that the lack of sponsors hinder their aspirations of becoming a superintendent (Allen et al., 1995). Sponsorship is essential for female candidates in a field where political affiliations play a

vital role in securing and excelling in a superintendency (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Sponsorship includes someone who is respected not only sharing the name of a candidate but also vouching for them. This person can be in the field of education but could also be any respected community member. However, sponsors can also carry influence in other communities. A sponsor can also reach out to someone in their network outside of their own community (Mactavish, 2010). In this way, they can open doors in other communities for individuals for whom they are willing to advocate.

Informal networking accounts for over 60% of superintendent hires and these networks seem to be less available to Black candidates (Fields et al., 2019; Hudson, 1994). Other than networking to help get superintendent positions, many African American women do not have access to sponsors who vouch for them or assist them in getting hired. Mentors motivate people, but sponsors enable them. In the past, there was a lack of white men who were willing to sponsor African American females (Allen et al., 1995). We do not know the current number of white men who feel comfortable sponsoring African American females for vacant superintendent positions and that makes this study important to determine if anything has changed. This is critical because for many Black women, career advancements in education are dependent on sponsors (Alston, 2000). Women can receive sponsorships from anyone with professional connections, but most female superintendent sponsorships come from the applicant's current district superintendent, a board member from their district, or a fellow professional in the field (Mactavish, 2010). Mactavish's (2010) study of female superintendents in Washington State concluded that 62% of all female superintendents in the state benefited from the assistance of a sponsor while attaining their first superintendent position. Data from a three-state study identified barriers for females who aspire to become school superintendents and 53.9% of the females felt that the absence of a

sponsor with influence was making it difficult for them to ascend to the position of superintendent (Sharp et al., 2000).

Once becoming a superintendent, the need for sponsors diminishes and the role of mentor becomes more important. Women who aspire to the role of superintendent primarily use their own district superintendent, a superintendent from another district, or staff members from a university as mentors (Mactavish, 2010). Female leaders may need more robust mentorship and support systems to navigate the challenges and biases they encounter (Muñoz et al., 2014). All women lack mentors in fields traditionally held by men, but Black women lack mentors in all fields (Alston, 2000). Most female superintendents report having both male and female mentors who played pivotal roles in their careers (Dudek, 2012). African American female superintendents have fewer external systems of support and face challenges in finding suitable mentors (Angel et al., 2013; Dudek, 2012; Wiley et al., 2017). African American female superintendents traditionally do not have other African Americans as mentors because there have been so few Black females who have held this position. This system creates a cycle of low numbers of possible mentors who share the same gender and race (Brown, 2014; Davis & Bowers, 2019). Some African American females in educational leadership have expressed that not having mentors with whom they identified culturally created a perceived barrier to high-ranking positions (Bush, 2016). With so few African American females in these positions and even fewer in place as formal mentors, some of these leaders create their own support groups. African American women face comfort-related issues in network settings, and those who proactively established informal networking groups experienced substantial benefits, viewing it as an integral aspect of their role (Dudek, 2012). One narrative study found that a group of African American female superintendents who were all hired at the same time created their own

informal mentoring group and called themselves the sisters (Bush, 2016). This group was there to offer support and encouragement to one another while serving in the role of superintendent. This group received some backlash from some of their male peers. Other superintendents who were not part of this group made sure to let these women know that the other superintendents did not like this group and viewed their leadership style as too blunt (Bush, 2016). This backlash from other superintendents speaks to the need for mentors who have similar experiences.

One benefit of African American women having mentors with different backgrounds is the opportunity for the mentors and mentees to obtain a different perspective on educational and professional topics (Enomoto et al., 2000). In addition to sponsors recommending the hire of a superintendent, some school boards utilize the expertise of search committees to identify their next superintendent.

Superintendent Search Consultants

Another barrier to ascending to the position of school superintendent is the practice of using search consulting firms to hire a superintendent. These consultants are often hired by boards of education to create a pool of qualified applicants for an open superintendent position. Often these groups are made up of a disproportionate amount of people from one demographic. A 2009 study in Texas found that 91.8% of superintendent search consultants were male and 86.9% of consultants were white (Glenn & Hickey, 2009). This same study found that none of the consultants who participated in the survey identified as African American females (Glenn & Hickey, 2009). Representation like this in organizations that are hired to help find applicants could help explain the low numbers of African American females represented in superintendent roles.

Such a lack of representation within the organizations responsible for sourcing superintendent candidates may contribute to the persistently low numbers of African American females in superintendent roles. These consulting firms may inadvertently be limiting the chances of African American females, potentially perpetuating the underrepresentation of this marginalized group. Experience has often been identified as a barrier to entry into superintendent roles; however, the reluctance of many consultants to openly acknowledge race or gender as barriers underscores the need for greater awareness and action (Glenn & Hickey, 2009). The opinions of the African American consultants in the Texas study, who identified race and gender as significant barriers, calls for a more inclusive and equitable approach to superintendent searches.

Other studies have also focused on school boards that have used the services of a consulting service to fill their vacant superintendent position. A 2012 study in Texas sought to determine if districts that used search consultants had different preferences for superintendent characteristics based on the ethnicity of the new superintendent (Beagle, 2012). The study participants included 17 school board presidents who decided to use a consulting service while looking for their next superintendent. However, the study found that all 17 respondents selected a Caucasian superintendent, making it impossible to ascertain any differences in preferences based on ethnicity (Beagle, 2012). The study could not determine if there was any difference in the preferred characteristics of superintendents based on their ethnicity because there was no diversity in the ethnicity of the superintendents chosen by the respondents.

It is important to discern if superintendent search consultants are helping females break through the glass ceiling or keeping them out of the position. A study of 43 search consultants who worked for firms in California found that search firm consultants perceive themselves as

gender neutral (Bernal, 2019). However, they hold implicit and unconscious biases about gender-based leadership qualities and characteristics a superintendent candidate should possess and these present themselves as a contributing factor to the gender inequity that exists in the school superintendency (Bernal, 2019). This means that even in professional settings where neutrality is expected, underlying biases can influence decision-making and perpetuate gender disparities. Addressing these biases is crucial for promoting fairness and diversity in the hiring process for school superintendents.

The role of search firms in educational leadership recruitment extends beyond simply sourcing candidates; they also shape the perceptions and preferences of school boards regarding the characteristics of potential superintendents. Other studies have found that consulting firms lacking in diversity leads to a narrow understanding of what constitutes an effective leader (Hale & Pruitt, 2016). These biases held by these consultants can directly influence hiring decisions, favoring candidates who conform to traditional demographic profiles. This can perpetuate a cycle of exclusion, where the same types of candidates are continually selected, thus limiting opportunities for underrepresented groups, particularly African American females, to ascend to leadership roles (Hale & Pruitt, 2016).

Schmidt (2013) contends that school boards often lack a clear understanding of how to actively promote diversity in their selection processes, frequently relying on search firms that do not prioritize inclusive practices. This gap in awareness can result in a preference for candidates who fit traditional molds, as seen in Beagle's (2012) study where all selected superintendents were Caucasian, despite the existence of diverse candidates.

Superintendent Preparation Programs

Graduate programs in universities that prepare individuals for the superintendency could provide an institutional form of mentorship and sponsorship. One aspect of these programs that needs to be addressed are the low number of African American female faculty members and students (Allen et al., 1995). Prospective Black female school leaders need to see themselves in the university's staff. Universities lacking diversity in their superintendent preparation programs create a narrow viewpoint on education because students are learning from mostly white men (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). Not only does representation inspire future leaders, but having African American voices included in the preparation program debunks many narratives that are not true (Dailey, 2015). Increasing diversity in the superintendent preparation programs would provide a more diverse perspective, but real learning comes from on-the-job experiences and mentors (Brown, 2014). University superintendent preparation programs can also act as their own form of professional networks. In a 2010 survey of female superintendents in Washington State, 27% identified their university doctoral cohort as one of their primary professional networks (Mactavish, 2010). Female superintendents find it easier to discuss work-related topics with colleagues who have completed the same courses and shared the same experiences while completing a university's superintendent preparation program (Mactavish, 2010). Therefore, having doctoral cohorts that include substantial shares of Black female students could be beneficial.

Graduate programs within universities that prepare individuals for the superintendency hold substantial potential as institutional sources of mentorship, sponsorship, and professional networks. However, addressing the critical issue of low representation of African American female faculty members and students within these programs is important. The presence of

diverse voices in these programs is not merely about representation but also enriching the educational perspectives. A lack of diversity among educators can lead to a narrow viewpoint on education, primarily influenced by predominantly white male instructors. Increasing diversity in superintendent preparation programs is essential to providing a more comprehensive and inclusive perspective. Furthermore, these graduate programs can serve as crucial professional networks, as evident from the experiences of female superintendents in Washington State, who found solidarity and valuable support in their doctoral cohorts. This highlights the significance of shared experiences and connections forged through university programs to facilitate open dialogue and collaboration among aspiring superintendents.

Post-Career Opportunities

Superintendents in North Carolina do not spend many years in the position. A 2021 survey indicated that 53% of the superintendents in the state had between two and eight years of experience in their current role and 39% had three years or less (Hart et al., 2022). With these relatively short tenure lengths, many superintendents find work in other positions after retiring from the position. A study consisting of state association directors from across the country identified common positions occupied by former superintendents (Hall & Difford, 1992). These positions include university faculty positions, search firms, consultation roles, and other district leadership positions in different districts (Hall & Difford, 1992).

There is currently little research comparing the post-career opportunities of superintendents of different races and genders. This gap in the literature needs to be addressed to determine if the opportunities afforded to one demographic of former superintendents is different when compared to others. It would be important to determine if the historically low number of

African American female superintendents has any effect on the professional opportunities of African American female superintendents who have left the position in the past few years.

Gaps in Research

Previous research included in this literature review has focused on the experiences and perceptions of African American female superintendents. More research is needed in this area to study whether these experiences and perceptions have changed as the position of school superintendent has become more accessible to African American females. These types of studies will shed more light on the effects of intersectionality on African American women as more women and African Americans have attained the position of school superintendent. This study addresses these gaps by interviewing African American women who have stepped away from the role of superintendent and compare their experiences to the participants from previous studies included in this literature review. Another gap addressed by this study is the experiences of African American female superintendents in the state of North Carolina. Findings from this study can be compared to studies performed in other areas of the country to compare the experiences of African American female superintendents. This data could be utilized to distinguish whether the experiences and perceptions of African American female superintendents differ from state to state, or region to region.

The literature discussed in this review highlighted the importance of sponsors, mentors, and professional networks. As more African American females attain the position of superintendent, gaps in research will exist describing the relationship between these African American females and their supporters. Are the previous generation of African American females mentoring and sponsoring the next generation of African American female school leaders? Are the current African American female superintendents still relegated to seeking out

white men who will sponsor them? This study addresses this gap by asking former African American females to identify their sponsors and mentors. I also ask the women to explain their relationships with their professional mentors and their experiences with professional networking.

Due to the low number of African American females who have held the position of school superintendent, there appears to be very little research completed on post-superintendency career paths for these women. The superintendency is a job with a short average tenure length. Future studies should focus on the career opportunities, or lack thereof, for African American female superintendents once their tenure ends. How many go on to join the faculty of superintendent preparation programs? How many go on to start consulting firms? How many go on to accept a higher position in education, or at a lower level? Now that it appears to be more common for an African American female to attain the position, new research should focus on the experiences of these superintendents after their term comes to an end.

Summary

Chapter 2 of this study delves into the literature surrounding the experiences and challenges faced by African American female superintendents in the field of education. The chapter begins by introducing the theoretical framework of intersectionality, which emphasizes the unique discrimination faced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups, such as African American women.

The review of literature explores the underrepresentation of women and people of color in leadership positions, particularly the role of school superintendent, and highlights the various factors contributing to this underrepresentation. The chapter discusses the low number of female leaders in education, noting that while women make up a significant portion of the teaching

workforce, their representation decreases significantly as they move up the administrative hierarchy, particularly in superintendent positions. This discrepancy is even more pronounced for African American women aspiring to become superintendents. The chapter identifies various factors, such as personal choices, societal norms, and hiring trends, that contribute to the underrepresentation of African American female superintendents.

The literature review also examines the discrimination faced by African American female superintendents, both in terms of race and gender. Studies suggest that race is often viewed as a more significant barrier to career advancement for African American females than gender, with perceptions that they are hired due to affirmative action rather than merit. Discrimination can manifest in various ways, including lower salaries and being placed in challenging school districts.

Perceptions of African American female superintendents by others, including stereotypes and biases, are also explored in the chapter. These leaders often find themselves navigating the expectations and biases of others, including the perception that they are solely responsible for addressing racial issues in their districts. The chapter also delves into the self-perceptions of African American female superintendents, highlighting the challenges they face in balancing their identities as both women and people of color. These leaders often feel the need to prove themselves continually, knowing that even minor complaints against them may be scrutinized more heavily.

The role of mentors, sponsors, and professional networks in the career progression of African American female superintendents is discussed. Many of these leaders face challenges in finding suitable mentors and sponsors, particularly those who share their racial and gender

identities. Informal networking is a crucial aspect of superintendent hires, and the lack of access to these networks can hinder African American female candidates.

Finally, the chapter addresses the gaps in research on this topic, emphasizing the need for more studies examining the experiences of African American female superintendents as their numbers increase and exploring their post-superintendency career paths. Overall, this literature review provides valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges faced by African American women in educational leadership roles, shedding light on the intersectionality of their experiences.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The research methodology for this study involved an exploratory case study approach with elements of phenomenology to describe the lived experiences of former African American female superintendents. The objective was to provide an in-depth description of the essence of what it means to be an African American female superintendent in North Carolina. The study described and interpreted, rather than explaining, their experiences. The data collection, analysis, and findings are a valuable resource for improving policies, procedures, and support systems for future African American female superintendents in North Carolina. In the following section, I discuss my (a) positionality statement, (b) research design, (c) research questions, (d) site selection and participants, (e) instrumentation, (f) data collection, (g) data analysis, (h) trustworthiness, and (i) limitations and delimitations.

Positionality Statement

As a white male principal who completed a qualitative study about African American female superintendents, I recognized the importance and value of exploring underrepresented perspectives within the field of educational leadership. My research sought to shed light on the experiences of African American female superintendents, a demographic group that is underrepresented in superintendent positions in North Carolina. By focusing on this specific group, I sought to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable understanding of leadership in the education system.

Through this exploratory case study, I examined the experiences of African American female superintendents, and provided a platform for them to share their unique perspectives and experiences within their roles. My intention was not to speak for or generalize the experiences of

these leaders. I simply shared their experiences. I wanted to recognize the significance of their contributions to the field of education. By sharing the experiences of these women, I sought to challenge prevailing assumptions and biases that may limit their opportunities for leadership and professional growth. It was my hope that this research would be used to improve the experiences of African American females who seek to serve in these same roles in the future.

I recognized my own identity as a white male, and I understood the potential for biases and preconceived notions. I also recognized that my race and gender may have affected what experiences were shared with me and how they were shared with me. My objective was to be open-minded, receptive, and respectful in reporting the findings. I acknowledged the intersectionality of race and gender in shaping the experiences of African American female superintendents. By engaging in this research, I fostered a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by female African American educational leaders.

Ultimately, I believe that this qualitative case study contributed to the broader body of knowledge on educational leadership and fostered a more inclusive and diverse educational system. By studying the experiences of African American female superintendents who have served in North Carolina, I aimed to advocate for equitable opportunities for leadership within the field of education.

Initially, I felt a certain apprehension as a white male purposefully interviewing a population different from my own. I was aware of the historical and social contexts that could influence how I was perceived by my participants. I aimed to listen actively and validate their experiences without imposing my own narratives. This awareness drove me to reflect deeply on my privilege and the responsibility that came with it. I was very passionate about this topic and found myself constantly discussing it with colleagues and friends prior to starting the study

Throughout the interviews, I discovered the importance of building rapport. I made it a point to share my intentions for the research and emphasized that I was there to learn from their lived experiences, not to judge or critique. I also found that being transparent about my background opened doors for more genuine dialogue. When interviewees sensed my sincerity, many expressed a willingness to share their stories, which enriched the data collection process.

Research Design

The study was qualitative and followed an exploratory case study approach. A case study entails a methodical exploration of an authentic environment. This research approach was employed to gain a deep understanding of a case in its real-world context (Yin, 2009). This exploratory case study focused on a bounded system (Creswell, 2013). For this case study, the bounded system was former female African American superintendents who served in public school systems in North Carolina.

This qualitative case study drew from both intrinsic and instrumental single case study designs. Instrumental case studies seek to understand a phenomenon through studying a case while intrinsic studies seek to describe a case, particularly one that is unique or of inherent interest (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). This study had elements of both types. My case study was instrumental because I sought to understand the issues faced by African American females serving as superintendents in North Carolina through the framework of intersectionality; however, intrinsic case studies are also intended to learn more about a case due to its uniqueness. This case had elements of intrinsic case studies due to the uniqueness of African American females serving in the role of superintendent. Specifically, I focused on how intersectionality affected their relationships with mentors and sponsors, as well as its effects on their post-retirement career opportunities.

I chose to use an embedded approach in my research design instead of a holistic approach. This allowed my study to highlight specific elements of my selected case (Yin, 2009). For this study, the embedded aspects of the case were focused on two specific aspects of being a superintendent. The first being the relationships participants had with mentors and sponsors. The second being the post-retirement career opportunities available to these African American females.

To create an in-depth case study, I collected multiple forms of data. A reliance on one form of data would not have been enough to achieve the depth of knowledge needed for a case study (Creswell, 2013). The majority of my data came from interviews with former African American female superintendents. I also collected demographic and organizational data from each participant's school district(s) to construct a more comprehensive and nuanced case study. Other forms of data included documents and artifacts related to their career as superintendent.

Research Questions

This exploratory case study was designed to collect and amplify the experiences of former African American female superintendents in North Carolina and to answer the following:

1. How do former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the impact that their race and gender had on their experiences while fulfilling their job responsibilities?
2. How do former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the impact that race and gender had on their relationship with their professional mentors, sponsors, and access to networking opportunities during their careers in education?

3. How do former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the impact that their race and gender had on the professional opportunities afforded to them after their retirement?

Site Selection and Participants

Having only former female African American superintendents from North Carolina as participants created a bounded system for this exploratory case study (Creswell, 2013). The choice to focus on superintendents from North Carolina in this study was based on several justifications. A bounded approach allowed for an in-depth examination of the unique experiences of African American female superintendents from North Carolina. North Carolina's educational system may have specific dynamics that are distinct from those in other states, which could have influenced the experiences of African American female superintendents. For example, the experiences of African American females may differ greatly between southern and northern states. By concentrating on one state, this study provided nuanced insights into the intersection of race and gender within the context of North Carolina's education system.

The participants for this exploratory case study were all former African American female superintendents who had led a public school district in North Carolina. Including former superintendents in this exploratory case study was a strategic choice for several reasons. First, former superintendents offered a unique perspective on the experiences of serving in this leadership role. Their reflective insights provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that African American female superintendents encounter throughout their careers in North Carolina. I also thought former superintendents were likely to share more freely with a researcher without the fear of retaliation from their board or their participation negatively affecting them professionally.

Former superintendents were also well-suited to shed light on the post-superintendent phase, which is an often-overlooked aspect in educational leadership research. Their descriptions of their experiences provided insights into the professional opportunities available to African American female superintendents after leaving the superintendency. This was crucial for answering my research questions and developing strategies for improving post-retirement support and opportunities. By examining the experiences of those who have successfully navigated both their leadership roles and life beyond, this study offered valuable lessons and guidance for the next generation of African American female school superintendents.

I was introduced to all participants through mutual acquaintances. These introductions served as a form of vouching for the project and helped strengthen my credibility. This helped me with gaining access to recruit participants. This was crucial as many of the study invitations I sent out on my own went unanswered.

Instrumentation

This exploratory case study examined the lived experiences of former African American superintendents through the use of one-on-one semi-structured interviews and document analysis. I utilized the same interview protocol for all individuals (Appendix A). The interview protocol included a brief review of confidentiality and listed the structured questions planned for each former African American female superintendent. Follow-up questions were asked when appropriate and when these types of questions garnered a better description of the interviewee's experiences. The structured questions used were based on a review of the literature regarding the experiences and perceptions of African American female superintendents. The interviews were designed using interview procedures inspired by the work of Creswell (2013). This included using purposeful sampling, using an interview protocol, and obtaining consent from participants.

The opening question allowed the participants to describe their career pathway leading up to their appointment as superintendent. The remainder of the interview covered three main topics: perceived effects of intersectionality, mentor relationships, and post-career opportunities. To strengthen the credibility of the interview protocol, it was reviewed by a panel of experts who have knowledge of qualitative research and educational leadership.

Data Collection

Prior to beginning data collection, I obtained permission from North Carolina State University's Institutional Review Board. Data for this exploratory case study was collected through the use of semi-structured one-on-one interviews as well as artifacts and documents. I decided to use purposeful sampling because this type of sample garners more insight into the phenomenon experienced by the superintendents in this case study (Patton, 2002). Each participant in this study was an African American female who had served as a superintendent. Employment was verified by utilizing the directory of school superintendents kept by the North Carolina School Superintendents' Association and my document analysis. Each participant must have also been employed as a superintendent in the state of North Carolina. Five interviews were conducted to properly synthesize the lived experiences of these former school leaders (Polkinghorne, 1989). Invitations were sent out by email to the five former African American female superintendents selected to participate in the study. Many of the participants were personally introduced to the researcher by mutual acquaintances who helped recruit participants and vouch for the researcher.

I started each interview with a brief explanation of why I chose this topic and how important the work was to me. I thought this was an important step to take in order to build rapport with the participant and to discuss why a white male researcher was completing this

work. Each interview followed an interview protocol; however, follow-up questions were asked when more information might be gained by asking another question. Using semi-structured interviews allowed me to delve deeper into the experiences of these African American female superintendents based on their responses or non-verbal cues given during the interview process (Mertler, 2019). This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the experiences of these individuals. Interviews were held and recorded by utilizing the online conferencing software Zoom.

Artifacts and documents highlighting the career experiences of these former African American female superintendents were another data source for this exploratory case study. Having additional data sources separate from the participant interviews provided a more in-depth case study. Documents included in my data collection were any media coverage of each superintendent's career, as well as biographical information that could shed light on leadership positions held in professional organizations and any awards or recognitions received during their career. This included media articles and press releases to analyze how they were covered by the media. I also reviewed their biographies to observe if they were chosen to serve in leadership positions for professional organizations or if they received awards related to their time as a superintendent. These documents allowed me to verify the experiences shared by my participants and gave insight into how their experiences were documented by others. These documents added context to many of the stories shared by my participants, but in order to maintain the confidentiality of my participants, a detailed analysis of these artifacts could not be included in the findings.

Data Analysis

The data analysis portion of this study began by transcribing the interviews with the former African American female superintendents. Drafts of the interview transcripts were created by making use of Zoom's transcription services. Next, I read through and cleaned up my transcriptions to ensure accuracy. During this process, I anonymized the transcripts to ensure the confidentiality of my participants and the districts in which they worked. Once the transcripts were transcribed, I then familiarized myself with my data. This process started by reading over the transcripts numerous times and taking preliminary notes on recurring themes and significant quotes in the transcripts that supported these identified themes.

I used a qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti, for efficient coding and data management. This allowed me to organize and visualize the themes that existed throughout my different interviews. Once all the interviews had been transcribed, I moved on to summarizing and analyzing the transcripts. I created a summary of each participant's interview before identifying similarities between the participants' experiences. This consisted of descriptive summaries for each participant's interview to provide an overview of their unique experiences (Miles et al., 2014). In these descriptive summaries, I paid attention to the influence they believe the intersectionality of their race and gender had on their experiences as superintendent.

Once I had a summary of each participant's interview, I moved on to coding my transcripts. My first cycle of coding was deductive coding, in which I utilized established theories, concepts, or predefined categories as a framework for directing my coding procedure (Saldaña, 2016). Examples of my predetermined codes included intersectionality, mentors, sponsors, networks, retirement, and bias. I then moved on to another layer of coding that was inductive. I utilized in vivo coding by making use of the words and expressions of my

participants to formulate codes (Saldaña, 2016). This type of inductive coding allowed for a more participant-centered analysis of the data. I then moved on to my second cycle of coding after the initial deductive and in vivo coding. This second cycle included focused coding which grouped my codes based on important themes that emerged in my first cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2016). This form of coding was more selective and more targeted. I then identified themes based on this coding and created assertions based on these themes.

Data analysis also included a thematic analysis of all documents and artifacts collected. This thematic analysis was then used to triangulate my findings from the interviews with themes identified in the artifacts. This triangulation of data added richness to my study that would not have existed with interviews alone. Triangulation also acted as a form of data verification (Saldaña, 2016). If the themes identified in the participants' interviews could be supported with documents and artifacts, then my findings were that much more trustworthy.

I utilized the theory of bracketing as a part of my data analysis plan. Bracketing is a strategy used in phenomenology to address and acknowledge the potential biases and preconceptions of the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Bracketing was very important for this study because of my race, gender, and professional experiences. As a white male who works in the field of education, it could have been possible for my analysis to be affected by my own experiences. Bracketing allowed me as a researcher to set aside my assumptions, beliefs, values, and experiences (Creswell, 2013). I was aware of my own biases and perspectives and acknowledged that these may influence the research process. By understanding this and bracketing, I aimed to prevent my subjectivity from distorting the experiences shared by the participants of my study. I always kept in mind that bracketing is not a one-time activity but an ongoing process throughout the research (Creswell, 2013). Bracketing did not mean I ignored my

experiences, but it did mean that I could not let my experiences affect how I described the study participants' experiences (Giorgi, 2009). Thus, I continually had to reflect on my own biases and made adjustments to ensure they did not unduly influence my study's findings.

I then presented my findings in a clear and organized manner, focusing on the themes and shared experiences I found while completing my thematic analysis. I used quotations and examples from the transcripts to illustrate my key points (Miles et al., 2014). I then discussed the significance of the findings, particularly regarding the effect that the intersectionality of my participants' race and gender had on their relationships with mentors and professional networks as well as describing the effect they felt the intersectionality of their race and gender had on their post-career opportunities. I then discussed how my research could inform superintendent preparation programs and support systems for aspiring superintendents.

Table 3.1

Data Sources and Approach to Analysis for Each Research Question

Research Questions	Data Sources	Data Analysis
How do former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the impact that their race and gender had on their experiences while fulfilling their job responsibilities?	Interview questions 2, 3, 4 Artifacts	Deductive coding In vivo coding Focused coding
How do former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the impact that race and gender had on their relationship with their professional mentors, sponsors, and access to networking opportunities during their careers in education	Interview questions 5, 6, 7 Artifacts	Deductive coding In vivo coding Focused coding
How do former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the impact that their race and gender had on the professional opportunities afforded to them after their retirement?	Interview questions 8, 9 Artifacts	Deductive coding In vivo coding Focused coding

Trustworthiness

Before proceeding with my interviews, I completed several modules of training within the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) to ensure that all ethical considerations were followed regarding the scope of this study. These modules taught me the methods and procedures needed to ensure the safe and ethical treatment of all the participants of my study. I also sought approval of my proposed research project from my dissertation committee and North Carolina State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before completing any of my data collection for this study.

Member checking was used to ensure the accuracy of my findings and interpretations of my findings. Member checking is the practice of sharing information such as data and analysis with the study participants and letting them determine the accuracy of the researcher's findings (Creswell, 2013.) My participants did not read through a transcript of their interview; instead, I shared with them the themes I identified in their responses. Member checking also ensured my interpretations were correct and it also ensured that I did not leave anything out that the participants wanted to be included. None of the participants identified any summaries that they wanted to be changed.

All data was kept secure and confidential. I also obtained informed consent from each of my study participants. I also ensured confidentiality for all my participants by utilizing pseudonyms and ensured that case descriptions were not specific enough to risk the identification of any of my participants. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored on North Carolina State's secure Google Drive and all files on my computer were password protected.

Finally, I utilized the practice of bracketing to ensure that my background, biases, and values did not influence my data analysis. I suspended my own ideas to focus on understanding

the views of my study participants and thus remained reflective instead of judgmental (Creswell, 2013; LeVasseur, 2003; van Manen, 1990).

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this study primarily revolved around my participants. One of the greatest constraints on my study was the low number of female African Americans who had attained the position of superintendent in North Carolina. This limited the number of participants to whom I could send out interview invitations and thus impacted the number of participants I included in my study.

I also felt as if my race and gender acted as a limitation on my study. I could not help but think that there were some experiences and thoughts that the participants in my study felt uncomfortable sharing with me because I was a white man. I imagined that I could have gotten different results following the same research design if the researcher had been an African American female. I sought to minimize this limitation by sharing with my participants why I chose this topic and why I was passionate about it.

The bounded system I created made up most of the delimitations associated with my study. I created these delimitations for my study to make it more manageable. These delimitations involved only including female African American superintendents who had served in North Carolina. I also chose to only include former superintendents in this study. This was a decision that limited my participant pool, but I think it allowed my participants to share their experiences without the fear of professional impacts. All these delimitations both narrowed the focus of my study and helped establish boundaries for my case study.

Summary

This study was an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of former African American female superintendents in North Carolina. I employed an exploratory case study methodology and sought to offer a comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by this underrepresented demographic in educational leadership. The primary goal was to describe the essence of being an African American female superintendent, focusing on their experiences with mentors and sponsors, as well as their post-career options.

The research design used elements of both an instrumental and intrinsic approach, with a specific focus on the impact of the intersectionality of race and gender on these superintendents' experiences. Through one-on-one semi-structured interviews and artifacts, the study collected data that answered three central research questions: (1) how former African American female superintendents describe the impact of their race and gender on their job responsibilities, (2) their relationships with mentors and sponsors, and (3) the influence of race and gender on professional opportunities post-retirement.

This section also identified the study’s limitations, such as the small number of African American female superintendents and potential biases due to the researcher's identity. I intended to minimize these limitations through ethical considerations, member checking, and bracketing.

In conclusion, this study shed light on the experiences of former African American female superintendents in North Carolina. It provided a platform for these leaders to share their unique perspectives. The study also sought to challenge prevailing assumptions, reduce biases, and improve support systems for future generations of African American female superintendents.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was twofold. First, this study explored and depicted the current conditions faced by African American female superintendents in North Carolina. By employing an exploratory qualitative case study methodology, this study concentrated on the collective experiences of former African American female superintendents, striving to grasp the essence of their leadership journeys. It highlighted their work environments, particularly focusing on the roles of professional mentors and networks. In doing so, the study investigated how being an African American female superintendent in North Carolina impacted the working conditions for those in this position. It also explored whom these women considered their mentors and how they described these relationships. Additionally, the study determined if they participated in formal or informal professional networks that offered them mentorship throughout their careers.

Secondly, this study investigated the career opportunities available to African American female superintendents after their retirement. Specifically, it examined whether these women believed that the opportunities presented to them post-superintendency differed from those available to their peers.

Summary of Methods

The study addressed three primary questions: the impact of race and gender on African American female former superintendents' professional experiences, their experiences with mentors and sponsors, and the influence of these factors on their professional opportunities post after leaving the position. Participants in the study were former African American female superintendents who served in North Carolina. Data collection primarily involved one-on-one

semi-structured interviews as well as documents and artifacts. The data was then thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns and themes, aiming to capture the essence of their leadership experiences and how the intersectionality of race and gender shaped their careers and post-superintendency career paths.

Participant Profiles

The study involved five participants who were purposefully selected because of their professional backgrounds. The participants for this exploratory case study were African American female superintendents who had previously led public school districts in North Carolina. Choosing former superintendents was strategic, as their reflective insights provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced during their careers. Their unique perspectives were invaluable, as they seemed to share candidly without fear of professional repercussions.

Additionally, these former superintendents discussed the often-overlooked post-superintendency phase, shedding light on the professional opportunities available to African American female superintendents after their tenure. This perspective was crucial for addressing the research questions and developing strategies to enhance post-superintendency support and opportunities. By examining the journeys of those who have successfully navigated this leadership role and life beyond, this study provided valuable lessons and guidance for the next generation of African American female school superintendents.

Participant Biographies

The following participant biographies highlight the diverse career trajectories and leadership journeys of the five African American female superintendents who participated in this study. Each superintendent has demonstrated commitment and achievement in the field,

navigating various roles from classroom teaching to district-level administration. Their paths reflected a blend of instructional expertise and administrative experiences. These brief biographies illustrate their professional evolution, focusing on pivotal experiences and leadership transitions leading up to their appointment to superintendent.

Dr. Alex Johnson

Dr. Johnson had over 30 years of experience working in the field of education. She taught for five years in various schools and districts, taking on additional leadership roles such as team leader, family engagement coordinator, and lead trainer. Encouraged by supervisors, she transitioned into administration where she learned from a seasoned principal and participated in an intensive training program while working as an assistant principal.

After successfully serving as a principal and earning a doctorate, Dr. Johnson briefly left her role to focus on her doctorate full-time, working as a graduate research assistant and adjunct professor. She then returned to the district, taking on a central office position as a supervisor and later director of instruction. This role focused on addressing disparities in access to rigorous programs.

Dr. Johnson later became an executive director in a neighboring district, successfully improving student outcomes. She then moved to a different state to serve as a chief academic officer, where she again significantly improved student achievement. Eventually, she applied for and was selected as a superintendent in North Carolina, drawn to the district's strong focus on equity.

Dr. Brandi Morgan

Dr. Morgan’s career in education began as a classroom teacher in special education working in a different state. Later, she moved to another state, where she joined a cooperative for

special education teachers, which provided extensive professional development opportunities. Dr. Morgan was then asked to take on a teacher-leader role. In this position, she conducted educational assessments and created learning plans for students, including those not in special education. She also held a quasi-administrative role, focusing on early childhood programs.

After approximately seven and a half years of teaching, Dr. Morgan pursued a doctoral degree full-time. During this period, she interned and worked at the state's department of education. Post-graduation, she briefly worked at the post-secondary level before returning to public education in North Carolina. During these years she held various administrative roles across numerous districts. This included district leadership roles in special education and student services.

Dr. Morgan's first superintendent position was in central North Carolina. She focused on transforming the district, improving teamwork among staff and board members, and enhancing district processes and materials. After serving as superintendent in this district for over five years, she took a different position to be closer to family. In this new role, she served as an associate superintendent. She later served as deputy superintendent and superintendent in two different states.

Dr. Casey Reid

Dr. Reid's career in education began as an elementary teacher in eastern North Carolina. After four years of teaching, she transitioned to the role of Instructional Specialist, where she coached teachers. This role was followed by an administrative position as assistant principal at a high school. The district then named Dr. Reid as principal at a low-performing elementary school. She helped lead the school to double-digit gains in the first year.

Seeking new challenges, she then transitioned to a different district in North Carolina. In this district, she served as a principal for one year and was then selected for a district-level leadership position. Success in this role led to a state-level position in North Carolina. Dr. Reid was then appointed superintendent for a district in which she had previously worked and served in this role for less than five years.

Dr. Denise Blake

Dr. Blake began her career as a teacher, dedicating almost a decade to teaching before transitioning to administrative roles. Dr. Blake first served as a summer school principal for a few years without prior administrative experience, then moved into an assistant principal position. She served as an assistant principal at three different schools before moving to a district-level position working in Human Resources. Next, Dr. Blake returned to a high school as an assistant principal at the request of a superintendent who needed help addressing specific issues.

Dr. Blake was then recruited to North Carolina to become a high school principal, where she served for almost five years. She then served as an executive director at the district level for four years before being named to her first superintendency. During her time as a superintendent, she led two different districts in North Carolina.

Dr. Evelyn Harper

Dr. Harper began her career as an elementary teacher in eastern North Carolina. After teaching for seven years, her principal encouraged her to pursue a master's in educational administration and supervision. Dr. Harper faced early challenges in her first role as assistant principal at a middle school, swiftly becoming interim principal due to administrative issues after only three months. She then returned to her first district where she served as both assistant

principal and principal. This included over five years as a principal. Dr. Harper then moved to the district level and held different positions in Human Resources and was later named assistant superintendent. She was then hired to serve as superintendent of a different district in North Carolina where she served for less than three years.

Findings

The findings of this study are organized by the three research questions that guided the study. Each section addresses one of the research questions and the themes that emerged from the participants' responses. The themes reflect patterns and insights that were consistently identified across multiple interviews. This thematic analysis allowed for an in-depth exploration of the data, highlighting the experiences and views of the study's participants.

In presenting the findings, each research question section begins with an overview of the themes that were identified. These themes are then elaborated upon by using direct quotes and examples from the participants' interviews to emphasize the key points. Following the detailed exploration of each theme, a summary is provided to highlight the main insights related to each research question.

Research Question 1

The first research question of the study sought to answer, "How do former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the impact that their race and gender had on their experiences while fulfilling their job responsibilities?" From this question, I hoped to learn if participants thought gender or race played a larger role in their experiences while serving in the role of superintendent. I also wanted to learn if the intersectionality of their race and gender created experiences that were specific only to African American females.

The theme of the intersectionality of race and gender emerged from the participants' interviews. Another theme discussed by a majority of the study participants was having to navigate bias within professional spaces. Multiple study participants also shared that their race and gender led them to strategically pick their battles. A final theme that emerged was the feeling of being disrespected and devalued despite being qualified for the position of superintendent.

Intersectionality of Race and Gender

The interviews with African American female superintendents revealed that my participants perceived a connection between their race and gender that uniquely shaped their professional experiences. Participants recognized that the intersectionality of being both an African American and a woman created distinct challenges that differ from those faced by African American men or women of other races.

Dr. Alex Johnson highlighted the difficulties arising from her intersecting identities. She described a "pecking order" where Black women were positioned at the bottom, stating, "the only group lower than Black women are Black queer women." This underscored the pervasive hierarchy that marginalizes African American women. Dr. Johnson also noted that while she could relate to the experiences of Black men regarding race and to white women regarding gender, the intersection of these identities placed her in a unique and more challenging position. She shared that "in that space of intersectionality, that's where the difference comes." Dr. Brandi Morgan's experiences further illustrated this intersectionality. She observed that as a Black female leader, she encountered different treatment than her peers. She noted that while a Black male colleague also faced racial challenges, the combination of race and gender uniquely impacted her experience, emphasizing the dual label she carried. "You don't go into the superintendency as a Black woman, not knowing what you are going to…You don't expect

anything different when that's my experience my entire life.” Dr. Johnson’s thoughts emphasized her views that African American females are treated differently in the superintendency just as they are treated differently in all aspects of their lives.

Dr. Evelyn Harper underscored the disadvantage she felt being an African American female, stating that they are "at the bottom of the totem pole." She described how the combination of being a female and African American made it "ten times harder" to be successful in the superintendency. She did not give specific examples of this increased difficulty, but elaborated on the challenges she faced due to race and gender. She described her experience with disagreeing with a school board, “We're good until that minute we go against what somebody else wants us to do.” This indicates her opinion that the intersection of these identities compounded the challenges she encountered.

Dr. Casey Reid offered a different perspective, indicating that gender-based skepticism was prevalent regardless of the racial composition of the board with which she worked. She remarked that questions about a woman's ability to do the job persisted even when the board was predominantly African American. She reflected that the board, “Really thought that I wouldn't hold people accountable.” According to Dr. Reid they did not think a female could be responsible for district level accountability. Thus, she suggested that gender bias was a more significant factor in her professional challenges than racial bias.

Other study participants also shared the view that gender had a larger effect on their professional experiences. Dr. Denise Blake used a strategy of applying to districts with high minority populations, leveraging her familiarity and connection with these communities. However, she acknowledged that gender posed more significant obstacles than race in her professional journey. She stated, “I will say being a female created more challenges than my

race," highlighting how gender played a more critical role in the difficulties she faced. One specific example she shared was a male board member who tried to get her to fire a staff member so his wife could get a position. He thought he could tell a female superintendent what to do. Dr. Blake went against this board member's request but felt like it hampered her ability to get the board member on board for future motions. It is important to understand that her experiences could be because Dr. Blake only applied to districts with high minority populations.

The intersectionality of race and gender for African American female superintendents results in unique challenges. While they share commonalities with African American men in terms of racial experiences and with women of other races regarding gender issues, the intersection of these identities places them at a distinct disadvantage, requiring them to navigate professional spaces with strategic resilience. Many participants felt like this intersectionality placed them at the bottom of the professional ladder. However, some of the participants did respond that gender bias played a larger role in their professional experiences as compared to racial bias.

Navigating Professional Spaces with Bias

The African American female superintendents in this study revealed that they had to deal with bias while navigating traditional professional spaces. These biases stem from both their race and gender. This bias significantly shaped their professional experiences and interactions, specifically with board members and other school leaders.

Dr. Alex Johnson highlighted the difficulties she encountered in professional settings due to her race and gender by providing examples of being dismissed, disrespected, or ignored by colleagues and community members. These experiences were often attributed to her identity as a Black woman. Dr. Johnson stated, "You see a pattern. Who is called on first, or who gets to

speak, and you have to fight your way into a conversation." This illustrates the ongoing struggle she felt to be heard and respected in professional settings.

Dr. Brandi Morgan discussed how she was treated differently compared to other leaders due to her race and gender. She mentioned the discomfort and bias she faced, including being viewed as a "rock star" simply for being the first African American superintendent in her district. This was a label she initially disliked. She would have rather been judged by her actions. Dr. Morgan added, "Until there are enough of us and there's full acceptance, I don't know if I'm impacted so much by gender or race or that's just the way it is." This reflects the ongoing struggle for acceptance and representation. The rock star imagery will likely linger as long as African American females are underrepresented.

Dr. Casey Reid observed exclusionary practices and the existence of a "good old boys' club" in the larger superintendent networks. She described this club, "Some people kind of know and they're kind of like preparing themselves for the next thing in these roles. And they have now these ten other people that know how to get you there. And I'm definitely not in that club." However, she did share that she did not experience a lot of racial bias in her home district. She shared that, "being an African American female working in a predominantly African American district, that did kind of help to …. calm some of the questions and concerns about what would be happening because they felt like I was from the community." However, when she left her district, she did notice a difference. She shared that when "leaving out of my district and going to the superintendent meetings with bigger districts and stuff, I would notice …different fields of maybe collegiality with certain superintendents that were kind of cliquish." Although this was not something she felt affected her day-to-day life in her district, it did leave an impression on her when having to network with other superintendents. She mentioned that African American

female superintendents are underrepresented in many of the larger districts, indicating systemic barriers. This underrepresentation contributed to her experiences of exclusion in professional spaces such as superintendent meetings and other networking opportunities.

Additionally, Dr. Reid shared an experience where she defended a female district supervisor who many leaders thought should be replaced because she was leading a male-dominated department. Although not directly related to the superintendency, this situation required her to advocate for the inclusion and recognition of women in other roles traditionally dominated by men.

Dr. Denise Blake mentioned a board member who had a dismissive attitude toward women, creating difficulties for her, particularly in gaining support for new initiatives. She recalled an incident where the male board member wanted a coach fired so his wife could become the new coach. Dr. Blake thought this reflected a belief that male board members should be able to dictate actions to a female superintendent. This exemplifies how gender bias undermined her authority and decision-making.

Dr. Evelyn Harper felt that, because she was a female, there were expectations for her to be constantly monitored or controlled. She shared a story about the board's decision to purchase a car specifically for her to travel with them. Board members would drive and she would be chauffeured around. She felt this was unnecessary and a reflection of their desire to keep her under their watch. She did not think this was done for any of her male predecessors.

Strategic Battle Picking

Many of the participants in the study expressed the idea of having to decide when to fight and when to let things go. These leaders illustrate how making thoughtful decisions about when to engage in conflicts can help maintain focus on their broader goals and responsibilities.

Dr. Johnson shared her approach to navigating spaces often dominated by white men, emphasizing her confidence and sense of belonging. She acknowledged the need to not let these dynamics influence her, asserting her right to be in these spaces. She often felt dismissed in these meetings but realized she could only focus on her behavior. Dr. Johnson shared, “You got to pick your battles. Am I going to fight through this one, or do I just say, later for you guys, and you know, can't wait until the meeting is over and get myself out of there. So it does add an added layer to the work, but it adds an added layer to our lives." She highlighted the importance of choosing battles wisely, weighing whether to confront an issue or to move past it, noting that these experiences add complexity to her work not felt by superintendents who are not African American females.

Dr. Brandi Morgan shared a scenario in which a former superintendent was supposed to stay on to provide guidance. She thought this situation was created because she was replacing a white male. Choosing to act graciously, she opted to celebrate his retirement even though his assistance was neither needed nor wanted. She explained this decision, "I'm very gracious. And I said to the staff, ‘Okay, he's retired and we need to do something to celebrate his retirement.’" Her approach highlights her focus on positive outcomes and maintaining a positive working environment, rather than allowing personal feelings or disagreements to dictate her actions.

Dr. Morgan shared another incident in which she decided to engage in a professional battle and disagreed with someone. This incident occurred before she became a superintendent. There was a state panel being held to discuss curriculum. Her superior at the time asked her to go because they did not have any superintendents of color at that moment and he thought they needed a person of color to talk on this issue. She shared, “I thought about it for a while and I said, ‘You know, I refuse to go. I cannot be the prop for a state that has no minority leadership

and don't see it as important that they do.'" Dr. Morgan viewed this as an opportunity in which she had to speak up and express her thoughts on an important issue.

Dr. Casey Reid did not notice a lot of issues in her district but did when networking with superintendents in other districts. She shared, "That was kind of some of the things that I saw. But nothing that directly impacted me as a superintendent because my work was with my district and I was very at home in my home district." So even though she observed challenges in broader professional networks, she remained focused on her work within her district. This focus implied a strategic choice to prioritize her district responsibilities and effectiveness over engaging in broader, potentially contentious professional dynamics outside of her district. Likewise, Dr. Harper expressed her discontent with the board's decision about the car but ultimately complied. She made a strategic choice to avoid a potentially larger conflict. This highlighted her desire to pick battles that were more critical to her role and the well-being of the students.

Experiences of Disrespect and Devaluation

Another theme that was evident in many of the participants' experiences was the feeling of being disrespected or devalued because of their race and gender. This feeling was prevalent even though each of these women had impeccable educational and professional backgrounds and had climbed to the highest position in their school district.

Dr. Johnson shared how her gender and race always impacted her experiences in both her professional and personal life. She remembered, "There were times when, you know, clearly I was dismissed. What I said or thought was devalued in light of my track record. I have a proven track record. Proven. I know how to communicate. I know how to work with people. I have people skills." In her experiences, many times it did not matter what she could add to a

discussion, and it did not matter because her idea was coming from an African American woman.

Dr. Johnson also shared an experience where as a superintendent, she greeted staff in a school, and a staff member refused to respond, even after she addressed them directly by name. Dr. Johnson reflected on this incident, “I remember thinking, ‘Maybe they just didn't hear me.’ So I went behind the staff person and I said, ‘Good morning.’ I looked at the principal and I said, ‘What's this staff member's name?’ So I used the name. Still refused to speak.” Dr. Johnson felt that this behavior was in direct response to her race and gender. The African American male principal in the building also noticed, but Dr. Johnson asked him not to intervene.

Dr. Johnson shared another experience from the central office, where she encountered a white man in the lobby who dismissed her attempts to help and was rude. She explained, “Just his rudeness. And so that one I pushed in a little bit and I said, ‘You know, I am the superintendent.’ He said he didn't care who I was.” Both of these instances indicated a lack of basic respect and acknowledgment of her position.

Dr. Casey Reid reflected on her first interview for a superintendent position in which she encountered board members who questioned her capabilities. She shared, “Two of my male board members almost bluntly said, ‘I don't know if you can do this because you're a woman. We might need a man superintendent.’” They were not questioning her qualifications or professional experience; they were questioning her gender. She decided to take the opportunity to educate them, “So I pushed along those lines to help them to understand that it's not about male or female. It's about the work that's going to happen.” By focusing on the work itself rather than the gender of the leader, she aimed to shift the conversation toward what truly matters, that being the ability to effectively lead and manage.

One superintendent shared that she received more disrespect from other females than she did from the males. Dr. Harper discussed receiving disrespect from board members, but explained that “the female I think probably discriminated against me more than the males.” She never explained why she thought this was the case, but it does suggest she felt devalued by a peer who, instead of supporting her as a fellow female, contributed to her discrimination. She also shared that she got along well with the community, “I didn't have issues with people within the community. The only people that I had issues with were people that were friends of the female board member.” It appears the female board member was able to influence other community members to disrespect the superintendent.

Summary of Themes for Research Question 1

The first research question of this study aimed to explore how former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the impact of their race and gender on their professional experiences. The research sought to determine whether their experiences differed from those of other school superintendents, whether gender or race had a more significant influence, and whether their intersecting identities created unique challenges. The interviews revealed a clear theme of intersectionality, with participants consistently highlighting how the combination of race and gender shaped their experiences in ways specific to African American females. However, many of the participants placed more emphasis on the discrimination they faced due to their gender over their race.

Key themes that emerged from the participants' reflections included navigating professional spaces with inherent biases, strategically choosing when to confront issues, and a pervasive sense of disrespect and devaluation despite their qualifications. These findings underscore that while race and gender both play crucial roles, the intersection of these identities

introduces unique challenges that are not as prevalent among superintendents of other races and genders.

Research Question 2

The second research question of the study focused on the relationships with professional mentors that African American female superintendents had during their careers and the access to networking opportunities. From this question, I hoped to learn more about who the participants identified as mentors. Did they identify individuals who shared the same gender and race or did that not play a part in their mentor relationships? I also wanted to learn if their lack of representation in the field affected their access to networking opportunities both during and after their tenure as superintendent.

The analysis of the data revealed several key themes that shed light on the complexities of mentorship and networking for this demographic. These include the value they place on good mentorship, the need for diverse perspectives in mentoring, and the challenges they face in networking due to race and gender.

Value of Mentorship

Dr. Alex Johnson emphasized the importance of having experienced mentors who provided her valuable guidance throughout her career, “If you're going to mentor me, I need the best for a mentor.” She wants to be pushed and wants to learn from people who can push her. “I can learn from anyone. But generally, if you're going to mentor me or I'm going to learn from you, I need to be with the best, because even the best is not perfect. So I'm still going to learn some things not to do. But don't give me the worst.” Based on her experiences, having a mentor, just to say you have a mentor is not accomplishing anything. She needed individuals who could

truly help her professionally. She identified both sitting and former superintendents as her greatest mentors.

Dr. Brandi Morgan reflected on the crucial role that mentors played in offering her guidance, support, and advice during her time as superintendent. “I was very fortunate to have had some incredible mentors throughout my career who guided me, supported me, and provided me with invaluable advice.” She stated that, “My mentors helped me navigate various challenges and made significant impacts on my professional development.” Dr. Morgan’s experiences underline the fact that mentorship can significantly influence personal and professional growth. She also believed that the support received from mentors not only helped in overcoming challenges but also played a pivotal role in shaping her career trajectory.

According to Dr. Casey Reid, mentorship was a pivotal factor in her professional journey and provided her with the guidance and wisdom needed to navigate her career in education. One superintendent, for whom Dr. Reid worked, was one of her mentors, “I followed her from one district to another and just absorbed all the ways to move in the field of education so that you can be successful, take the right opportunities.” Because she followed her mentor from one district to another, Dr. Reid implied that the mentor's influence was significant enough to warrant such a move. Dr. Reid also felt like her mentors offered crucial insights into navigating the complex world of the superintendency. “They can kind of tell you how to be savvy about the environment that you're in or, you know, who you can expect some support from.” Here she illustrated how mentors not only guided her career growth, but also helped in understanding and maneuvering through the intricate dynamics of the superintendent role.

Other superintendents in the study pointed to professional mentors who were not in the role of superintendent. Dr. Denise Blake discussed a mentor who was a classroom teacher she

had in high school. “I had the most phenomenal mentor…was actually a CTE teacher when I was in high school… I wanted to be just like her. And so I ended up going to the same university she went to, majoring in the same thing, pledging the same sorority.” Dr. Blake’s mentor’s influence clearly shaped not only her educational and career choices, but also her personal aspirations and values.

Need for Diverse Perspectives in Mentorship

Another theme that developed throughout talking with the study participants was the importance of having mentors from various backgrounds to gain a comprehensive perspective. This means the African American female superintendents did not necessarily want to be matched up with, nor did they specifically seek out mentors with the same race and gender.

Having the best mentor was very important for Dr. Johnson. She expressed this over and over. “So even if I were a white woman, I would welcome a mentor who is a Black male, so for me, the criteria is ‘Were you successful?’ I think the broader it is only serves you well." In Dr. Johnson’s effort to find the best, most successful mentors, she also opened up her options to anyone who was successful. It did not have to be an African American female superintendent. In fact, she felt that having diverse mentors created a richer learning experience.

Dr. Johnson did share that she was able to glean different insights and perspectives from this broader spectrum of mentors. She described her mentor relationship with an African American male, “He had walked a mile in the moccasins I just came out of. And, you know, we connected on a race level, not as men and not based on gender, but based on race. And he was very supportive.” In this case she could connect and learn from her mentor’s experiences primarily based on their shared experiences of being African American superintendents. However, she was very open to mentors from any background. “I think you do yourself a

disservice that it has to be a woman and a Black woman only. I need the perspective of a woman. And of Black women. Of men. Of white men. Of Black men. Yes. Absolutely. And if I could have found a mentor from a, you know, from a Latinx standpoint, I would have welcomed that too." Dr. Johnson's approach to mentorship highlighted the importance of diverse perspectives, acknowledging that valuable lessons can be learned from individuals of varying backgrounds. Her openness to different viewpoints underscored her belief that mentorship transcends race and gender, enriching her professional journey and broadening her understanding.

The need for, and the benefits of having, a diverse pool of mentors was reflected in other study participants as well. Dr. Morgan's views mirrored those of Dr. Johnson, "It was beneficial to have mentors from different backgrounds who offered a range of perspectives and experiences. This diversity helped me approach problems from various angles." Dr. Morgan's words exemplify her belief that drawing on mentors' varied perspectives and experiences helped her develop more innovative and effective solutions to challenges. She reiterated these views, "Having mentors of different races and genders was particularly important. They provided insights and advice that I might not have received from someone with a similar background." Thus, Dr. Morgan was able to approach challenges from various perspectives because of the diversity of her mentor pool.

Dr. Reid only shared female mentors when asked to identify her greatest professional mentors. After discussing two African American females who greatly influenced her as mentors she did express the benefits of mentors from other races. "Now, I would also say at the same tone, I've had some non-African American females. She was very supportive because she had been in that assistant superintendent role, had a lot of contacts, and really showed me how to make some connections to other people to make sure our needs were met in my district." The

mentor relationship she cultivated with a female from a different race helped her build relationships with groups of people she may not have previously been able to. While she did gravitate towards female mentors, Dr. Reid found it beneficial to work with females from different racial backgrounds.

Other participants also shared that the majority of their mentors were African Americans. Dr. Blake explained that most of her mentors were African Americans due to the natural development of relationships and support from experienced superintendents, "They just happened organically through conversations. Because the ones who served as superintendents just kind of embraced me as a young superintendent, and it just blossomed from there." She did not seek out African American mentors, but these relationships did seem to develop more often than relationships with other races. However, just like the other participants she did find value in having mentors with a diverse background. She highlighted the benefits of having a diverse mentor pool by reflecting on the unique contributions of one male mentor from a different race. “The one that I would say stood out as being different was an Italian male. And for me, he helped me with the micro-political piece because we served a school that had the haves and the have-nots in the city. And so he helped me maneuver the haves." Her other mentors, who were all African American, including two women and one man, provided support and guidance within a shared cultural context. In contrast, the perspective and experience of this Italian male were invaluable in maneuvering through the complexities of a different environment in which she found herself working.

One participant did not express that diversity of gender or race played a significant role in her choice of mentors. When asked if race and gender influenced her choice of mentors Dr. Harper responded, "I don't think that had any effect at all. The biggest thing for me was trying to

find people that had been in the position." Dr. Harper's statements indicate that she prioritized the professional experience and positions of her mentors over their race and gender. However, she did express her desire to learn from superintendents who had diverse professional experiences. She added that she liked "talking to people that ended up not being in the position anymore or moving to another county." She sought a diverse pool of mentors, but not in the traditional sense. Her statements indicate that she prioritized these diverse professional experiences and positions of her mentors over their race and gender. By valuing the practical wisdom and career trajectories of her mentors, Dr. Harper sought a form of diversity that transcended racial and gender lines.

Access to Professional Networking

Study participants discussed different viewpoints and experiences when addressing their access to professional networking opportunities. The findings show that these areas did have an impact on networking for African American female superintendents in this study.

Dr. Johnson observed that while her race and gender did not completely restrict her access to professional networks, they did influence the dynamics within these networks. She shared her experiences, "Not access to [networks]. But I will say that the dynamics in some of these groups are interesting in terms of how white males are treated. And what they have access to and what they're given even more opportunity to." She did not feel entirely excluded from professional networks due to her race and gender, but she did observe different treatment and access levels within those networks. Dr. Johnson also emphasized that she needed to create her own networking opportunities, "My networks largely came from my body of work. People knew, not only my body of work, but who I am as a person. And so that's also important, right?" Dr.

Johnson's professional network was primarily built on her work and character rather than formal or informal network affiliations.

Dr. Johnson also shared that she thinks there should be an emphasis on African Americans helping each other professionally. She shared that African Americans could help themselves when it comes to networking. She discussed a difference she found between two different races, "I would say to the Black race, I would say we need to do a better job of helping each other. So I think white people do a really good job of that, and that's great. I'm not mad at them for that." This was important to her, but networks needed to make sure they help qualified people advance professionally. However, it is her experience that this was not always the case in these situations. Dr. Johnson stated, "I have no problem with that [networking] at all…when the person really has the right skill set… If you have the chops and the skill set… you should be the best person for the job. And I know that's always not the case."

Other study participants described the effect that race and gender had on their networking opportunities as more subtle. Dr. Reid reflected on the challenges she faced, noting that her race and gender might have limited her awareness of certain opportunities, "I don't know if it had an impact on it. I would say that oftentimes I felt like there were other opportunities out there that I might not have known a lot about because of my race, possibly. And for being a female, too." Not only did she describe feeling like she was not aware of certain opportunities, but she also described the feeling of seeing less qualified candidates receiving positions due to race and gender. Dr. Reid discussed this informal network, "Like I said, sometimes that good old boys club, you can see the trajectory of somebody going from here to here to here and be like, 'I know they only got there because they knew these people.'" In her mind, it was obvious that some people advanced because of their connections. Despite this, she made the most of the training,

professional learning opportunities, and networking available. She specifically mentioned organizations such as the North Carolina State Superintendents' Association as having a tremendous impact on her professional career. However, Dr. Reid shared, "Even in those meetings, you can tell sometimes there's some connections here that are behind the scenes." Dr. Reid's experiences highlight the pervasive influence of race and gender on professional networking and advancement, but she did reflect more on the effects of gender.

The "good old boy network" came up in another participant's observations. Dr. Blake noted, "I think yeah, I think there is a good old boy system in the superintendent realm." This echoes thoughts shared by Dr. Reid; however, Dr. Blake's reflections did not encompass all men in this club. She specifically referenced race as well, "Because there's a larger contingency of white men who are superintendents. And sometimes they got the recognitions that we didn't think they deserved, but it just kind of felt like it was that group. It was that clique. It was that little network." According to Dr. Blake, not only did she see white men getting professional opportunities based on gender and race, but she also saw them earning recognitions that other superintendents did not think they deserved. Dr. Blake has noticed that this informal good old boys club has been lessening in influence. She described the decrease in impact, "But now I think a lot of them are starting to fall off. And when I say fall off, I just mean deciding to retire and move on to do something else." Dr. Blake describes the diminishing power of this network as the members step away from the superintendency. Dr. Blake's observations emphasize the challenges faced by individuals who are not part of the dominant group within the superintendent profession, highlighting issues related to recognition and networking opportunities.

Not all of the findings of this study aligned with these views on networking. Two of the study participants did not detect any effect that gender or race played on their access to

networking opportunities. Dr. Morgan described her experiences accessing professional networks, “I don't think my race and gender affected access per se. I believe in my profession, I was pretty well received and respected for my knowledge and skills and especially curriculum knowledge.” Dr. Morgan emphasized that she felt her professional competence was the primary factor in gaining access to networks, suggesting that her expertise often outweighed potential biases. This highlighted how individual skills and knowledge can mitigate the impact of race and gender in professional settings, though it does not negate the existence of systemic barriers.

Dr. Harper also expressed that she felt little impact on her access to networks due to her gender and race, “I do not think that [gender and race] affected anything at all for me, because a lot of the people that came in during my time were Caucasian males, and we had great relationships, as well as Caucasian females.” Dr. Harper’s experiences differed from other participants due to the relationships she cultivated with other superintendents who entered the position at the same time. She described her experiences with this group, “There was a cohort of us that all came in at the same time. And so I was able to talk to them, especially those that were in small counties like I was.” Dr. Harper’s reflections suggested that professional camaraderie and shared experiences within her cohort transcended racial and gender differences, fostering effective networking and support.

Summary of Themes for Research Question 2

The themes that arose with this research question underscored the complex nature of mentorship and networking for African American female superintendents in North Carolina. The participants highlighted the importance of mentorship and emphasized the importance of diverse perspectives in their mentor relationships. While some preferred mentors who shared their race and gender, others valued the insights and guidance from a broader spectrum of mentors. The

findings also revealed that race and gender subtly, yet significantly, influenced access to professional networking opportunities for many of the participants. Some participants noted disparities in treatment and access within networks, often observing the impact of the "good old boys club," while others felt their professional competence mitigated these biases. A few participants did not experience any effects on their access to professional networks in their career.

Research Question 3

The third and final research question of the study sought to identify if the study participants felt like their post-superintendent career options were impacted by their race and gender. From this question, I hoped to learn more about the perceptions of African American female superintendents regarding the influence of their race and gender on their career opportunities following their tenure as superintendents.

The findings for this question are mixed, with a few participants expressing they saw a direct correlation to their race and gender, and the career opportunities afforded to them after stepping away from the superintendency. Other participants denied seeing any impact due to race or gender.

Effects of Gender and Race on Post-Superintendent Career Options

Dr. Johnson shared that she knows she is getting some professional opportunities after leaving the superintendent position because of her race, “I also know that some of the outreach I've received is because they are looking out for me as a Black woman, as a Black person, so these are Black people, men and women who are looking out for me in that regard.” Dr. Johnson feels that in addition to her qualifications and achievements, her race and gender have prompted specific forms of support from individuals who are Black and who recognize the value of

providing opportunities to underrepresented professionals. This support can be crucial in navigating a predominantly white and male-dominated field. Because of her professional accomplishments, Dr. Johnson is also receiving offers from white people as well, “There are white men and women who are looking out for me. From this, what's equal across the board is the body of work and who I am as a leader.” She feels that many opportunities are coming from individuals from different racial backgrounds because she has been successful.

What is different in Dr. Johnson’s experience is the support she feels she would receive had she not been successful as a superintendent, “If you remove the body of work, I don't think there would be white men and women trying to support me. I do think there would be Black men and women.” Here she suggested that support from Black colleagues might be more closely linked to shared identity rather than professional metrics. Dr. Johnson acknowledged that Black professionals would likely offer support regardless of her achievements, highlighting a sense of solidarity and mutual assistance within the Black community.

Dr. Reid also experienced opportunities following her time as superintendent that she felt were impacted by her race and gender. She primarily focused on the impact of race, “I definitely do think it had an impact, and I think more because of my specializing in small rural areas that were low performing and seeing that growth in those areas…especially if it's a large African American or minority community. They're more apt to want me to come.” She has observed that her race gives her an advantage in districts when they are looking for candidates to match their demographics. However, she does admit that these are positions that are harder to fill, “It's especially in other rural areas where they struggle to find somebody that has a connection with their community.” Overall, Dr. Reid reflected on a few instances in which her race aided in her ability to attain another position.

Another study participant believed that her race and gender caused her to not be considered for a position. Despite having a suitable opportunity in her hometown, Dr. Harper was informed that the selection committee favored candidates without prior superintendent experience, which she interpreted as a result of her race and gender. When asked if she thought race and gender were impacting all of her career opportunities since stepping away from her superintendent position, “Oh absolutely. Absolutely I do. I believe they are.” She did not share any specific examples other than the superintendent position in her hometown that she did not receive, but she personally feels that race and gender have had an impact.

One study participant wholeheartedly denied that race and gender has had any impact on the professional opportunities afforded to her since leaving her superintendent position. When asked if her post-superintendent career options were impacted by her race or gender, Dr. Blake simply replied, “No, nope.” It should be noted that Dr. Blake served as superintendent in two districts and since stepping away from that role she has served as a deputy superintendent in an even larger district. She reflected on her experiences, “I was only a superintendent for a few years, and those were recent years. I'm sure 20 years ago it was very different for people. But I think it's just kind of opened up. It's more inclusive and more accepting of anybody who sits in that seat. And I hope it continues to be that way.” Dr. Blake’s reflections indicated that she did not believe her race or gender affected her career options after leaving the superintendent role.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from my qualitative case study exploring the experiences of African American female superintendents in North Carolina. The chapter was organized around the three primary research questions: the impact of race and gender on professional experiences, relationships with mentors and sponsors, and the influence of these

factors on professional opportunities post-retirement. Data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with five former superintendents as well as documents and artifacts. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and insights. The participants' reflections provided a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities they encountered throughout their careers, including the significant role of professional mentors and networks.

The findings were detailed in sections corresponding to each of the three research questions, with an emphasis on key themes drawn from the participants' responses. Each section began with an overview of the themes and was followed by quotes and examples from the interviews, which illustrated the participants' perspectives and experiences.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion of the study's findings in the context of existing literature and the theoretical framework of intersectionality. The chapter begins by restating the purpose of the study and presenting a summary of the key findings. In the discussion of findings, the study's results are examined in relation to previous research, highlighting areas of alignment and divergence. Novel findings in the field are also identified and potential explanations are provided. The chapter also includes a reflection on the use of intersectionality as the guiding framework of the study. Additionally, the limitations of the study are reviewed, acknowledging factors that may have influenced the findings. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications of the study for policy and practice, particularly in supporting African American female superintendents, and offers recommendations for future research to further explore and address the challenges highlighted in this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was twofold. First, it aimed to explore the experiences of African American female superintendents in North Carolina, particularly focusing on those who are no longer serving in the role. By employing an exploratory qualitative case study approach, this study sought to capture and describe the shared experiences of these leaders, highlighting the essence of their leadership roles (Creswell, 2013). Special attention was given to their working conditions, emphasizing the influence of professional mentors and networks. This study also examined whether the limited number of African American female superintendents in North Carolina impacted their professional environments. It sought to understand how these women identified and described their relationships with mentors and assessed their involvement

in both formal and informal professional networks that may have provided support during their careers.

Second, the study investigated the career opportunities available to African American female superintendents after they left their position. Specifically, it explored whether these women perceived that the post-superintendent career opportunities available to them differed from those available to their peers who have also served as superintendents.

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1

The study's first research question aimed to explore, "How do former African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the influence of their race and gender on their experiences while carrying out their job responsibilities?" Through this question, I intended to discover whether they believed that race or gender had a more significant impact on their experiences in the role. Additionally, I sought to understand if the intersection of their race and gender led to unique experiences specific to African American females.

The study revealed a strong theme of intersectionality, with participants frequently discussing how the combination of their race and gender uniquely influenced their experiences as African American females. However, some participants emphasized that the discrimination they encountered was more often related to their gender than their race. Key themes that emerged from their reflections included the challenge of navigating professional environments with biases, the strategic decision-making required to perform their job successfully, and a persistent feeling of disrespect and devaluation despite their qualifications. These findings highlighted that while both race and gender are significant factors, the intersection of these identities created distinct challenges not commonly faced by superintendents of other races and genders.

Research Question 2

The second research question of the study explored the professional mentor relationships that these African American female superintendents had throughout their careers and their access to networking opportunities. Through this question, I aimed to gain insight into whom the participants identified as mentors and whether these mentors shared the same gender and race. I also wanted to identify if those factors were relevant in their mentoring relationships. Additionally, I sought to understand if their underrepresentation in the field impacted their access to networking opportunities, both during their time as superintendents and afterward.

The findings related to this research question highlighted the dynamics of mentorship and networking for these African American female superintendents in North Carolina. Participants emphasized the critical role of mentorship and the value of diverse perspectives in their mentoring relationships. While some preferred mentors who shared their race and gender, others appreciated the guidance from a more diverse range of mentors. The findings also indicated that race and gender impacted access to professional networking opportunities for many participants. Some noted disparities in treatment and access within networks, often attributing this to the influence of the "good old boys club." Others believed that their professional competence helped them overcome these biases. A few participants reported that their access to professional networks was unaffected by their race or gender throughout their careers.

Research Question 3

The final research question of the study aimed to determine whether the participants believed that their race and gender affected their post-superintendent career options. Through this question, I sought to gain insights into how African American female superintendents

perceived the impact of their race and gender on the career opportunities available to them after their tenure as superintendents ended.

The findings for this question were varied, with some participants noting a direct connection between their race and gender and the career opportunities available to them after leaving the superintendency. In contrast, other participants did not perceive any influence of race or gender on their post-superintendent career opportunities and placed more emphasis on the success they achieved while serving in their role.

Discussion of Findings

In this section I detail the findings for each of my three research questions to explore how they align with or differ from previous research and literature on African American female superintendents. I also present new insights based on my study's data. The section is structured around the answers to each of my three research questions.

Research Question 1

The study found that African American female superintendents often experienced discrimination more due to their gender than their race, with the intersection of these identities creating unique challenges in professional environments. Despite their qualifications, they frequently faced disrespect, devaluation, and the need for strategic decision-making to succeed in their roles.

Gender and Race Discrimination

My findings found that participants felt discrimination was more often related to gender than race. This differed from previous case studies that indicated that African American females felt race was a bigger obstacle to their career advancement than gender (Allen et al., 1995). What I found interesting is that my findings aligned more with a study that focused on older

generations of African American females. This older generation believed that sexism was the more significant barrier in the workplace (Allen & Hughes, 2017). My findings suggest a shift in perspective among African American females, with current participants perceiving gender as a more significant factor in discrimination than race. This shift may indicate changing dynamics in how African American females experience and interpret the challenges of their professional environments over time.

One finding that did align with previous studies was the idea of intersectionality's effect on African American female superintendents. In past research, African American females frequently referred to the combination of their race and gender as a double disadvantage against them (Angel et al., 2013; Enomoto et al., 2000). One participant in my study described their experiences as being at the "bottom of the totem pole." Another participant in my study explained that African American females are positioned at the bottom of the pecking order, with only a Black queer women being further down the list. My results underscore the persistent and pervasive impact of intersectionality on African American female superintendents, reinforcing the notion that the combination of race and gender continues to create unique barriers in the professional lives of African American female superintendents. Despite progress in some areas, the deeply ingrained challenges they face remain a significant obstacle to achieving equity in the role of superintendent.

This "double whammy" stems from the overlapping biases associated with both their race and gender, positioning African American females at the bottom of the social and professional hierarchy. These barriers likely result from the deep-rooted societal stereotypes and structural inequalities that continue to persist, even as progress is made in other areas. The fact that African American female superintendents in North Carolina still experience these challenges suggests

that efforts toward achieving true equity in leadership roles must address not just one aspect of identity, but the interplay of both marginalized identities.

Disrespect and Devaluation

Earlier studies have suggested that African American female superintendents often feel they are not afforded the same level of respect as their peers in similar professional roles (Bush, 2016). The findings from my study align with past research, in which participants felt as if they were not taken seriously by men they work with in the field of educational leadership. Previous study participants reported having to explain simple decisions, being laughed at when they showed up to mentor a male superintendent, and having their ability to handle a $500,000,000 budget questioned by men (Bush, 2016; Gewertz, 2006). Participants in my study shared similar experiences. One participant was forced to be chauffeured around by board members instead of driving herself. Another participant reported her board continually questioning whether a woman could fulfill the duties of the position, even when the majority of board members were African Americans. Another of my study participants shared that male board members felt like they should be able to dictate her decisions. Finally, one participant reported being told during an interview that a woman could probably not handle the job and they should hire a man to fill the role. These are all experiences that my participants felt they would not have had to endure if they had not been African American females.

The experiences reported by my study participants mirror those from previous research, highlighting a persistent issue of disrespect towards African American female superintendents. Despite advancements in some areas, these leaders continue to face unique challenges rooted in both gender and racial biases, such as questioning their decision-making abilities and undermining their authority. My findings underscore the ongoing need for systemic change to

ensure that African American female superintendents receive the respect and recognition they deserve, free from the prejudices that impede their professional advancement.

Rockstar Status

Another perception issue reported in past research is that African American female leaders are only seen as a combination of their gender and race. This view minimizes or ignores qualities such as their education, professional background, and leadership skills (Brown, 2014; Nozaki, 2000). When coworkers or the community look at them, they only see them as African American females. The idea of being viewed as successful just for being in the position of superintendent and being an African American female was echoed by one of my participants. She expressed discomfort with the bias she encountered, such as being labeled a "rock star" merely for being the first African American superintendent in her district. This was a label she found frustrating as she preferred to be evaluated based on her performance. She noted, “Until there are enough of us and there's full acceptance, I don’t know if I’m impacted so much by gender or race or if that’s just the way it is.” This statement highlights the ongoing challenge of achieving genuine acceptance and representation. My findings suggest that this "rock star" label is likely to persist as long as African American females remain underrepresented in the role of district superintendent.

Strategic Battle Picking

One theme that was prevalent in the majority of my interviews was the idea of strategic battle picking. As seen in previous studies, my findings revealed that the African American female superintendents in my study felt they had to navigate their roles by carefully choosing when to engage in conflicts and when to let issues go (Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000). My participants shared that strategic decision-making about when to address issues or overlook them

helped them maintain focus on their overarching goals and responsibilities. They described instances where they opted for either graciousness or direct confrontation, depending on the situation. For example, one leader chose to celebrate a retiring predecessor who was staying to work in an honorary position. This decision was made to foster a positive work environment. Another study participant declined a request to participate in a panel to avoid being used as a token. Similarly, some superintendents remained focused on their immediate district responsibilities rather than getting involved in broader, potentially contentious issues involving race and gender. These strategies highlight the added complexity of their roles and the need to balance personal convictions with professional effectiveness.

Research Question 2

The study also focuses on the effects of intersectionality on the professional mentor relationships and networking opportunities for African American female superintendents in North Carolina. Findings indicated that while some participants valued mentors who shared their race and gender, others felt that they benefited from a variety of perspectives. The study also revealed that race and gender influenced access to networking opportunities with multiple participants facing challenges due to biases associated with the "good old boys club." A few participants reported no significant impact from their race or gender on their networking access throughout their careers.

Diverse Perspectives in Mentorship Role

Previous research has highlighted the advantage of African American women having mentors from diverse backgrounds is the chance for both mentors and mentees to gain new perspectives on educational and professional issues (Enomoto et al., 2000). These findings are supported by the findings in my study. One participant shared, “Having mentors of different

races and genders was particularly important. They provided insights and advice that I might not have received from someone with a similar background." Another participant in my study added, "I think you do yourself a disservice that it has to be a woman and a Black woman only. I need the perspective of a woman. And of Black women. Of men. Of white men. Of Black men. Yes. Absolutely." These words from my study participants not only support the findings from previous research, but almost align with it perfectly.

There was one participant in my study who shared that she valued the input from mentors with differing backgrounds, but she did notice that her closest mentors tended to share the same gender and race. She described these relationships as happening "organically through conversations. Because the ones who served as superintendents just kind of embraced me as a young superintendent, and it just blossomed from there." In fact, most of my participants shared that at least one of their mentors was an African American female. This does contradict the findings from previous studies. Earlier research found that African American female superintendents often lack mentors of the same race and gender due to the historically low number of Black women in these roles. This creates a cycle where the limited number of potential mentors with similar racial and gender backgrounds perpetuates the scarcity of such mentoring opportunities (Brown, 2014; Davis & Bowers, 2019). My findings showed that these African American women were able to identify and create relationships with mentors who shared race and gender.

The findings of my study reveal a divergence from previous research regarding mentorship for African American female superintendents. While earlier studies indicated a scarcity of mentors with matching racial and gender backgrounds due to the low number of Black women in these roles, my research found that many participants successfully established

mentoring relationships with individuals who shared their race and gender. This was a unique contribution because it suggests that current African American female superintendents are able to foster mentoring relationships that align with their identity, highlighting a changing dynamic in professional support networks involving the superintendency. This could be attributed to more African American females attaining the role of superintendent in recent years.

Racial Barriers in Networking

Past studies have shown that African American females have not viewed the superintendency as an attainable position. In one study, African American women aspiring to become superintendents reported that the absence of sponsors limited their ability to achieve this goal (Allen et al., 1995). Sponsors are individuals who vouch for a candidate or use their own network to help someone else attain a superintendent position. None of the superintendents in my study mentioned feeling as if they could not attain the position or had a more difficult time attaining it compared to other individuals. There have been prior studies that focused on this perceived barrier. One found that African American women in educational leadership have shared that the absence of culturally relatable mentors created a perceived obstacle to attaining high-ranking positions (Bush, 2016). While none of the participants in my study shared that they felt like high ranking positions were unattainable due to their race and gender, a few participants did mention barriers they noticed in networking opportunities. One participant observed that while her race and gender did not completely restrict her access to professional networks, they did influence the dynamics within these networks. She shared her experiences, “Not access to [networks]. But I will say that the dynamics in some of these groups are interesting in terms of how white males are treated. And what they have access to and what they're given even more opportunity to.” She did not feel entirely excluded from professional networks due to her race

and gender, but she did observe different treatment and access levels within those networks. Another study participant reflected on the challenges she faced, noting that her race and gender might have limited her awareness of certain opportunities, “I don’t know if it had an impact on it. I would say that oftentimes I felt like there were other opportunities out there that I might not have known a lot about because of my race, possibly. And for being a female, too.” Not only did she describe feeling like she was not aware of certain opportunities, but she also described the feeling of seeing less qualified candidates receiving positions due to race and gender. In her mind, it was obvious that some people advanced because of their connections.

Research Question 3

My final research question aimed to determine whether participants felt their race and gender affected their career opportunities after leaving their superintendent roles. The findings were mixed, with some participants noting a direct correlation between their race and gender and their career opportunities, while others did not perceive any impact.

There is a lack of research comparing the post-career opportunities for superintendents of varying races and genders. This gap needs to be explored to see if different demographics of former superintendents experience varying opportunities. It is particularly important to investigate whether the low representation of African American female superintendents affects the professional opportunities available to those who have stepped away from the position in recent years. Due to the lack of research, I am unable to compare my results to those from previous studies.

My findings revealed varied experiences regarding the impact of race and gender on post-superintendent career opportunities. This is a novel finding as some study participants reported they felt that their race and gender influenced the support and opportunities they received, with

particular advantages found from individuals matching their demographic background. One participant noted she felt she received assistance after leaving her position solely because other individuals were helping her due to her being a Black woman. Others felt that their race and gender had a negative impact on their opportunities, citing instances where they were overlooked or faced biases. Conversely, one individual did not perceive any impact from race or gender on their career prospects, attributing their experiences to a more inclusive and accepting environment. These varying perspectives highlighted the different ways in which race and gender can shape post-superintendent career trajectories, underscoring the need for further research to better understand life after the superintendent for African American females.

Reflections on Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded in the theoretical framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013), which explores how overlapping social categories like race and gender can create unique forms of discrimination. Intersectionality is grounded in the thought that individuals belonging to multiple marginalized groups, such as African American females, face distinct forms of discrimination that cannot be understood by examining each aspect of their identity separately. This framework was used to investigate how the intersection of gender and race influences the experiences of African American women serving in the role of superintendent.

The theory of intersectionality influenced the research questions and participant selection for my study by emphasizing how race and gender intersect to shape the lived experiences of African American female superintendents. Intersectionality highlights the unique challenges faced by individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups. Using this theory, my research questions guided the study to explore how the combination of race and gender impacted my participants' professional experiences, mentorship opportunities, and post-retirement

experiences. The research questions were framed to address these intersecting identities, focusing on how they influenced the participants' leadership experiences and the barriers they encountered.

Furthermore, selecting only African American female superintendents from North Carolina as my participants aligned with the intersectional approach. This allowed for a focused exploration of whether or not race and gender intersect to affect the experiences of African American female superintendents in North Carolina. By concentrating on this specific group, my study aimed to uncover the experiences that would otherwise remain hidden without an intersectional approach. The findings from my study reinforced the theory of intersectionality and highlighted how African American female superintendents in North Carolina describe the interplay of their gender and race.

For my first research question, participants consistently emphasized the ways their race and gender together shaped their professional experiences. They noted the discrimination they faced and often felt devalued despite their qualifications. Many participants placed more emphasis on gender discrimination over race, but they also shared that their intersecting identities created unique challenges, such as navigating bias and choosing when to confront it. These experiences are clear examples of how race and gender cannot be separated when analyzing professional experiences of superintendents. This makes the use of intersectionality as a framework ideal for studying this topic and these participants.

The findings stemming from my second research question suggested that mentorship and networking experiences were also influenced by intersectionality. While some participants sought mentors who shared their race and gender, others valued a broader range of perspectives. Race and gender impacted access to professional networks for many participants, with some

feeling excluded from networks like the "good old boys club" and others believing their competence helped them overcome biases. These experiences illustrate how both race and gender shaped the participants' access to key professional networking and mentoring.

Findings from my final research question further confirmed intersectionality's relevance in post-superintendent career opportunities. Participants reported varied experiences based on their identities, with some reporting they received support only because they were Black women and others feeling overlooked because of the same identities. These differing perspectives emphasized how the intersection of race and gender influenced their opportunities beyond the superintendency, either enhancing or limiting their career options. Overall, my findings aligned with the theory of intersectionality by illustrating how the intersecting identities of race and gender shaped my participants' professional experiences, mentor relationships, networking opportunities, and post-superintendency career options.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the potential for unconscious bias to shape my research due to my lack of experience, as a white male, with the intersecting identities of race and gender that I studied. As a white man, I may not fully grasp the challenges and experiences faced by African American females which could have affected how I interpreted or analyzed the data. This limitation may have also influenced the relationship between the researcher and participants, thus potentially impacting the depth of the responses, as participants may have felt hesitant to share certain details with someone outside their racial and gender group.

Another limitation could have involved my positionality, which might have shaped the framing of the themes I constructed during data analysis. There is a risk that I overlooked, misunderstood, or underemphasized key aspects of the participants' experiences due to

differences in background and perspective. This could have led to an incomplete or skewed interpretation of the data, as I may not have fully appreciated or comprehended the cultural and social context of the African American female superintendents' responses.

Finally, my identity as a white man may have inadvertently introduced power dynamics that affected the interviews and interactions. Participants might have been more guarded or cautious in discussing sensitive topics related to race, gender, and discrimination. This could have potentially limited the data collected and impacted the way in which my participants discussed their experiences with white males while serving in the role of superintendent.

Implications of the Study for Policy and Practice

Participants in my study reported navigating professional spaces with biases and facing disrespect and devaluation despite their qualifications. One suggested policy change could be to require states and districts to offer regular bias training for educational leaders to increase awareness of how race and gender biases manifest in leadership roles (Devine et al., 2012). This could include workshops on inclusive leadership practices, understanding microaggressions, and strategies to promote equity in decision-making and opportunities for underrepresented groups in leadership.

Some of my participants felt that their race and gender hindered their access to professional networks, while others believed their competence helped them overcome these biases. These disparities highlight the need for policies and practices that ensure equitable access to professional networks and professional development opportunities. School districts and state agencies should develop targeted programs that provide African American female superintendents with greater access to networking opportunities, leadership training, and career advancement resources. These programs should be structured to ensure equal access regardless

of race or gender, with specific attention to eliminating informal barriers like exclusive networking circles such as the “good ole boys club” discussed by multiple study participants.

My findings also revealed that study participants felt their race and gender influenced post-superintendent career opportunities. Some participants felt supported only due to their identity, while others felt they were overlooked due to their race and gender. These experiences suggest that policies and programs addressing post-retirement support and opportunities for African American female leaders are needed. Districts and state agencies should establish post-retirement support policies that focus on facilitating career opportunities for African American female superintendents. These could include leadership consultancy roles or positions on educational boards, with an emphasis on promoting diversity and inclusion in these post-career spaces. Additionally, implementing formal post-retirement career planning services could help African American female superintendents transition into new roles with the support they deserve.

Given the biases reported by participants, it is also crucial for superintendent preparation programs at the university level to incorporate training on implicit biases, microaggressions, and culturally responsive leadership. This could involve developing a curriculum that not only addresses educational theory and management skills but also emphasizes diversity, equity, and inclusion (Marzano et al., 2011). Including case studies that highlight the experiences of African American female superintendents could provide valuable context and foster a deeper understanding of the challenges they face. These leadership programs should not only seek to assist African American females in attaining leadership positions but also in their post-career opportunities. Preparation programs should address these barriers directly by providing workshops and training on navigating professional networks, leadership consultancy roles, and post-retirement career planning.

Recommendations for Future Research

My study focused on race and gender, but future research could explore how other intersecting identities impact the experiences of African American female superintendents. Other characteristics that could be researched include socioeconomic background or sexual orientation. One study participant did share that she thought only queer Black women were lower on the totem pole. Investigating how these additional factors may influence professional experiences, mentorship, and post-retirement opportunities could provide a deeper understanding of intersectionality in educational leadership roles. Future studies should examine the experiences of African American female superintendents who also belong to other marginalized groups.

My study was bounded inside the state of North Carolina, which limited my pool of possible participants and my access to other regions of the country. A comparative study involving African American female superintendents from different states could provide insights into how regional contexts affect the intersection of race and gender in leadership roles. Future researchers could conduct a multi-state comparative study to compare how the experiences of African American female superintendents differ across regions and how state-specific policies or cultural contexts impact African American female superintendents' experiences. In reflecting on their experiences with race, participants often discussed Black and white colleagues. It is possible that the context of this study in North Carolina contributes to this focus. A similar study in another state with a different racial composition could find different experiences of Black female former superintendents related to racial groups other than whites

Given the limitation I discussed earlier revolving around my study being conducted by a white male researcher, future studies could explore how the identity of the researcher might have influenced data collection, participant responses, and the overall interpretation of my findings.

Future studies should consider utilizing an African American female researcher to explore how different researcher identities might impact data collection, participant responses, and interpretations, especially when addressing sensitive race and gender issues.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe the current conditions faced by African American female superintendents in North Carolina by exploring the experiences of former African American female superintendents. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, the study dove into participants' working conditions, focusing on their interactions with professional mentors and networks, to assess whether the limited number of African American female superintendents in North Carolina impacted their work environment. It also examined how these leaders perceived their mentors and their access to formal or informal professional networks throughout their careers. Secondly, the study explored the career opportunities available to African American females after they step away from the superintendency, investigating whether these opportunities differed from those available to their peers.

The underrepresentation of African American females in superintendent roles results in a unique experience that is only encountered by those who hold this position. To learn more about their unique experiences, the framework of intersectionality was utilized to study the intersection of participants' race and gender.

The study focused on former African American female superintendents from North Carolina to provide an in-depth exploration of their unique experiences. By concentrating on North Carolina, the study aimed to uncover the specific dynamics of race and gender within the state's educational system. Former superintendents were chosen for their ability to offer reflective insights into their leadership challenges and opportunities, as well as their experiences

after leaving the position. This approach was used to reveal valuable lessons for current and future African American female superintendents and to enhance understanding of both career and post-career phases in educational leadership.

The study found that former African American female superintendents in North Carolina faced significant impacts from the intersection of their race and gender on their professional experiences. Participants reported encountering challenges related to discrimination and bias, with many indicating that gender discrimination was more pronounced than racial discrimination. The intersection of race and gender created unique difficulties not experienced by superintendents of other races and genders. Regarding mentorship and networking, the study highlighted the complexity of these aspects in their careers. Some participants preferred mentors who shared their race and gender, while others valued a broader range of perspectives. Study participants also reported that their race and gender affected their access to professional networks, with some feeling excluded from the "good old boys club." In terms of post-superintendent career opportunities, experiences varied widely. Some participants felt that their race and gender influenced the support and opportunities available to them. However, a few did not perceive any impact from race or gender. These findings underscore the critical role of intersectional identities in shaping the professional and post-retirement experiences of African American female superintendents in North Carolina.

The study provided significant implications for policy change and future research. I included suggestions for changes at the state and district level to address bias and enhance post-retirement opportunities. I also recommended further research to explore the experiences of different marginalized groups and the impact of researcher identity on my findings.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of my doctoral dissertation. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the professional experiences of former African American female superintendents who served in North Carolina. I want to remind you that all the data acquired for this study will only be used for my doctoral work and will not be shared outside of that context. In my paper, the identity of all study participants and their school districts will be confidential. At any time during this interview, you may ask to skip a question or stop the interview entirely. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this study and making time to sit down with me for this interview. If you still agree to participate, I will begin with my first question:

Interview Questions

1. Please detail your career path from the time you entered the field of education to the time you became a superintendent.
2. Do you think the intersection of your race and gender influenced your experiences? For example, how were your experiences different from white females or African American males?

3. Can you tell me about a time when your gender impacted your experience as a superintendent?
4. Can you tell me about a time when your race impacted your experience as a superintendent?
5. Who have been your greatest professional mentors?
6. Do the mentors you described share your race and/or gender and how did this influence these relationships?
7. How did your race and gender affect your access to professional networking, both formal and informal?
8. What are your career plans now that your time as a school superintendent has ended?
9. How do you think your post-superintendency career options were impacted by your race and/or gender?
10. What improvements would you suggest for superintendency preparation programs, such as those in university settings, and organizations such as the NC School Superintendents' Association to better prepare and support African American female superintendents?
11. Would you like to share anything else about your experience as an African American female superintendent, as well as mentors, professional networking, or opportunities after retiring?