ABSTRACT

WATFORD, RONICA TANAE. In Their Own Words: African American Women Superintendents in North Carolina. (Under the direction of Dr. Michael E. Ward).

While the North Carolina teacher workforce is comprised mostly of women, this does not reflect the occupancy of superintendents' offices (Gordon 2020). Women, especially African American women, are disproportionately underrepresented in the superintendency. This grievous underrepresentation of African American women who hold the position of public school district superintendent is stark contrast with their white male counterparts (Pruitt, 2015). The superintendency is regarded as one of the most gender-stratified positions within educational leadership; the ascension to the superintendency for African American women continues to be laborious and includes barriers and challenges that are unique to minority women. This is particularly concerning for North Carolina's public school systems, as their diversity is steadily growing. Therefore, it is imperative that the face of senior-level leadership be reflective of the diversity of the student population.

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded. Study findings revealed that race and its intersectionality with gender adversely affect African American women's ascension to and service in the superintendent position and can be a deterrent for some African American women aspirants. These findings are advantageous to state boards of education, local boards of education, North Carolina public school districts, lawmakers, graduate programs, and superintendent preparation programs as they seek to impact

legislation, board policies, and culturally relevant course content in hopes of diversifying the North Carolina superintendency.

This study involved the exploration of data from interviews conducted with six African American women who had served or were currently serving in the North Carolina superintendency. Findings obtained from this qualitative research yielded insights into social stigmas, inequities within educational leadership, the barriers and challenges associated with the ascension of African American women to the superintendency, and the support mechanisms employed to aid in successfully ascending to the superintendent position.

These findings advance current research by examining the viewpoints of African American women superintendents in a manner that has not been substantively addressed in the literature in the past decade. The perspectives shared by the participants emphasized the significance of implementing equitable hiring practices, leadership development, and support networks for aspiring and early-career superintendents. The study revealed that the duality of race and gender influenced the work of these African American superintendents even before the work started. Participants felt that the absence of adequate support mechanisms created unfavorable conditions for continuous improvement and leadership development. Additionally, the study revealed that the current state of the superintendency in North Carolina calls for an examination of organizational values, enactment of equitable recruitment and retention practices, establishment of a professional network that is reflective of minority leaders, and implementation of structures that are conducive to the diverse needs of women, especially African American women.

Implications for policy and practice were offered based on the findings of the research. The discussion of the study's results concluded with a set of recommendations for future

research that identify areas that warrant further investigation. Considering these recommendations, future research can build upon this study's findings as North Carolina seeks to employ mechanisms to mitigate the underrepresentation of African American women serving in the North Carolina superintendency. As the diversity of the public schools in North Carolina continues to grow, it will be essential to continue to examine the North Carolina superintendency through the lens of race and gender as educational leaders seek to positively change the educational milieu of all students.

In Their Own Words: African American Women Superintendents in North Carolina

by
Ronica Tanae Watford

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APPROVED BY:

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DEDICATION

To my children,

Rhyonna and Mason, I dedicate this dissertation to you, as I take copious pride in being your mother. Your mere existence motivates me and if God never does another thing for me, he did his greatest work in giving me you two. I am so thankful to be loved and supported by each of you. The pride you have in me is only reflective of the immense pride I have in you. As your mother, I will remain steadfast in ensuring that my legacy of love, hope, and opportunity is passed down to you as a tangible reminder that, despite society changing around us, I will always be the beacon of light that guides you, the facilitator of safe spaces that protects you, and the mother who relentlessly fuels your courage and empowers you to be the change you wish to see. This is for you!

BIOGRAPHY

Ronica Watford, a native of Ahoskie, NC, has dedicated her life to promoting education and ensuring high-quality, equitable educational experiences for students from rural communities in North Carolina. A catalyst for change, her journey in education is a testament to her unwavering commitment and passion for making a difference.

Ronica began her educational career by earning a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Elementary Education from North Carolina Central University in 2008. Her interest in education continued to grow, and she was named Ahoskie Elementary School Teacher of the Year for the 2012-2013 school year while serving as a fifth grade mathematics and science teacher. However, Ronica's ambition didn't stop there. In 2014, she earned a Master of School Administration degree through the Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA), operated under the auspices of North Carolina State University, expanding her leadership skills and knowledge.

With over 10 years of experience in public education, Ronica has served in various roles, including elementary, middle, and high school positions. She's been a fifth grade mathematics and science teacher, dean of students, beginning teacher mentor, and instructional coach. Her dedication and passion for education were evident, and in 2019, she transitioned into the role of assistant principal at Hertford County High School. In 2022, she further elevated her leadership journey by becoming the principal of Hertford County High School. Today, she proudly serves as the principal of C.S. Brown High School Stem.

Ronica’s unwavering commitment to education knows no bounds. She earned a Doctorate in Educational Leadership under the auspices of North Carolina State University. She continues to strive for educational excellence and seeks ways to be a catalyst for change and a

voice for education in her community. Ronica's favorite quote: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world," is a true testament to her dedication to making a positive impact.

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Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

As I prepare to experience another unfolding of what God has in store for my life, I'm reassured in knowing that what seems impossible can be made possible. I would like to first and foremost give all glory to God for without him none of this would be possible. With a heart of gratitude and sentiments of profound thanks, I am so indebted and would like to acknowledge the remarkable individuals who have served as pillars of hope and offered their unreserved support throughout my pursuit of my doctoral degree.

To my parents, Rachel and Ronald, thank you both for being beacons of hope and love, for pushing me into owning my own strength, for stimulating my commitment to education during the early stages of my life, and for bestowing upon me the fortitude to complete this journey. This esteemed tribute is in honor of your unwavering support and the consistency of how well you show up for me even now in adulthood. A first-generation undergraduate student, and now a first-generation doctoral completer; on no account could I ever begin to quantify how significant an achievement this is, nor can I adequately express how overwhelmed I am with gratitude and joy that you both are able to share in this experience with me. To my mother, Rachel, thank you for planting seeds of love, hope, and perseverance and for your profound encouragement. To my father, Ronald, thank you for standing firm in faith and covering me in love, prayers, and support throughout my life. Your encouragement, your guidance, and your prayers have guarded me and given me the strength to be victorious.

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guidance, and earnest words of encouragement. Under your stewardship, I matured as a graduate level writer and a benevolent leader. Your unwavering support and faith in my ability to finish this journey propelled me forward and gave me the courage to own my place in this space and to leave a mark for generations to come. The incalculable amount of time you spent working with me on my research is a true testament to your commitment to positively shaping the lives of educational leaders and your dedication to being associated with research that will be great additions to the body of knowledge. I am humbled to have had the opportunity to be guided by your keen insight, research expertise, and your diligent support and pray that you will continue to support me throughout my career.

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I am filled with immense gratitude to have been afforded the opportunity to complete this journey alongside the members of my doctoral cohort. Each of you inspired me personally and

professionally. The camaraderie of our cohort served as a wellspring of support, guidance, and encouragement.

To my devoted family, friends, colleagues, and sorority sisters of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.; thank you for your continued support, well wishes, and continual words of encouragement. You have truly been the wind beneath my wings and I'm forever grateful for each of you.

To the six courageous women who boldly and fearlessly shared their lived experiences with me as participants in this study, thank you. Please accept my deepest gratitude for allowing me to uplift your voices and share your stories. Your service to public schools and the difference you make on behalf of students each and every day, your resiliency and persistence to break glass ceilings and overcome despite all obstacles, are held in high regard and serve as inspiration for African American women aspiring to the superintendency.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"If Black women don't say who they are, other people will and say it badly for them."
-Barbara Christian

Brown v. Board of Education is recognized as one of the country's most noteworthy milestones in civil rights (Horsford, 2007). While this decision marked the end of de jure segregation of White students and students of color in the United States, this ruling also resulted in the displacement of African American female and male educators and administrators (Alston, 2005; Horsford, 2007, 2009, 2010; Horsford & McKenzie, 2008;). Since the ruling, many reforms in education have sought to ameliorate conditions in education that disproportionately result in the underrepresentation of educational leaders from marginalized groups.

Historically, it remains a momentous feat for African American women to ascend to the role of superintendent (Alston, 2005; Blount, 1998; Jackson, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1989). Teachers of color are unfortunately not proportionately represented in teaching positions, but they are even more drastically underrepresented in the superintendency. Barriers still impede the opportunity for women of color to break the "glass ceiling" and reach the highest position in public-school districts (Calderone et al., 2020; Glass, 2000). Gordon (2020) asserted that even though the North Carolina teacher workforce is comprised mainly of women, this is not the reflection of the superintendent's office. In the state of North Carolina, only 31 of the 115 school districts are helmed by women (Gordon, 2020). As of 2022, eight women were African American and one was Latina (Hart et al., 2022).

As North Carolina continues to grapple with employing equitable hiring practices, the restricted number of North Carolina superintendencies held by African American women is unsettling. Significant racial or ethnic disproportionality, including the underrepresentation of African American women superintendents in public school districts, exposes the historical

underpinnings of racist practices in American society and highlights the need for more equitable systems for women leaders of color. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded.

Statement of the Problem

African American women, as double minorities, face a multitude of constraints as they pursue the superintendency. Jackson (1999) claimed, "Black women superintendents grew up doubly marginal in society, as females and African Americans" (p. 141). Despite the fact that the ethnic makeup of American schools is changing, African American women still are not on a level playing field, evidenced by the longer period of time it takes them to become superintendents compared to their White peers. Their professional ascension is much more laborious due to constraints including but not limited to hiring practices and other biases from Boards of Education and State Departments of Education (Pruitt, 2015). African American women have not had a favorable image in the eyes of society for a prolonged period of time. The African American woman is seen as inferior, incompetent, aggressive, loud, and fit only for motherhood. As a result, the negative images of African American womanhood that are ingrained in the minds of others often allow for the creation of mental models regarding the capabilities of these women and their place in the educational arena (Collins, 1990). In 1831, Maria W. Stewart asked, "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles" (Collins, 2000, p. 1).

Nearly two centuries later, numerous African American women are, for the most part, compelled to limit their talents to the four walls of a classroom. The number of opportunities to

expand their sphere of leadership outside of the school building is increasing, yet is still limited. Despite the fact that there are numerous women within school buildings who possess the qualifications needed to obtain the superintendency, the pace of their career advancement to the superintendency is considerably slower (Pruitt, 2015).

In 1851 Sojourner Truth questioned, “Ain’t I a woman?” in an attempt to proclaim that women should be treated equally to men (Collins, 2000). During this time, African American women were seen as carriers of burden and were expected to shoulder the burden of being viewed as subservient and mere caretakers of children. Since that time, there have been forceful attempts to have African American women afforded equal rights to those of their White female and male counterparts. However, the sentiments imbedded in Sojourner Truth’s question are still relevant, as African American women who don not “fit” the role of leader suffer more harshly than their male peers (Livingston et al., 2012). According to a participant in Brown’s 2014 study,

> I think being a woman certainly has its disadvantages but being an African American woman has more disadvantage in terms of our ability to be retained for a couple of things in terms of we tend not to have the opportunity to build the networks like the "good old boy relationships" because we don't golf or hunt. Maybe we fish, but they build different kinds of relationships than we as females. Accessibility is a huge issue because business of connections, social connections, country club memberships, etc. As African American women, we must try to insert ourselves into the connections which they (White males) have. (Brown, 2014, p. 581)

These perspectives are pertinent to the issue addressed in my study; African American women are not provided equal opportunities to build professional networks or make the personal connections needed to be successful in the position of superintendent.

Ironically, the United States is often depicted as a "melting pot" due to the growing diversity of the nation's population. Nonetheless, many Americans have yet to come to a point of tolerance of those with differing views or those who look differently than they do.

> Black women have so much to offer our country, so many gifts to share with all of us. And yes, as a society and as a nation, we have never quite stopped to appreciate the truth of their experience, the verity of what it feels like to be Black and female, the reality that no matter how intelligent, competent, and dazzling she may be, a Black woman in our country today still cannot count on being understood and embraced by mainstream White America. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 2)

Hence, the face of senior-level leadership in the United States in general and North Carolina public school districts in particular does not reflect the diversity of the population. African American women are practically invisible in the research literature and in the office of the superintendent in districts throughout North Carolina.

The Scarcity of African American Superintendents

Alston (2000) questioned, where are the Black female school superintendents? As has been documented already, African American women are significantly underrepresented in the senior-most echelons of school leadership. The shortage of African American women in the superintendency is problematic. African American women are compelled to not appear "too Black" or "too female" (Fordham, 1993) while grappling with appearing confident and competent. According to Alston (1996),

> There are five constraints (or barriers) faced by African American women seeking to become superintendents: a lack of awareness of how to navigate politically within the administrative structure; a lack of role models; exclusion from the "old boys" network, support systems, or sponsorship; the perception of society that African Americans are incompetent leaders; and a lack of a system for identifying potential African American aspirants to administrative positions. (p. 63)

With these barriers in mind, and in an attempt to sufficiently address the issue of African American women being a rarity within executive positions, a deeper understanding of these positions is warranted. Such inquiry needs to occur through the lenses of race and gender.

The Nature of the Superintendency

Today's school superintendents face numerous challenges. There is an increased imperative around accountability and the parameters of responsibility surrounding the myriad of dilemmas and constituencies' needs. In addition, federal mandates, local policy initiatives, and economic and social changes contribute to the complexity of the position (Björk et al., 2014). The position of superintendent, especially in a public-school district is often referred to as multifaceted. Initially regarded as a teacher-scholar, the superintendency came to be regarded as a masculine role, despite the large population of female professionals in K-12 public education (Glass et al., 2001). The role of the superintendent has evolved since its inception by way of four additional roles: organizational manager, statesman or democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator (Callahan, 1966). The role has evolved incrementally, and is arguably more large-scale, complex, and demanding; as a result, perhaps, the superintendency had, by the latter years of the 20th century, become institutionalized as men's work (Shakeshaft, 1989). Given the complex demands of the superintendent's position, society has typically conceptualized the

highly ranked position as one that is male-dominated (Cox, 2017). Conversely, stereotypical assumptions of African American women not possessing adequate leadership skills nor being as competent as men, are often used as explanations for the low number of female leaders (Patterson, 2006).

Throughout the 20th century, the role of the superintendent was held predominantly by men. Additionally, the sparse research conducted on the superintendency in the United States has mostly been carried out by male researchers and presented from the male point-of-view. It is also worth noting that there is still an absence of gender-neutral language when referring to the duties of the superintendent. North Carolina General Statute 115C-276 still refers to the superintendent as “he” or “him.”

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded. The study further explored with African American female leaders in K-12 leadership roles, specifically as superintendents, their perspectives on how race and gender influenced their journey towards obtaining their current positions and factors that impact their career progression. This qualitative approach aided in developing a more in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of these superintendents (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Employing the Black feminist thought lens, this inquiry placed emphasis on African American women superintendents and their experiences. In addition, to establish a means to understand how being an African American woman in educational leadership creates different modes of discrimination, the critical race theory lens was also employed to afford these women the opportunity to share their experiences

of how racism and gender discrimination impacted their career progression. The scarcity of research dedicated to African American women superintendents and their lived experiences is regrettable because such information would be useful to these leaders, and to local school boards and executive search firms as they seek to employ equitable hiring practices. Therefore, due to the exclusion of their voices in scholarly works, this study amplified the voices of African American women superintendents despite their underrepresentation in educational leadership.

The literature abounds with studies that focus on women, leadership, and women in leadership; however, a limited number of studies exist that have specifically explored African American women's lived experiences and challenges in senior leadership positions in the K-12 public school arena. Alston (2005) asserted, “The tenacity and resilience of those Black women who meet the challenges of the superintendency and are successful have not been studied extensively” (p. 676). A concerted effort from federal, state, and local levels is needed to provide African American female leaders equitable leadership opportunities. However, given the diverse contexts surrounding the school districts, educational leadership practices, and the demographic, political, and cultural attributes of the state referenced in this study, it is both timely and important to engage in research about African American females in K-12 district-level leadership roles.

Research Questions

In order to explore the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How do African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina describe their career progression in the K-12 educational leadership setting?
2. How do African American women in the state of North Carolina describe the barriers and supports they encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent?
3. What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina regarding the relationship between race, gender, and the underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina?
4. What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina about how race and gender influence their work?

Definitions of Terms

For this study, the following terms and definitions are essential to developing a comprehensive understanding of this research and the status of African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina.

African American or Black (are used interchangeably throughout this study). A person of African descent, having any African ancestral origins.

Aspirants. African American women serving in senior-level leadership positions within the K-12 public school system seeking advancement or appointment to the North Carolina superintendency are referred to as aspirants throughout the study.

Black Feminist Thought. A term that references the exploration of themes of oppression, family, social relationships, work, community engagement, activism, cultural images, stereotypes, gender, and sexuality (Collins, 2000).

Glass Ceiling. A term that references the invisible barrier that hinders the advancement of women and minorities and prevents them from reaching the highest leadership positions within an organization based upon discriminatory measures (Pruitt, 2015).

Intersectionality. A term used to establish a means to understand how aspects of a person's identity create different modes of discrimination.

Superintendent. The professionally prepared individual serving as the general executive officer of a board of education (Alston, 1996).

Significance of the Study

This qualitative research study is responsive to the dearth of African American women superintendents. Among persistent issues of inequity in educational leadership, the underrepresentation of women of color and minority women in senior leadership positions is associated with a long history of discrimination. In August 1920, the 19th amendment was ratified by the U.S. Congress which guaranteed all American women the constitutional right to vote. A milestone that did not come easy and was the result of an arduous fight from many women seeking equality. Significant to African American women in particular, the 19th amendment guaranteed these rights despite the 15th amendment's granting of voting rights for African American males, based upon race, but still not gender. Race and gender are two factors that continue to have adverse effects on women of color further accentuated by the fact that it took two constitutional amendments to secure them the right to vote. African American women in educational leadership are still fighting that arduous fight a century later as they seek to reach the highest position in public schools. Notwithstanding the fact that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on gender identification, an evident gender gap still exists within the superintendency in North Carolina.

This study aimed to expand the body of knowledge on African American women superintendents in North Carolina. Furthermore, this research aimed to contribute to and build upon existing scholarly literature about the public school superintendency by examining the perspectives of these female educational leaders in order to provide a richer illustration of their experiences. Jackson (1999) asserted, "We are in a position to tell a complete story of all these women leaders. We need to hear their voices loud and clear, for us to understand the intensity of their struggle" (p. 157). A study of this sort is very timely and essential as the results will benefit women of color in leadership roles and amplify their voices to improve career satisfaction, recruitment, and retention.

The results of this study not only extend scholarly research on African American women superintendents, it gives them a platform to share their experiences. The literature is replete with studies that focus on men serving in the superintendency, yet few studies have examined minority women and women of color serving in the superintendent role and that gives credence to a study of this sort. Alston (1999) posited, "The invisibility and quiet tone of women in leadership are continued by the contention that women are trying to be leaders inside hierarchical organizations that promote gender decisions by roles and maintain values and beliefs on a man's experiences" (p.183). Therefore, it is significant that this study delved into the viewpoints of African American women superintendents in a manner that has not been extensively mentioned in the literature in the past decade.

Viewpoints of African American women are needed to serve as counter-narratives to negative stereotypes and to explicate their leadership experiences. The results of this research may be helpful to public-school districts, local school boards, and educational leadership preparation programs in understanding the dynamics of the superintendent role and its

accessibility. This research is significant in that it goes beyond African American women sharing their stories of how race and its intersection with gender negatively influenced their work and offered insight for North Carolina public school districts and graduate programs to aid in the implementation of more equitable preparation programs, hiring practices, and support mechanisms. The results of this research may also be beneficial to state and local policymakers and aid them in gaining a better understanding of the roles of race and gender in the educational leadership workforce in North Carolina. This will hopefully serve as a catalyst for social change and motivate them to advocate for legislation that continues to afford equal opportunities for women of color.

Organization of the Study

Intended to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public-school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded; this study is organized in five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction of the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, definition of terms, and a statement of significance. Also included in Chapter 1 is the organization of the study.

Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature. The review incorporates the history of the superintendency in the United States, the historical perspective of African American women as superintendents, and superintendent representation in North Carolina. The review also includes an exploration of the theoretical frameworks for this study; these include Black feminist thought and critical race theory. The chapter provides context for a study of this nature by identifying both past and contemporary research relevant to the topic of African American women superintendents.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used to guide the study and the rationale used to support the implementation of a qualitative research design. Also included in the chapter are a description of study participants, research procedures, and data collection methods. The chapter concludes with ethical considerations for conducting research that involves human subjects within the K-12 public school arena.

Chapter 4 includes a description of the findings of the study based on the data collected from the interviews of African American women superintendents. As this exploratory qualitative study was conducted, data were collected and coded for emerging themes. This chapter details the lived experiences of the participating African American women superintendents in North Carolina.

Chapter 5 includes a summary and discussion of the research findings based on the study's research questions. These findings are also contrasted with those in extant research. Chapter 5 also provides implications for practitioners and policymakers. This chapter adds to the existing body of literature and address implications for future research surrounding African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina.

Chapter Summary

Notwithstanding the minuscule increase in the number of female superintendents, the superintendency is still characterized as a White male-dominated position (Cox, 2017; Pruitt, 2015). In a male-dominated world of educational leadership, African American women encounter challenges as they ascend to the superintendency, to an even greater degree, once named a public-school superintendent. Discrimination in educational leadership recruitment practices is among one of the most salient and enduring issues in educational leadership. These female aspirants should have a platform to share their stories; otherwise the discrimination in

these recruitment practices is more likely to persist and the incumbents in North Carolina's superintendents' offices are more likely to continue to be White and male. Therefore, through the voices of the women of color who aspire to or serve in superintendent positions, this study attempted to reduce the magnitude of the problem and embrace equitable recruitment practices. The silence will only exacerbate existing and future societal inequities.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with an analysis of research literature associated with the superintendency in the United States (U.S.), providing an account of the historical underpinnings of the position and its evolution over time. Additionally, the literature review outlined the historical developments of African American women in the superintendency and depicts their underrepresentation as superintendents in the research literature. Next, the literature review described the status of women, emphasizing African American women in school leadership in North Carolina. This chapter concludes with a review of the literature associated with two theoretical frameworks, Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT). The focus on African American women superintendents makes these theoretical frameworks appropriate to examine the constructs in this study. Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory are cardinal frameworks that apply to the arena of public education as they examine how race, racism, and gender bias are present in the K-12 public school setting.

Through an evaluation of past scholarly literature regarding the position of superintendent and the limited number of African American women serving in the senior-level leadership position, this study provides African American women an opportunity to share their experiences while ascending to the superintendency; it further provides an opportunity for them to describe barriers and supports that they encountered while serving in their current superintendent position. More specifically, the findings of this study will be of benefit to superintendent aspirants in North Carolina.

Background and Policy Context

In response to the dearth of African American women serving in the superintendency, the purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of African American women

superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded. Against the backdrop of inequity in job acquisition in educational leadership, some researchers argue that the superintendency has historically been regarded as a male-dominated profession (Alston, 2005; Björk, 2000; Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Burton & Weiner, 2016; Cox, 2017; Dowell & Larwin, 2013; Glass et al., 2001; Jarrett et al., 2018; Pruitt, 2015; Revere, 1987; Rodriguez, 2019; Searby et al., 2015). Therefore, significant racial disproportionality, including the scarcity of women of color in the superintendency, persists and highlights the need for more equitable hiring practices for women of color. Gender inequity creates a subtle pattern of systemic disadvantage for women of color, which reduces the opportunities for career advancement (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). Therefore, this study addressed the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. The intent of this study is to add to the previous discourse on the scarcity of African American women acquiring and retaining senior-level administrative positions in North Carolina.

The past scholarship on the superintendency has been primarily devoted to White males, which calls attention to the importance of understanding the complexities encountered by women in the superintendency, especially African American women. To that end, taking into consideration the plight of African American women superintendents in North Carolina, it is an opportune time to outline the significance of this study's approach through five fields of literature:

1. The historical perspective of the superintendency in the United States (U.S.)
2. The historical perspective of African American women as superintendents
3. The underrepresentation of African American women as superintendents

4. The insubstantial portrayal of African American women superintendents in the research literature
5. Superintendent representation in North Carolina

Evolution of the Position of Superintendent in the United States

The superintendent's role has evolved since its inception in the United States. Not always regarded as a permanent career post, it was deemed a temporary position by many, "which can explain why many historians such as Callahan (1966) did not view the position as being relevant to contemporary practice" (Björk et al., 2014, p. 9). This conclusion lends itself to the reported discrepancies within the previous accounts of the evolution of the position. Petersen and Barnett (2003) credited these discrepancies to differences in literature sources, differences in the analysis of historical accounts, and systematic approaches. Much like the transitional nature of politics in the United States, the superintendent position has gone through many phases. Although the core responsibilities of the superintendent position are largely uniform, according to Kowalski and Brunner (2011), this is not true of the conditions encompassing the position.

> Variability exists in the following areas: method of selection (appointed versus elected); relationship to the state board of education (nonmember, nonvoting member, member, or chair); authority over the state board of education (high, moderate, or low); and required, desired, and actual qualifications (professional educators or noneducators).
>
> (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 143)

Initially, the position began with the appointment of a New York state superintendent in 1812. This position came with three primary responsibilities: arranging a school system for the entire state, accepting fiscal responsibility for state funds, and reporting mandatory school-related information to the state legislature (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). In 1830, inequity among

schools drew the attention of officials who sought to adopt a common school approach. As a result of dissatisfaction, there was a shift towards local control. Years later, as the role of superintendent continued to evolve and take on many titles, Oliver Steele was appointed as the first superintendent in Buffalo, New York, in 1837. During the Civil War, many city school boards adopted the model in Buffalo. They appointed the superintendent as a direct consequence of the multitude of challenges facing school districts and, in an attempt, to improve educational outcomes for students. Since that time, the duties of the superintendent have continued to evolve and have been conceptualized by way of four separate roles as described by Callahan (1966): "(a) *teacher-scholar* (1865 to 1910); (b) *organizational manager* (1910 to 1930); (c) *statesman or democratic leader* (1930 to 1954), and (d) *applied social scientist* (1954 to 1966)." Kowalski (2005) added a fifth role that is still applicable to current-day superintendents, *communicator* (1970s to present). The aforementioned role conceptualizations provide a foundation for discerning the intricacies of the superintendent's work.

The position has continued to progress; depending upon the public-school district, the specified duties of the superintendent may differ. As stated in General Statute 115C-276 of the North Carolina General Statutes, some of the general duties of a superintendent in the state are to serve as a secretary to the board, manage the fiscal operations, hire and supervise district staff, including principal, provide annual evaluations, attend professional meetings, and implement state policies and rules.

Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar

Callahan (1966) characterized the earliest role of the superintendent as a teacher-scholar. During this leadership phase, the primary responsibility of the superintendent was to be an instructional leader and pedagogical expert who was heavily involved in the teaching and

learning process, guided by academic quality. The role of teacher-scholar provided a means for the superintendent to manage curriculum and instruction by way of training teachers, assisting them with developing the necessary skill sets to be successful, revising courses of study, and providing the necessary instructional materials for teachers and students (Björk et al., 2014). Throughout the years, there was dissension surrounding the superintendent serving as an instructional leader, thus necessitating the emergence of the second role of the superintendent as an organizational manager.

Superintendent as Organizational Manager

The growing concerns persisted from school board members regarding the ability of the superintendent to manage large city districts and serve as influential instructional leaders. This lack of managerial knowledge created concerns and evident dissatisfaction. As a result of these concerns, the role of the superintendent evolved into that of an organizational manager in the early decades of the 20th century. During this leadership phase, the superintendent focused on the education business and the managerial tasks associated with district operation, fiscal management and budget development, personnel management, and management of school facilities (Björk et al., 2014). As the role of the superintendent continued to evolve, there were concerns from political leaders that the superintendent as a manager could result in the superintendent gaining too much power and influence. There were many criticisms of the business aspect of the superintendency from mayors and city council members. Although there were differences among various parties, the goal was not to eliminate the management role but to determine the proper way for the role to be carried out (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

Superintendent as Democratic Leader

Inadequate financial resources to support public education is a perpetual problem. Historically, school districts have competed with other public agencies and public schools for funding and resources that are often insufficient. This competition gave rise to the superintendent taking on a more political, democratic, and community-based approach to leadership (Björk, 2018; Kowalski, 2005). This shift towards democratic and political leadership framed the position of the superintendent from 1930 until mid-1950. During this leadership phase, the effective superintendent was viewed as a leader who understood and capitalized on the political realities of the position (Callahan, 1966). The effective officeholder was one deemed to be one who acknowledged the political reality of the work and used it to their advantage to address the micro-politics of the position. Superintendents were not tasked with being politicians. Essentially, they were tasked with garnering support from policymakers and other stakeholders to support initiatives while seeking to secure sufficient funding to carry out the school district's business (Callahan, 1966).

Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist

Developing discontent with leadership after World War II, coupled with the exponential growth of the social sciences, created a push for the superintendent as a social scientist (Callahan, 1966). Similar to the early role conceptions, there were some mounting concerns regarding the need to serve a role that Callahan characterized as applied social scientist. Callahan (1966), as cited in Kowalski and Brunner (2011), described four catalysts for the applied social scientist role:

> (1) growing dissatisfaction with democratic leadership after World War II; critics charged that the concept was overly idealistic and ignored the realities of practice; (2)

> rapid development of the social sciences in the late 1940s and early 1950s; much of the knowledge generated by this expansion was applicable to public organizations and administration; (3) support from the Kellogg Foundation; during the 1950s, the foundation provided more than $7 million in grants, primarily to eight major universities that allowed school administration professors to conduct social science research; (4) a resurgence of criticisms of public education in the early 1950s; much like conditions leading to the management conceptualization, public dissatisfaction spawned reform efforts and heightened interest in the social sciences. (p.148)

During this leadership phase, the superintendent was viewed as a leader who implemented scientific theory and behavioral theory as a means to approach problems encountered in order to make effective decisions. Superintendents were expected to have a working body of knowledge in research associated with sociology, psychology, and criminology in order to be informed decision-makers (Kowalski, 2005).

Superintendent as Communicator

The role of the superintendent as a communicator is still typical in present-day educational leadership. There is a presumed imperative that the superintendent serves as an effective communicator in support of the mission and vision of the school district, building relational capital and cultivating positive board relations (Björk, 2018). Due to No Child Left Behind, signed into law in 2002, and the Race to the Top initiatives in 2013, there was an increased consciousness surrounding high-stakes testing accountability, causing the expectations for superintendents to shift. In accordance with this shift, the superintendent also had to act as an expert communicator, crafting messages about student and school performance that are

appropriate for multiple stakeholder groups, including but not limited to school board members, school administrators, parents, and community leaders (Björk et al., 2014).

The evolution of the role of the superintendent and the documented stages of this evolution contrast based on the documented time frames. In contrast, Brunner and Grogan (2005) document the historical shifts in the superintendency in seven stages:

1. 1829-1850 – Superintendents as clerks serving a redeemer nation
2. 1850-1900 – Superintendents as political master education or instructional leader
3. 1900-1954 – Superintendent as expert manager
4. 1954-1970s – Superintendent as communicator to the public
5. 1970-1980 – Superintendent as accountable: Living with conflict
6. 1980-1990 – Superintendent as political strategist focused on excellence
7. 1990s and beyond – Superintendent as collaborator. (pp. 211-212)

The superintendent position continues to undergo changes as educational and constituency needs change and intensify. Although the basic requirements for obtaining the necessary credentials to serve as superintendent are standard, these requirements differ among various states. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, to serve as a superintendent in North Carolina, one must hold a North Carolina principal's license and a superintendent's license as well as an advanced graduate-level (sixth year) or doctoral license in school administration (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022). These are the credentialing criteria that the state's school boards most often prescribe as they hire superintendents (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022). However, a codicil in state law, Article 18 of General Statute 115C-271, allows the State Board to "adopt rules that establish qualifications for a person to serve as a superintendent without having direct experience

or certification as an educator." Local boards in the state of North Carolina have applied this exception in a few instances, just as various other states allow alternative routes to the superintendency that do not require a traditional superintendent's license.

Jackson (1999) conducted a study of African American women superintendents, and out of the 41 participants, 31 held the highest degree offered in the educational leadership field. More than ten years later, in a study conducted by Angel et al. (2013) in North Carolina, each of the participants "held a doctoral degree or was enrolled in a doctoral program and held state certification at the superintendent level" (Angel et al., 2013, p. 609). Eight years later in North Carolina, and complementary to the results of Angel et al. (2013), Hart et al. (2022) found that the majority of all superintendents held a doctorate or an education specialist Ed.S. degree; "only nine superintendents across the state held less than a doctorate or an Ed.S., of which eight were White and one was African American" (p. 16).

Early in the 20th century, The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) began to gather documentation on the position of superintendent by the means of conducting surveys (Robinson et al., 2017). The results of these surveys are utilized to complete a State of the Superintendency report every ten years. However, race was not always a classification. With time and as the nature of the superintendency evolved, race is now included. The results of the 2015 mid-decade study indicate results that were closely aligned with the 2010 decennial study; however, the 2015 study encompassed new questions that were related to the incumbent's gender (Robinson et al., 2017). This was paramount as the results provided a means to record gender and audit changes in the proportionality of women superintendents. This was a very salient step in ensuring that African American women are afforded equal opportunities to ascend to the superintendency. Despite the fact that the study findings were disaggregated by gender, the 2015

mid-decade study was “not able to provide a current snapshot of race and gender in the position in the United States” (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 3). The 2015 results suggest that there are some commonalities between the behavior patterns of superintendents and the expected behavior of superintendents from society.

1. The profiles of women superintendents are becoming more like their male counterparts;
2. All women are more likely to head a district with a larger number of students who are homeless and a larger number of students with disabilities, than men;
3. Women are more likely to bring expertise in curriculum and instruction than men;
4. White women are more likely to be hired in smaller districts than white men;
5. Women of color are more likely than white women to lead majority-minority districts;
6. Women are more likely to be promoted from within than men. (Robinson et al., 2017, p. 10)

The Historical Perspective of African American Women as Superintendents

The viewpoints of African American women are seldom uplifted to add context to their story of aspiring to serve as public school superintendents. Brown (2014) observed that:

> The voices of many African American women superintendents have been assigned to the voices of White women and African American men. Rarely are the voices of African American women superintendents revealed to solely address the issues and challenges of recruitment and retention faced by African American women to the public school superintendency. Neither has credence or validation been given to the impact of race,

> gender, and social politics on the recruitment and retention process of African American women in the public school superintendency. (p. 576)

To thoroughly understand the present picture of African American women in educational leadership, it is imperative to be cognizant of the historical antecedents of their role in the American educational system. Majority of African American women who helmed leadership positions during this time were referred to as Jeanes supervisors. As Jeanes supervisors these women worked to improve educational outcomes by serving as superintendents in practice (Angel et al., 2013). Legislation enacted in the 1960s granted women in the United States previously denied freedoms. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 afforded women equal opportunities to gain access to the workforce. In an egalitarian society, women, despite race, should be afforded equal leadership opportunities within public school districts. Nonetheless, according to Alston (2000), African American women's position in educational leadership rarely surpasses the principalship. However, contradicting this assertion in 1909, Ella Flagg Young took over Chicago schools and was the country's first woman superintendent (Heffernan & Wasonga, 2017). During her tenure, she proclaimed:

> Women were destined to rule the schools of every city. I look for a large majority of the big cities to follow the lead of Chicago in choosing a woman for superintendent. In the near future, we will have more women than men in executive charge of the vast educational system. It is a woman's natural field, and she is no longer satisfied to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership. As the first woman to be placed in control of the schools of a big city, it will be my aim to prove that no mistake has been made and to show citied and friends alike that a woman is better qualified for this work than a man. (Blount, 1998, p.1)

Young's leadership paved the way for women superintendents; however, African American women were still traditionally regarded as teachers, just as the superintendent position was deemed a position for men (Revere, 1987). Similarly, Edgehouse (2008) contended:

> Although more women lead elementary buildings, men clearly dominate high school principal and superintendent positions. This could indicate an additional barrier to the superintendency in that attaining a high school principalship is rare for women, yet this position is a likely step in the career path of those who have reached the top. (p. 16)

In parallel, Glenn and Hickey (2009) found that consultants also believe that the high school principals' position, due to the relatively high demands is instrumental in preparing for the upward move to the superintendency. Robinson et al. (2017) found that the path to the superintendency differed for men and women. Research suggests that men feel they are prepared to assume the role of superintendent earlier in their careers than women (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Sampson et al., 2015; Young & McLeod, 2001). Additional authors confirm this conclusion; numerous studies document that women do in fact take longer to enter the superintendency than men (Glass, 2000; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Munoz et al., 2014; Shakeshaft, 1989). Typically, men's career path includes the traditional route from teacher, to high school principal, and then superintendent, whereas, women's routes are not as traditional and include teacher, elementary principal, central office staff, and then superintendent (Robinson et al., 2017).

There was scant attention paid to a traceable development of the role of African American women as senior-level school administrators and superintendents prior to 1956 (Revere, 1987). Women of color were not represented in the role of superintendent during this period. Revere (1988) found one deviation. Velma Dolphin Ashley, the first African American woman superintendent, served from 1944-1956 in Boley, Oklahoma (Revere, 1988). However,

Barbara Sizemore was stamped as the earliest African American woman chief executive to lead an urban school district. She was superintendent of Washington, DC, public schools from 1973 to 1975 (Cohen, 2014).

With time came advancement and as women were afforded the right to vote through the suffrage movement, the number of women elected to the superintendency began to increase. According to Revere (1987), "During the 1984-1985 school year, there were 29 Black female superintendents employed, representing 0.18% of the over 16,000 public school districts in the United States" (p. 512). Geographically these women serving as senior-level leaders were stationed across various states. California led with six African American superintendents and the other states led by African American women superintendents included Alabama, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. In an attempt to accurately trace the development of African American women serving as superintendents, Revere (1987) studied the experiences of 22 African American women superintendents. Utilizing interviews, the researcher focused on the themes related to the participants' age, family background, career path, and educational preparation (Revere, 1987). Participants in this study felt that sexism and racism were prevalent causes of the fact that there is a limited number of women who occupy the superintendency. Among other issues, one of the participants claimed that "the phenomenon of the 'superwoman' is responsible for the guilt some women feel if they cannot perform their tasks perfectly" (Revere, 1987, p. 518). African American women struggle to ascend to the superintendency. Revere's (1987) study, one of the first of its kind, was a remarkable opportunity for women of color to document their experiences and let their stories be told through their voices. However, despite the opportunity provided for these women to share their experiences, there was a lack of

research that documented the underrepresentation of women of color in the superintendency, the reasons for their limited participation in the role, and the means by which to address the low number of African American women superintendents. A more comprehensive study that not only documents these experiences but one that describes why these experiences are limited is warranted.

Since 1956, the number of African American women superintendents has fluctuated. Depending on the literature source, the number of women superintendents differs, and it is not easy to find accurate and reliable data (Blount, 1998). The absence of a reliable database detailing the existence of African American women in the superintendency creates barriers to gaining an in-depth understanding of their experiences (Alston, 2000; Jackson, 1999; Revere, 1987). Past research regarding the superintendency has been conducted based on either race or gender; it is very rare that research focuses on the two conjointly. Therefore, African American women are generally placed in one category or the other. As a result, there is a gap in the literature, and the plight of these women is not fully understood.

The Underrepresentation of African American Women in the Superintendency

There is a restricted number of African American women in the superintendency (Alston, 1996, 1999, 2000; Bailey-Walker, 2018; Blount, 1998; Gewertz, 2006; Jackson, 1999; Kingsberry, 2015; Kowalski et al., 2011; Shakeshaft, 1989; Sharp et al., 2004; Tallerico, 2000). In the latter part of the 20th century, Revere (1987) concluded that Black women were practically nonexistent at the top echelons of public-school districts. Decades later, similar to the conclusions of Revere (1987), Brown (2014) posited that it seems that the struggles African American women face regarding obtaining and remaining in the public school superintendency are related to how they are viewed and valued as contributing members of society. Brown (2014)

concluded her study by sharing participants' responses and thoughts, which lend themselves to the assertion that race and gender are significant contributing factors in the ascension of women superintendents. One participant shared: "He told me, he said you were the best candidate and I couldn't in good conscience not vote for you, but others did not, and they did not because of the color of your skin" (Brown, 2014, p. 578). Succeeding the work of Revere (1987) and a decade before Brown (2014), Tallerico (2000) asserted that there are implicit rules for women who wish to be hired as a superintendent. These unwritten rules include "school board members and headhunters (a) defining quality in terms of hierarchies of particular job titles, (b) stereotyping by gender, (c) complacency about acting affirmatively, and (d) hyper valuing feelings of comfort and interpersonal chemistry with the successful candidate" (Tallerico, 2000, p. 37). Even more problematic is the extent to which gender inequity exists in these female leaders' recruitment and retention processes.

Barker contends that "Women are at a disadvantage when it comes to leadership if social roles place them in the kitchen instead of in the office" (Barker, 2012, p. 47). American society has developed preconceived notions regarding women's leadership capabilities. As a consequence, O'Reilly (2015) declared that "A woman has to work twice as hard to be considered half as good" (p. 50). Despite strength in leadership skills, she must decide how to "present herself to others" (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011, p. 114). Society has also developed criteria for how women should behave. There is a modern-day paradox of gender and leadership that exists in society. Women are often perceived less as leaders and more as wives, mothers, and caregivers. In response to this paradox, a nationwide survey of adults living in the continental United States was employed by the Pew Research center to gauge who Americans felt were better leaders, females or males (Cohn, 2008). The study's findings were based on survey

responses from the 2,250 participants and among the reasons cited for the dearth of women serving in top leadership positions were the "good old boys club," discrimination based on gender, and the unwillingness to accept change. All of these reasons contribute to African American women feeling inferior and less likely to gain access to equal opportunities for career advancement (Connley, 2020). Nearly half of the participants felt that the United States was unprepared to welcome a woman as the chief executive officer of a Fortune 500 company (Barker, 2012). The superintendent position is equivalent to that of a chief executive officer; therefore, the comparison of these opinions is applicable to the superintendency and how society views the capabilities of women.

For years, attempting to break the "glass ceiling" has been arduous for African American women. The "glass ceiling" refers to the invisible obstacles faced by women aspiring to senior-level leadership positions (Dobie & Hummel, 2001; Johnson, 2017; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). "The glass ceiling may have a few cracks but has not been shattered" (Barker, 2012, p. 75). Williams (2014) asserted that African American women encounter many barriers during their ascension to the senior-level positions, the glass ceiling is just one of many. Even though the face of the superintendency is evolving and more African American women are assuming the role of superintendent, this growth is still incomparable to that of their White counterparts (Pruitt, 2015) which Maranto et al. (2018) labeled as a "serious imbalance." According to Young et al. (2018), as a result of stagnant growth, gender gaps will not close until at least 2040. African American women superintendents, labeled as "doubly handicapped" are compelled to confront barriers that White female and male superintendents do not have to (Jones & Montenegro, 1983, p. 22). They are held to a much higher standard and their credibility is often questioned (Pace, 2018). As a result, some African American leaders view their status as double minorities as a major barrier in

ascending to the superintendency (Revere, 1987; Rowan, 2006; Smith, 2010). Brunner and Kim (2010) found that these obstacles include biased selection processes that are based upon damaging myths regarding women's preparedness for leadership positions. Six years prior to the work of Brunner and Kim (2010), Barrios (2004) surveyed local school board members and a group of administrators to include deputy superintendents, assistant superintendents, and superintendents regarding possible factors further perpetuating the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency. Comparable to the findings of Brunner and Kim (2010), the participants in both groups surveyed by Barrios agreed that there were obstacles for women ascending to leadership positions. Six primary factors that cause this underrepresentation were listed:

1. Women have limited administrative experiences overall.
2. Women are inexperienced in handling fiscal matters.
3. Women have limited experience in leadership roles.
4. Women's career aspirations have been placed behind family responsibilities.
5. Women lack personal aspirations to seek administrative positions.
6. Women's family commitments are a priority to career advancement. (Barrios, 2004, p.121-122)

The education profession is dominated by women according to Wallace (2015). In light of this, Tate (2019) questions why the number of women who hold the top leadership position is so limited. Consistent with the conclusions of Barrios (2004) cited above, Superville (2016) found that some women are not motivated to seek administrative posts, as they see themselves as primary caregivers of their families or seek to occupy leadership roles that are more closely linked to working with students (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). According to Superville (2016)

women sparingly go into administration while parenting young children; this is typically not true for men. Marielea (2017), likewise concluded that caregiving responsibilities are generally those of the woman and therefore more likely to affect a woman's career. However, "to know that women superintendents can and do raise children while serving in the role makes the position more attractive to those who do not want to delay seeking a superintendency" (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 85). Taking the notions of Superville (2016) into consideration, obligations to family are a factor in women ascending to the superintendency later in their careers (Glass, 2000; Goffney & Edmonson, 2012; Robinson et al., 2017). Superville (2017) further added to the discourse that some women "simply don't want the job, the hours are punishing, school board politics can be brutal, public scrutiny is intense, and it's not worth uprooting their families" (para. 10).

As women contemplate pursuing the superintendency, there are added stressors surrounding making a choice between family and career (Gresham & Sampson, 2017). These added stressors are a detriment to many women when it comes to attaining and remaining in the superintendency (Bernal et al., 2017). Sampson (2018) added that the balance between professional and personal life also impacts superintendent endurance. Similarly, Tarr (2018) posited that this balance has led to numerous women stepping away from these careers.

Brown (2014) conducted a study of female superintendents of color. This study addressed the ascension of African American women to the public school superintendency and the roles gender and race play in the process. Similar to the conclusions of Brunner and Kim (2010) regarding selection processes, Brown (2014) found that the advancement of African American women in leadership positions is highly dependent on them conforming to the standards of society. Seven years after the work of (Brown, 2014), in an attempt to continue to investigate the

experiences of women superintendents, Johnson (2021) interviewed six African American women superintendents to examine resiliency in the context of the K-12 public school superintendent position. Johnson found that these women continuously had their leadership authority questioned based on society's idea of leadership characteristics and how a leader should look. However, they reported that having strong religious faith aided them in remaining courageous and taking a stand when needed.

African American participants in Revere's (1987) study reported that even in the midst of all the constraints, there were also factors that helped them to be successful as superintendents. Based on the interview data, six factors were highlighted: (1) competence; (2) industry; (3) self-esteem; (4) strength; (5) interpersonal relationships; and (6) productivity. As more African American women ascend the ladder to the superintendency they will need to "continue their persistence, emotional stamina, and strong skills in order to counteract the antagonistic pulls on their way upward" (Revere, 1987, p. 519). A decade later, Alston (1996) noted continuing resistance to African Americans who aspired to the superintendency. Structures and systems continued to block African American women in leadership roles. These included society's preconceived notions of their leadership capabilities, lack of networks that supported ascension to the superintendency, and exclusion from a fraternal network that facilitated the ascension of males, especially White males, to the role.

Insubstantial Portrayal of African American Women Superintendents in the Literature

It is apparent that African American women are not rightly represented in the position of superintendent; nor are they adequately represented in the related research literature. There is a limited amount of research that documents African American women who are serving in the role of superintendent (Alston, 2005; Katz, 2012). This paucity of research corroborates that African

American women in leadership are practically invisible (Cox, 2017). Twenty-five years ago, African American women were not even included in research surrounding the superintendency (Blount, 1998; Glass et al., 2000; Tallerico, 1999). The treatment of African American women in literature by theorists and researchers is insufficient and scarcely recognizes their contributions to educational leadership. Kowalski and Brunner (2011) concluded:

> To be sure, only within the last 20 years have researchers aimed their attention specifically at women superintendents and superintendents of color. Without focused studies of women and superintendents of color, both groups may continue to lack appropriate role models; to believe themselves substandard because they do not fit the norms found in leadership and superintendency literature (studies primarily of White men); to find themselves practicing in ways not mentioned in books on the superintendency; and indeed, to experience limited access to the superintendency positions because criteria for hiring are based on White male norms. (p. 16)

A literature search of African American women and the superintendency results in few studies completed since 2010 that include the perspectives of African American women. This once again magnifies the need for a study of this sort. Grogan (2003) found that research literature addressing the superintendency is very gendered:

> I have thus found it to be very useful to examine the research on educational administration and on the superintendency, in particular, from the point of view that it represents necessarily gendered perspectives: the majority of both practitioners and researchers in the field have been men. This is not to judge such perspectives as good or bad, right or wrong. It is to acknowledge that they are, for the most part, male ones. (p.17)

In an attempt to address the gap in the literature, Cox (2017) conducted a qualitative study utilizing a narrative approach to explore the experiences of five Black superintendents in the U.S. Five themes emerged from this study: (1) the upbringing of the participants, (2) reasoning and motivation for aspiring to become a superintendent, (3) mentoring, (4) spirituality, and (5) the intersection of race and gender. Additionally, Cox found these women to be women who embody remarkable resiliency, with the strength to face and overcome adversity. Johnson (2021) reached similar conclusions. While a handful of dissertation studies have addressed this topic, there is still an insufficient portrayal of African American women superintendents and their lived experiences in other scholarly works (Alston, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2005; Edwards, 2016; Kingsberry, 2015; Shakeshaft, 1989). Gresham and Sampson (2017) cite this insufficient portrayal as a major barrier in women ascending to the superintendency.

Superintendent Representation in North Carolina

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded. Despite the efforts of the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights' attempts to prohibit discrimination based on gender, there remains an apparent gender gap in the public school superintendency in North Carolina. During the 2007-2008 school year in North Carolina, there were only two (1.73%) African American women superintendents (Angel et al., 2013). With time, the number of African American women superintendents started to increase. More than ten years later, among the 115 superintendents in the state of North Carolina in the spring of 2021, 85 (74%) were male, and 30 (26%) were female (Hart et al., 2022). Therefore, gender diversity is present in the position, but it is limited. Of the 85 male superintendents, 68 (80%) were White and

seventeen (20%) were African American. In regards to the 30 females who were active superintendents in the spring of 2021), 21 (70%) were White, eight (27%) were African American, and one (3%) was Latinx as reported by Hart et al. (2022). There is a presence of African American females in the superintendent's office in North Carolina; however, they are still proportionately outnumbered by White males and White females. According to historical data, there has been some progress made in North Carolina over the past two decades. In 2000, 15 (13%) of superintendents were females. By 2010, a slight increase was reported as 17 (15%) of superintendents were females. As the position and the state continued to evolve, a much more significant increase was reported between 2010-2021. As noted above, Hart et al. (2022) report that in 2021, "North Carolina had 30 (26%) female superintendents" (p. 4). Between 2010 and 2021, the number of female superintendents doubled as North Carolina moved towards being more diverse.

Notwithstanding the increase in the number of females in the superintendent position, males continue to dominate the position in North Carolina. Twenty-five of the 30 women superintendents were experienced educators who worked their way up the ranks; however, they were new to the position of superintendent (Hart et al., 2022). Only six of the 30 had more than five years of experience. Of those six, three had between six to ten years of experience, and the additional three had more than ten years of experience (Hart et al., 2022). Women superintendents were disproportionately represented in the state. It is useful to note that, in 2021, there were 19 women superintendents in the North Carolina, which represents 16% of superintendents in the state (Hart et al., 2022).

Additionally, Hart et al. (2022) reported that just like African American superintendents, women superintendents were very likely to be hired in districts in low-wealth counties. However,

as the state continues to diversify, so should the educational leadership workforce. “Although females comprise about 82% of the state’s teaching force, only 26% of public-school districts were led by females in 2021” (Hart et al., 2022, p. 23). Although the state of North Carolina is slowly and steadily making progress, disparities still exist. As of November 2022, the state of the superintendency in North Carolina is comprised as follows: seven (6%) African American females, 16 (14%) African American males, one (1%) Latina female, 25 White females (22%), and 66 (57%) White males (J. Hoke, Executive Director, NC School Superintendents Association, personal communication, October 23, 2022). The state is making progress; however, there is still work to be done in order to achieve a more equitable leadership workforce, one that reflects the diversity of North Carolina public schools and continually keeps pace with the growing diversity of the communities and students they serve. There is still a prevalence of issues of race and gender that have negative impacts on African American women in North Carolina who aspire to be superintendents. Angel et al. (2013) conducted a study of African American women aspiring to the superintendency in the state of North Carolina. According to one participant,

> I really don't think that North Carolina is open and willing to embrace African American female leadership, although I don't think that most North Carolina leaders will ever admit it. Let's be real here for a moment; there are places in North Carolina that I would not apply for a superintendent's position because they don't look like me there and they don't want anybody that looks like me in their town. That is reason enough for me to never apply. (Angel et al., 2013, p. 605)

Theoretical Framework

Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory are the two pertinent theoretical frameworks used to ground this study. These two frameworks were used to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded. African American women are subject to discrimination based on race and gender intertwined (Cook, 2014). Therefore, these frameworks are particularly advantageous as they have both been used in previous research studies to explore the lived experiences of African American women and they are "connected as they think *in* and *between* race, gender and other identities; the acknowledgement and understanding of the simultaneity of oppressions" (Rankin-Wright et al., 2020, p. 116).

Black Feminist Thought

The insignificant number of African American women serving in the role of the superintendent has prompted researchers to investigate causal factors (Glass, 2000). Deemed as one of the first African American researchers to give rise to the need of a theoretical framework, Alston (1999) proposed that "I believe a feminist lens of a particular lens quality is required – a lens that might be called a black feminist lens" (p. 87). Patricia Collins (1986) created Black Feminist Thought to elevate the viewpoints of Black women and to give them a space to share their stories with the world. By reason of Black women being an oppressed group, Collins' aim in the development of the BFT was to adapt feminist theory to include women of color and to clarify these women's experiences. To articulate the viewpoint of African American women. BFT has six basic tenets:

> (1) lived experiences as a criterion of meaning; (2) the use of dialogue in assessing claims; (3) an emphasis on the ethic of caring; (4) an emphasis on the ethic of personal accountability; (5) an emphasis on positionality as an agent of knowledge; and (6) the recognition of 'truth' and the complexity of the pathway toward truth. (Collins, 2000)

It is fitting to explore the perspectives of Black women through the lens of this theory due to the gravity of their struggles; BFT provided a lens to address the intersection of race, gender, and class in the educational system (Cox, 2017). BFT also situated the struggles of African American women in the larger context of social justice (Alinia, 2015). With respect to the topic of my study, BFT centers on the experiences of these African American women superintendents and as a result prompts questions like the following: Why is there such a limited number of Black women in the superintendency in the U.S.? Are women qualified and not applying for the position of superintendent? Do women of color believe that race and gender are barriers to obtaining the superintendency? It is vital to understand the answers to these questions and why Black women are so underrepresented in the superintendency. To gain a proper understanding of the plight of these women, their voices need to be magnified, their thoughts articulated, and truths about their experiences in the world of educational leadership uncovered, as they are the experts of their own experiences.

Furthermore, it was instructive and revealing to explain the social structures of the quandary of Black women superintendents and aspirants through a Black feminist perspective with emphasis on the BFT tenet, lived experiences as a criterion of meaning. This quandary was created by traditions of the past that continue to persist in today's society. According to Collins (1990), "African-American women share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent" (Collins, 1990, para 12). However, even

though Black women face similar challenges, these challenges are not germane to all female leaders. Black women continue to be oppressed based on race and gender (Lomotey, 2019) and BFT provides a lens to understand this oppression and the context in which these challenges occur by examining the interactions of these African American leaders with others within the workplace.

Critical Race Theory

Race and racism are embedded in U.S. culture in general and throughout the educational system as well; they are so enmeshed in public schools that it has been accepted as the norm. In order to closely examine this issue, legal scholars created the CRT movement to analyze the phenomenon of race and to study and transform the relationships among tenets of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Building on the insights of legal studies, CRT attempts to explain African American women's experiences with leadership through the lens of the Black experience. CRT is formulated on five basic tenets: permanence of racism, interest convergence, counter-storytelling, Whiteness as property, and critique of liberalism. More explicitly: (1) permanence of racism suggests that racism is hardly acknowledged, which makes it difficult to address; (2) interest convergence asserts that the self-interests of Whites coincides with progress of civil rights; (3) intersectionality contends that the intersections of a person's identity must be taken into consideration; (4) White privilege acknowledges whiteness as a form of property in a society based upon White dominance; (5) critique of liberalism addresses aspects of a system in which equal rights are not properly executed (Delgado et al., 2012). Questions of why the voices of the oppressed were not surfacing more frequently in scholarly literature began to accentuate disparities in the arena of educational leadership. Despite this fact, African American women

continued to fall victim to the detrimental racial politics that play out in many public-school districts in the U.S.

CRT, which served as a theoretical framework, was employed in this study to inform an intersectional analysis and demonstrate how race and racism manifest themselves in educational leadership throughout the K-12 system. "Intersectionality," a term that emerged from the work of theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, establishes a means to understand how aspects of a person's identity create different modes of discrimination. Through a commitment to intersectionality, CRT recognized that the concepts of racism and oppression are not unidirectional yet; rather, they are more divergent. In accordance with the work of Crenshaw, Collins' work has been pivotal in identifying intersectionality in educational settings (Collins, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2006). Collins (2015) claims, "the term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (p. 2). Since the inception of the term, the realm has been expanded to encompass multiple marginalized groups. The intersectionality of African American women was one of the focal points of this study. Although these women are of the same race, they do not share exact identities. Therefore, it is possible that their experiences are not the same.

Through my research, CRT provided a lens to inspect the lived experiences of African American women superintendents by centering on race and its intersection with the recruitment and retention of these leaders. In K-12 education, CRT provides a means to gain a comprehensive understanding of how African American women superintendents are affected by manifestations of race and racism in the public-school arena and how they navigate "intersectional invisibility" (Smith et al., 2018). CRT also provides a means to "communicate the

experiences and realities of the oppressed, as a first step in understanding the complexities of racism and beginning a process of judicial redress" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 14). Employing CRT as a theoretical framework aligns with the purpose of this qualitative study and affords African American women the opportunity to share their lived experiences of how racism and gender discrimination have impacted their career progression.

Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory informed the research protocol by first lending credibility to the connection of the constructs in the research questions. The theories justify a connection between the constructs of the barriers and challenges faced during ascendency to the superintendency and the constructs of race and gender to the disproportionate representation of African American women in the superintendency. Both theories informed the development of the research questions and the research protocols, including the qualitative research instrument. The theories also provided a lens to study African American women superintendents from a unique frame of reference. Collectively, both theories illuminated a more profound understanding of African American women superintendents and their work.

Chapter Summary

This chapter included a literature review of (a) the history of the superintendency in the United States (US); (b) the historical perspective of African American women as superintendents; (c) the underrepresentation of African American women as superintendents; (d) the insubstantial portrayal of African American women superintendents in literature; and (e) superintendent representation in North Carolina. It also included an exploration of the theoretical frameworks—Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory.

The position of superintendent in the U.S. has been commonly defined by the complex and demanding nature of the position due to the myriad challenges that must be addressed.

Although superintendencies held by women have not received the same scholarly attention as superintendencies held by men, that does not make them any less important. Women, African American women, in particular, face marginalization by gender as they aspire to serve in the superintendency. “African American females are in two groups that have been traditionally oppressed in this country and are fighting to rise to the top of the power structure” (Osler & Webb, 2014, p. 18). Their climb to the office of the superintendent is a laborious one, “often pushing against inhibiting selection criteria that screen them out” (Revere, 1987, p. 511). Historically, they persist and overcome as decades ago these same women were seen as merely “best suited to play the role of mother and housekeeper” (Pruitt, 2015, p. 21). African American women have shown great resilience in overcoming the inferior status designated to them by society. Resilience which according to Klocko et al. (2019) contributes greatly to the tenacity of a superintendent.

This study gave voice to their experiences. Experiences that have not been accurately accounted for by contemporary literature. As society continues to change, the faces of leadership in the U.S. and the voices being uplifted in contemporary leadership should be reflective of those they serve. As the state of North Carolina seeks to change the face of leadership, it is imperative to include voices not limited to White men. For the sake of justice, it is just as important for North Carolina to “make efforts to bring the number of women with leadership positions in closer proportion with the number of women in education” (Sobehart, 2009, p. xii). The perspectives of African American women who have served in the superintendency are the perspectives that should be shared with women aspiring to the superintendency in order for African Americans to be heard and not silenced.

In summary, this research highlighted the need for an equitable leadership workforce in the United States, distinctively in North Carolina. This study seeks to identify barriers and challenges faced by African American women while ascending to and serving in the role of the superintendent. Critically analyzing the experiences of African American women superintendents and their perceptions regarding how race and gender influence their work provided a perspective for female leaders who aspire to ascend to the superintendent position. It also addressed the gap in the literature surrounding African American women superintendents.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded. The study further explored the perspectives of African American female leaders in K-12 leadership roles, specifically as superintendents, about how race and gender influenced their journey toward obtaining their current positions and about factors that impact career progression. Angel et al. (2013) focused on the barriers and challenges faced by those aspiring to the superintendency. This study narrowed that focus to the barriers and challenges faced by African American women while they are serving, or as they served, in the superintendency.

There is a limited number of African American women superintendents in comparison to male superintendents throughout the U.S. The statistics for North Carolina are also reflective of this trend. As of November 2022, the superintendency in North Carolina was comprised of the following: seven (6%) African American females, 16 (14%) African American males, one (1 %) Latina female, 25 White females (22%), and 66 (57%) White males (J. Hoke, personal communication, October 23, 2022).

African American women are underrepresented in the ranks of North Carolina superintendents. The proportion of African American women superintendents was roughly half of the percent of African American women teachers, as only 6% of North Carolina superintendents are African American women and over 11% of North Carolina teachers are African American women (Gordon, 2020; J. Hoke, personal communication, October 23, 2022). Also, as of 2022, the representation of White women superintendents, while considerably lower than the ratio of White women in the population of teachers, was substantially higher than

African American women. White women accounted for 22 % of the North Carolina superintendency, while African American women only accounted for 6% (J. Hoke, personal communication, October 23, 2022). Throughout North Carolina, the demographics of the K-12 public school populations need to be reflected in senior-level leadership positions, including the superintendency. To create systems within North Carolina public schools that are responsive to the needs of the diverse population of students served, the cadre of senior-level school leaders—in this case, superintendents—should be reflective of the multiethnic population they serve.

This exploratory qualitative study was designed to advance the literature about the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. Notwithstanding the number of African American women who possess the necessary qualifications for the superintendent position, a limited number of African American women actually ascend to the superintendency (Pruitt, 2015). The results of this research will better enable policymakers, boards of education, practitioners, and researchers to comprehend the barriers and challenges African American women face as they seek to attain and maintain the superintendency in North Carolina. It will also be helpful in attempting to increase the number of African American women superintendents in North Carolina.

This chapter includes an introduction, the historical underpinnings of qualitative research, the selection of exploratory qualitative research as the appropriate methodology. The chapter continues with an explanation of the research setting and participant selection, a description of the sample population, details of the procedures for collecting and analyzing data. I conclude with a statement of the role of the researcher in the data collection and analysis phases, as well as a description of delimitations and assumptions.

Research Design

Qualitative research offers practices that allow the researcher to systematically gain insight that make the world visible (Creswell, 2013). To affirm this notion, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) assert "that qualitative researchers conducting a basic qualitative study would be interested in "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 24). The essence of this study was to lift up the voices of African American women superintendents and to provide a platform for them to share their stories. A qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study, given its value in fostering a better understanding of lived experiences of the participants and the intricacies of senior-level school district leadership and the need to maximize the voices of these senior-level leaders (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell (2007) proclaims that "we conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study" (p. 40). Thus, this study sought an in-depth understanding of the barriers and challenges faced by African American women superintendents. In recent years, limited research has been dedicated to African American women superintendents.

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of African American women superintendents, I, consistent with the observations of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), focused on "understanding how they interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 5). An exploratory qualitative research design assisted with bridging the gap that currently exists in literature and initiating a means to validate the critical narratives of these African American women superintendents.

Research Questions

In order to explore the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded, the following research questions guided the study:

1. How do African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina describe their career progression in the K-12 educational leadership setting?
2. How do African American women in the state of North Carolina describe the barriers and supports they encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent?
3. What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina regarding the relationship between race, gender, and the underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina?
4. What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina about how race and gender influence their work?

Research Setting

This exploratory qualitative study was conducted in North Carolina. North Carolina is located in the southeastern region of the United States. More specifically, for the purposes of this study, current and former African American women superintendents from North Carolina served as participants. The state of North Carolina was chosen as the research setting due to the alignment of the region's attributes with the purpose of the study and my access to potential participants. Current and former African American women superintendents have served North

Carolina; one of the participants was one of the first African American women to serve in the superintendency in the state. Therefore, their experiences added to and advanced the findings of this study.

Participant Selection

The participant recruitment and selection process were initiated by accessing and reviewing the roster of current North Carolina Superintendents from the North Carolina School Superintendents Association directory of local superintendents. The database features a comprehensive list of current North Carolina superintendents, a photograph, and the name of the districts they serve. Consistent with the guidance of Moser and Korstjens (2017), I used purposeful sampling with a criterion-based approach to identify participants (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Creswell (2013) describes purposeful sampling as a process in which "the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem" (p. 156). This study focused on current and former African American women superintendents in K-12 public school districts in North Carolina. I gained access to former African American women superintendents through professional relationships and communication with two former state superintendents and the executive director of the North Carolina School Superintendents' Association. Twelve current and former African American women superintendents in North Carolina were selected to participate in the study. The participants in this study were purposively selected, and the selection criteria was based on the following:

1. Their service in the public school superintendency in North Carolina for one or more years.
2. Their identification as African American women.
3. Their willingness to participate in the study.

Research Constructs

This section of the study describes the structure of the study and the major constructs that were included in the research questions. The study addressed four research questions, with all four employing a qualitative research methodology**.** The qualitative inquiry in Research Question 1 read as follows: How do African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina describe their career progression in the K-12 educational leadership setting? The research construct in this question is African American women superintendents' descriptions of their career progression in the K-12 educational leadership setting.

The qualitative inquiry in Research Question 2 read as follows: How do African American women in the state of North Carolina describe the barriers and supports they encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent? The two research constructs in this question are a) African American women superintendents' descriptions of the barriers they encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent, and b) their descriptions of the supports they encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent.

The qualitative inquiry in Research Question 3 read as follows: What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina regarding the relationship between race, gender, and the underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina? The constructs in this question are race, gender, and the underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendency.

The qualitative inquiry in Research Question 4 read as follows: What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina about how race and gender influence their work? The research constructs in this question are African American women

superintendents' perceptions of how race influences their work and their perceptions of how gender influences their work. All of the constructs in the four research questions were operationalized through the responses of participants to questions in the interview protocol that is described next.

Instrumentation

This study was designed to collect qualitative data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews using a qualitative interview protocol that includes demographic questions. I developed a qualitative interview protocol entitled Interview Protocol that was utilized to gain authentic accounts of the participants' perceptions regarding their lived experiences as African American women in the superintendency (see Appendix A). The qualitative interview protocol encompassed interview questions that provided insight into African American women superintendents' demographics as well as their perceptions of the superintendency and examined their views of how race and gender influenced their journey towards obtaining their current positions and factors that impact their career progression. The demographic questions included questions that yielded data regarding: (a) age range, (b) marital status, (c) highest degree earned, (d) number of years in the superintendent position in North Carolina, and age at first superintendency. The interview protocol was developed based on the theoretical frameworks, Black Feminist Thought Theory and Critical Race Theory for the sake of giving participants an opportunity to openly share their stories in their authentic voice. Miller et al. (2020) contended that "one important tenet of CRT is recognizing and valuing the experiences and voices of people of color" (p. 272). Using their experiences to speak from the standpoint of an African American woman, each participant in the interviews responded to a set of semi-structured interview questions that assist the researcher in learning about the lived experiences of African

American women superintendents. The questions were categorized as follows: background and path to the superintendency, reflections on the superintendency, the impact of race and gender on the journey to the superintendency, and final recommendations for African American women aspiring to the public school superintendency.

In order to adequately explore the perspectives of African American women superintendents, multiple interview questions supported acquisition of the data necessary to answer the four research questions that guide the study. Interview questions 6-9 produced data that supported answering Research Question 1. The data collected from interview questions 10-14 produced data that permit me to answer Research Question 2. Interview questions 15-17 produced data that supported answering Research Question 3. Finally, the data collected from interview questions 18-19 produced data that permitted me to answer Research Question 4. Other items included background questions (Items 1-5), a general question about advice to aspiring African American superintendents (Item 20), and a closing question that invites any additional information that the interviewee would like to share (Item 21).

In order to ensure alignment between the research questions and the interview questions based on the intent of this study, content validity of the interview protocol was ensured by consulting a panel of experts. The panel of experts included a former North Carolina state superintendent of public instruction and two North Carolina State University faculty members with expertise in qualitative research methodology. The fourth panelist was an African American female superintendent whose perspective who helped me to ensure the content validity of the interview protocol. The members of the panel of experts were recruited based on their expert knowledge surrounding educational leadership, qualitative research methodology, and the experiences of African American women in school leadership. A feedback protocol was

developed to solicit feedback from the panel of experts on the appropriateness of the interview protocol (Appendix B). The panel of experts reviewed the interview protocol and completed the feedback protocol to advise if there were any suggested revisions that should occur to strengthen the content validity. Based on feedback from the panel of experts, the interview protocol was revised appropriately.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to proceeding with contacting potential participants, I secured approval of the study from the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). After the approval of the IRB was secured, potential participants were recruited: I began this process with an email to each candidate (Appendix C). I explained the purpose of the study and requested their consent to participate. The methods and procedures, the expected timeframe for the study's completion, and the protection of confidentiality were explained to each participant. The email also explained that compensation would not be offered for participation. Thereafter, consent to participate in the study was secured verbally from those who agree to participate. I communicated to these individuals that their participation is voluntary, and that they can withdraw from the study at any time they choose without penalty. Upon electing to participate, each participant received an informed consent document to review and, if they still agree to participate, to sign (see Appendix D).

Semi-structured interviews occurred at the time of the participant's choosing and were conducted virtually via the online meeting platform Zoom. To better ensure confidentiality for the participants, the Zoom meetings occurred on a private network of their choosing. Consent to audio record the interview was obtained from each participant prior to the interviews. Participants were advised that the interview would be kept confidential. I used a pseudonym for

each participant during the interview and in the reporting of the results. Additionally, prior to the interviews, all participants were advised that the interview recordings would be deleted three years after the conclusion of the study. Each superintendent was interviewed separately, and each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

The Zoom platform has an audio recording feature that allowed for recording audio during each interview. A secondary audio recording device was also utilized to ensure that the interview is captured in its entirety without error. The Zoom platform also has a feature that transcribed the audio recording of the interview once the interview concludes. All interviews audio was recorded and transcribed via Zoom. Qualitative analytical approaches were used to interpret data collected through interviews. To ensure the accuracy of the transcription and that all interviews are transcribed verbatim, additional transcription software NVivo was also utilized. NVivo allows for the efficient organization of the data set while facilitating both depth and sophistication of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Initiating the coding process immediately after cleaning the transcripts from each interview assisted in ensuring that the interview is captured accurately and thoroughly. “Coding allows the researcher to simplify and focus on specific characteristics of the data” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 5). Participants’ transcripts were coded in the order of when the interviews were conducted. To ensure the precision of the transcript, I compared the audio recordings, the transcripts, and my written notes. This comparison took place multiple times to ensure accuracy.

In order to supplement the audio recordings, I took field notes throughout the interviews to enable me to fully understand the holistic nature of the experiences of each of the study participants, as well as the context in which they were produced. Field notes were also collected in order to document key words or phrases used during the interviews. The observations captured

in the field notes and the interview transcripts were reviewed to identify key phrases that have pertinent meaning to the research questions. Utilizing NVivo, I coded the data according to significance, repetition, and prevailing themes that surface during the interviews. I reviewed the documents multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. Initial codes were identified and grouped using inductive coding. Additionally, I placed initial common themes and patterns in categories and described in descriptive text. The names associated with each category came from the data itself. Developing these categories assisted in fulfilling the purpose of the study. Lastly, it was determined which codes and themes corresponded to which research questions.

To ensure the security of participants' data, I consulted with technology personnel in the College of Education at NCSU and employed tools such as their data encryption services. Additionally, in accordance with the security agreement outlined in the informed consent, I stored all digital files on a password protected drive on a secure university account. There was no public access to the drive. Data was encrypted, and pseudonyms for the participants and districts that they serve (or served) were used during the interview process and the reporting of results. There were minimum risks associated with the study and all recorded data would be destroyed three years after the conclusion of the study to further assure participant confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations established by the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) were followed throughout each phase of the study. Attending to ethical concerns and maintaining integrity is critical to capturing and amplifying the voices of a vulnerable group of study participants (Arifin, 2018). It was equally important to develop an

atmosphere of trust and rapport with study participants, as this study was very personal to them. This aided in amplifying the voices of African American women in leadership. Consistent with the advice of Price et al. (2020), and in light of the limited number of African American women superintendents in the state, safeguards were established to ensure participant confidentiality, to protect participants' privacy rights, and to honor the informed consent. Prior to each interview, each participant received a pseudonym that I used for them throughout the duration of the study. The pseudonyms were given to participants in the order in which the interviews were conducted. Additionally, these safeguards helped to ensure that all participants are spared any emotional, social, or physical harm throughout the duration of the study.

Subjectivity Statement

As an African American woman currently employed in a school leadership position in northeastern North Carolina and who aspires to ascend to the public school superintendency, there is a vested interest in the experiences of African American women superintendents. I started my educational career in 2008 as a fifth-grade mathematics and science teacher. Throughout my 14 years in education I have held several positions of increasing responsibility including dean of students, instructional coach, lead beginning teacher mentor, assistant principal, and culminating in my recent position as a high school principal. My professional career aspiration is to serve as an African American superintendent in North Carolina. In light of the relationship of these professional goals to this research, I was, as the researcher, very conscious of my viewpoint. The elucidation of researcher bias established validity.

As the researcher, I concluded that there is a benefit of utilizing a qualitative methodological approach, as it welcomes reflexivity and allowed me to address my subjectivity in regard to the women superintendents who were interviewed (Berger, 2015). Due to the nature

of qualitative research and its susceptibility to biases, the study was designed to mitigate potential bias on part of the researcher. Potential threats to the study's validity were addressed to enrich the study's credibility. Acknowledging the connection between my professional career aspirations and intent of the study, to avoid bias and ensure trustworthiness, I will, consistent with the guidance of Creswell (2013) and Moustakas (1994), employ bracketing of my personal experiences. Bracketing requires that the researcher suspend "preconceptions or learned feelings" (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 384). I bracketed through a personal journal after each interview. Reflexivity is self-appraisal in research and allows the researcher to "recognize and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation" (Berger, 2015, p. 2).

Trustworthiness

To provide a detailed, rich, and triangulated understanding of African American women superintendents lived experiences, data to address the research questions was obtained from three primary sources: semi-structured interviews, demographic questions, and participant observations. Triangulation allowed conclusions to be drawn for more than one vantage point (Schwandt, 2007). The use of semi-structed interviews allowed me to engage the participants with a set of specific questions and also leaves room for participants to expand upon their answers. Stake (2000) and Yin (2009) agree that triangulation is particularly useful in assessing case study reliability. Throughout this study, I maintained a profound commitment to conducting research that will aid in creating a more equitable educational leadership workforce in North Carolina. With intentions of ensuring that African American women superintendents' voices are uplifted, and their stories are shared, my role as the researcher was to ensure that the data are

collected and analyzed in an ethical, secure, and unbiased manner and that participants have a safe space to share their stories. Also, being attentive to my own personal implicit assumptions and potential biases, I scheduled regular consultations with my dissertation committee to ensure that these potential biases are addressed.

Delimitations of the Study

The primary goal of this research was to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded. Therefore, this study did not include interim superintendents or associate superintendents. This research focused only on African American women who have served or are currently serving in the superintendent position in public schools in northeast North Carolina. Therefore, the study did not address private or non-public school settings. The study was limited to a single state. Participants in this study are African American women superintendents who voluntarily participate. Therefore, findings were limited to the perspectives of these women. The study did not provide data adequate to understanding the nuances of senior-level administrators' perceptions of the barriers and challenges faced by African American women superintendents in other contexts.

Assumptions

This work was entered under the following assumptions:

1. The study participants shared their experiences openly, honestly, and with candor.
2. The study participants were willing to share their stories by virtue of helping African American women who aspire to the superintendency.
3. The study participants would participate without fear of penalty for participating.

Summary

There is a paucity of research on the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in the K-12 educational setting in the state of North Carolina. Hence, there is a compelling need to devote scholarly attention to the lived experiences of African American women superintendents. This study was guided by four research questions that examined the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded. Black Feminist Thought Theory and Critical Race Theory grounded the study's methodology.

A qualitative research approach with an exploratory design was employed to provide me the opportunity to gain a keen understanding of African American women superintendents' perceptions and to ensure that the study was advantageous and replicable. As the demographic landscape of young North Carolinians attending North Carolina public schools continues to evolve and diversify, efforts should be made to diversify the educational leader workforce in hopes of positively changing the educational milieu of all students.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers unfolded. I explored the perspectives of African American female leaders in K-12 leadership roles, specifically as superintendents, about how race and gender influenced their journey toward obtaining their superintendencies and about factors that impacted their career progression. This chapter presents a comprehensive set of findings based on the data collected from one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted with six African American women who were serving as superintendents or who had previously served as superintendents. Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory are the two theoretical frameworks used as a foundation for this study.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section includes a summary of the qualitative methods used to conduct the study. It describes the data collection procedures and the data analysis processes applied to examine and understand the data collected rigorously. This includes a description of the software programs employed to capture and analyze the qualitative data. The second section includes participant profiles that include essential demographic information such as age, marital status, children, and the highest degree earned. The final major section presents the themes related to the research questions and provides an answer for each of these research questions.

Summary of Methods

This section presents an analysis of the qualitative data gathered from interviews conducted with six African American women superintendents in North Carolina. A qualitative research approach was employed to carry out the study. The African American women

superintendents in this study are referred to by pseudonyms in order to safeguard their privacy and confidentiality. There are a limited number of African American women superintendents in North Carolina; the use of pseudonyms allowed me, as the researcher, to de-identify participants and significantly reduce the risk of participant identification. The use of pseudonyms also facilitated unreserved dialogue surrounding the lived experiences of an African American woman superintendent and enabled me to obtain an in-depth examination of these experiences, while adhering to the ethical considerations addressed in Chapter 3. Any information obtained during the interviews that could compromise the participant's identity has been intentionally excluded from this dissertation.

I explored the perspectives of African American women who were serving or had served as superintendents in North Carolina public-school districts. These reflections provided insights regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers had unfolded. The findings in this chapter were organized to address the research questions. The sharing of these women's stories was designed to illuminate their perspectives of what it feels and looks like to be an African American woman in the superintendency in the state of North Carolina.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina describe their career progression in the K-12 educational leadership setting?
2. How do African American women in the state of North Carolina describe the barriers and supports they encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent?

3. What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina regarding the relationship between race, gender, and the underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina?
4. What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina about how race and gender influence their work?

During the first phase of this study, an introductory email was sent to potential participants on March 31, 2023. The purpose of the email was to acquaint potential participants with the purpose of the study and to recruit participants for the study. The introductory email included a description of the purpose of the study and an informed consent form for study participation. The goal of the research study was to recruit at least five to seven participants. Sending this email and a related follow-up ultimately resulted in six African American women superintendents indicating their willingness to participate.

During the second phase of this study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Using the same protocol, I interviewed each participant separately. All interviews were conducted virtually via the online meeting platform Zoom. The audio element of each interview was recorded and transcribed via Zoom. In order to supplement the audio recordings, I took field notes throughout each interview to enable me to fully understand the holistic nature of the experiences of each of the study participants, as well as the context in which they were produced.

This study's results are based on the qualitative data obtained from interviews completed with African American women superintendents. Each interview was transcribed immediately after the interview utilizing Zoom's transcription feature, which allows for audio recordings to be

converted to text. In an effort to conduct a rigorous examination of the participants' lived experiences, I listened to the audio recordings from each interview multiple times. Responses from the interviews were analyzed using NVivo. ATLAS.ti, was utilized as a backup, confirmation tool. This data tool facilitated an analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the superintendent interviews. For data analysis, I chose to utilize an inductive analysis method.

Participant Profiles

At the onset of this study, there were a total of 12 current or former African American women superintendents of K-12 school districts in North Carolina who were identified owing to the fact that they met the criteria for participation. Each of these women had at least one year of experience in the North Carolina superintendency and were currently serving or had served in such a role. All 12 African American women superintendents were invited to participate in the study; six were available and agreed to be interviewed. Of the six who did not participate, none responded to the correspondence requesting their participation. During this study, the six African American women who were serving or had served in the North Carolina superintendent position shared their lived experiences, shed light on their paths to the superintendent position, and provided advice to me as the researcher. For the purposes of this study, the participants were assigned pseudonyms and are referred to as: Dr. Jackson, Dr. Thomas, Dr. Saunders, Dr. Phillips, Dr. Merritt, and Dr. Wilson.

Demographic information was collected from participants these data included age, marital status, number of children, and the highest degree earned. This information is summarized in Table 4.1. These particular demographics were essential to an understating of the lived experiences of an African American woman superintendent. These data provided personal background information about each participant. Each participant identified herself as an African

American woman. Their ages ranged from 42 to 75. Three (50%) of the participants were between the ages of 36 to 45 when they assumed their first superintendent position, and three (50%) were between the ages of 46-55 when they assumed their first superintendent position. Five (83%) are married and one (17%) was single. Five (83%) participants were parents and one (17%) had no children. All participants (100%) held a doctorate. The superintendents' experience ranged from an early career superintendent with one year of experience to a veteran African American woman who had served in the superintendent position and had 15 years of experience. The participants had served as superintendents for over 32 years combined. All of the participants started their careers in the K-12 educational setting as teachers and later served in various positions prior to attaining their first superintendency.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Marital Status	Children	Doctorate
Dr. Jackson	46-50	Married	Yes	Yes
Dr. Thomas	56-60	Single	No	Yes
Dr. Saunders	40-45	Married	Yes	Yes
Dr. Phillips	50-55	Married	Yes	Yes
Dr. Merritt	50-55	Married	Yes	Yes
Dr. Wilson	70-75	Married	Yes	Yes

Biographical Sketches of Participants

In this section I present the profiles of the participants who have been integral to this research study. I have ordered the participants according to their years of service in the superintendency, from fewest years to longest tenured. Through these biographical sketches, I

aim to provide additional context on the diverse experiences and leadership of these participants, adding depth and perspective to the study's findings.

Dr. Jackson

Dr. Jackson was the least tenured among the superintendents included in this study. She had one year of experience in the superintendency in North Carolina. A first-generation college student, Jackson stated that she originally planned to become a nurse because "educators don't make any money." However, she told a story of how she was encouraged and influenced by her high school educators, who "spoke seeds of greatness over her" and recognized her considerable potential. Before assuming the superintendent position, her professional pathway included service as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, priority school's coordinator, and area superintendent in a large school district.

Dr. Saunders

Dr. Saunders was the youngest and second least tenured superintendent included in this study. She had two and a half years of experience in the superintendent position in North Carolina. Dr. Saunders stated that she is "very selective and very intentional" about serving in positions in which she can lead as her "authentic self." Therefore, she did not aspire to be a superintendent; she was fine with being in a less senior position and supporting a superintendent. As was the case with Dr. Jackson, Dr. Saunders shared a story of other individuals seeing something in her that she did not see in herself. These individuals encouraged her to participate in a professional learning opportunity for aspiring superintendents. Before assuming the superintendent position, she pursued a professional pathway that included exceptional children's teacher, reading specialist, instructional coach in a Title 1 school, special education

coordinator/specialist, director of exceptional education, assistant superintendencies in two disciplines, and chief of staff to the superintendent.

Dr. Thomas

Dr. Thomas had three years of experience in the superintendent position in North Carolina. Before assuming the superintendency, she held various roles of increasing responsibility that included service as a teacher, curriculum specialist, assistant principal, principal, director of career and technical education (CTE), director of secondary education, director of AVID, interim exceptional children's director, and a principal coach. She shared that in rural North Carolina, opportunities for upward mobility to the executive leadership role in a school district did not come as often as one would like. Thus, after years of service, she was considering retirement from public education when she was finally asked to apply for a superintendent position.

Dr. Phillips

Dr. Phillips had six years of experience in the superintendent position in North Carolina. Before assuming the superintendency, her professional pathway included the roles of teacher, assistant principal, alternative school director, high school assistant principal, middle school principal, high school principal, director of a principal's program, assistant superintendent, transformation coach, and associate superintendent. She stated that as she transitioned through her professional career and groomed herself to be a superintendent, she always kept in mind that "When I become a superintendent, I want people to be a part of my program and stay the course."

Dr. Merritt

Dr. Merritt had five years of experience in the superintendent position in North Carolina. Before assuming the superintendency, her professional pathway included various professional roles of increasing responsibility, including work in areas of school employment that did not require a professional license. She held jobs as a substitute teacher and bus driver. Upon becoming license, she held posts as a high school math teacher, coach, assistant principal, principal, director of secondary education, director of testing and accountability, director of student services, director of professional development, director of K-12 curriculum, director of career and technical education (CTE), and chief academic officer.

Dr. Wilson

Dr. Wilson was the most tenured superintendent of the superintendents included in this study. She had 15 years of experience in the superintendent position. Before assuming the superintendency, her professional pathway included teacher, school counselor, principal, and assistant superintendent. When asked about her professional pathway, she stated that when she was approached from within the school district regarding the promotion to superintendent, she had not completed her doctoral studies. She shared, however, that she had thought about being a superintendent, and that she therefore accepted the promotion and went on to earn her doctoral degree.

Research Questions

This section comprehensively explains findings that enabled me to answer the research questions used to guide this research. The exploration of the lived experiences of African American women superintendents was guided by the four previously described research

questions. This inquiry led to a clearer insight into how an African American woman experiences leadership in the top position in a public-school district.

Details regarding the alignment of interview questions with each research question are outlined in the instrumentation section in Chapter 3. To facilitate the exploration of each of the research questions, I asked questions that allowed me, as the researcher, to focus on the participants' perceptions of their lived experiences as African American women superintendents. These perceptions amplified and elevated their voices as they were used to inform and expand the body of knowledge surrounding barriers and challenges encountered as they recalled and knew them.

Careful examination of the data collected through participant interviews was employed to address the research questions. Participant responses were organized and aligned to each research question and interview question. Aligning the themes with the research questions enabled an organized approach that yielded important insights. Specifically, this method allowed for the rigorous analysis of the interview transcripts to identify the themes that emerged from the interview data. Additionally, through this process, thematic commonalities in participants' lived experiences emerged, guiding the organization of the findings. Below are findings collected from participants in relation to the four research questions.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 read as follows: How do African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina describe their career progression in the K-12 educational leadership setting? This research question's primary goal was to illuminate participants' formal preparedness and career paths leading to the superintendent role. More specifically, the intent was to expound upon the scope of the participants' educational and professional experiences that

led to their assumption of the senior leader in their respective districts. The following sub-subsection describes the overarching theme and the related subthemes associated with this research question that arose from the participant interviews.

Precursors to the Attainment of a Superintendent Position

Creating an advantageous pathway to the superintendency rests upon a number of factors. This theme addressed Research Question 1, as it centers around those career pathways and the participants' professional and personal preparation for the superintendent position. Within this theme, precursors to the attainment of a superintendent position, three subthemes emerged, each of which contributed to answering Research Question 1– career preparedness, strategies for gaining access to the superintendency, and determination to persevere. Participants shared stories about their career pathways to the superintendent position. Although the reasons participants entered the superintendent position varied, they all emphasized the importance of a sense of certainty before accepting a superintendent position that the position was the right fit. They expressed that it should be a position in which individuals can lead as their authentic selves. Notwithstanding the fact that the superintendency was not originally a career goal for all participants, the opportunity to lead and serve districts as women superintendents was ultimately embraced by each.

Career Preparedness

The subtheme of career preparedness focused on educational training, professional pathways to the superintendency, and the robust professional experiences of each participant. All six of the participants in the study had earned doctoral degrees and held several administrative positions with varying levels of responsibility that prepared them for the superintendent position. When speaking about the highest degree held, none of the participants expressed any concerns

regarding the availability of accessing educational institutions or programs to earn their doctoral degrees.

Earning a doctoral degree is a favorable requisite, yet not a mandatory one for obtaining the superintendent position. However, participants in my study emphasized that having this credential for the superintendent position is immensely important for an African American woman; such individuals are a double minority in this career strata. Dr. Jackson emphasized that she "obtained every credential there was to be able to obtain a position." In a parallel observation, Dr. Thomas shared:

> …you must be prepared when the opportunity presents itself. Make sure you have your credentials in place and try to eradicate anything they could use to close the door in your face. So, you make sure you have everything you need going in so you can put it out there, here's how I look on paper.

Dr. Merritt stated that her original trajectory was not to be a superintendent and that she initially was pursuing only an educational specialist degree. "My intention was only to earn the Ed.S.," she said. But one of her mentors affirmed that "This is a competitive environment, and that I should pursue my doctoral degree; it would make me more marketable." Similar to Dr. Merritt, Dr. Wilson had not planned to be a superintendent when she assumed her first superintendent position. As a result, she explained, "I had not completed my doctoral degree, but I was still selected by the school board; I was so far along in the process that I completed my doctoral studies while in the superintendent position." Unlike the other five participants, Dr. Wilson was the lone participant who assumed a superintendent position before completing her doctoral program.

Strategies for Gaining Access to the Superintendency

Gaining access to the superintendency is seen as a more challenging feat for women than for men as women are perceived to have to work twice as hard to be half as good (O'Reilly, 2015). The organizational structure in which their careers unfolded often limited their opportunities for inter-district networking or professional development offerings tailored to aspiring superintendents; many of the participants offered perspectives about the strategies they utilized to gain access to the superintendency. Among these, participants included building professional reputations around their work ethic, seeking mentors, networking, and gaining a variety of leadership experiences. Dr. Saunders stated that she participated in a professional learning opportunity for aspiring superintendents and utilized the knowledge, leadership dispositions, and skills acquired to gain access to the superintendency. She also elaborated that through an urban superintendent academy, she connected with mentors who assisted her with interview preparation, conducted mock interviews, and provided feedback on her answers to the interview questions. They "reviewed my resume and my entry plan and gave me feedback on that," she said. Unlike Dr. Saunders, Dr. Phillips did not mention any professional development opportunities that she took advantage of while aspiring to the superintendent position. However, she offered perspectives about utilizing her professional reputation, in-depth knowledge of leadership positions closely related to the superintendency, and her experience with engineering and monitoring district initiatives to gain access to the superintendency. She observed that, as an associate superintendent, she:

> …had about eight high schools in my care, an early college in my care, and an alternative school in my care, because of the more regional approach. It was interesting that we were expected to do absolutely everything, everything from testing to the discipline, to the

> hearings, to parent complaints and concerns, to board presentations, to everything was necessary to prepare you for a superintendency. There were no bars held for that; you were to do everything except what was in statute for a superintendent to do.

Dr. Merritt shared some of the same sentiments as Dr. Phillips about utilizing her professional reputation and network to make herself more attractive to school boards and to gain access to the superintendent position:

> I was very well known in the surrounding school divisions and so the opportunity to work with superintendents when I was not a superintendent happened quite often. We had a regional consortium and oftentimes I attended those meetings on behalf of my superintendent when he couldn't go, so those superintendents knew me.

According to Dr. Thomas she was afforded the opportunity to shadow a superintendent in her district. This proved to be very beneficial in developing her skill set and knowledge base for dealing with difficult situations. Those experiences helped her prepare herself for gaining access to the superintendency and being more marketable.

Determination to Persevere

Based on interactions with the participants, determination to persevere is positioned here to portray the sincere sentiments shared by participants about their refusal to allow barriers to prevent ascension to the superintendent position. During the interviews, the emotion was evident in the participants' voices as they shared stories of perseverance; some of the participants' tone and pitch changed as they conveyed their messages. The six African American women superintendents who participated in this study shared different stories of how they had to show perseverance during the process of applying and interviewing for superintendencies. There were references to the limited number of African American women who actually obtain

superintendent positions after completion of their first interview. However, participants also asserted that this limitation did not discourage them from continuing to apply for superintendent positions. Said Dr. Thomas:

> I actually applied for several superintendent positions before I actually received one, and actually, at the time that I received the superintendency, I did not apply. I was asked to apply for that position when I was at the point of retirement.

Dr. Jackson expressed the belief that there was a "good old boys' network when it came to getting superintendent positions." She felt that such a system resulted in the exclusion of women, specifically, African American women, from the superintendency. She later elaborated that she, along with other African American, Hispanic, and White women formed an aspiring superintendent's group. Within this group, they had their "White counterparts to leverage their privilege to help them get interviews in school districts."

This same sense of determination was shared by Dr. Saunders, who stated that she had applied for a superintendent position and did not get an interview. She further explained that she was given feedback from the firm that conducted the search for the new superintendent. Although she had the "experiences and of course the educational requirements," the search specialist said that the school board was looking for an experienced superintendent. Dr. Saunders recognized what had kept her from being able to interview was that she had never been in the role; however, she did not allow this to deter her from applying for other superintendent positions.

In summary, this theme emerged due to the plurality of cited perceptions of formal preparedness surrounding the professional requirements required to gain access to the superintendency and the strategies employed to gain access. It centered around participants'

emotions, perceptions, and personal experiences in relation to career pathways leading to the superintendent position for an African American woman. Through interviews all participants conveyed a message of determination to succeed despite barriers. The perspectives offered by participants offered rich insights for addressing Research Question 1.

Research Question 2

Research Question number 2 was posed as follows: How do African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina describe the barriers and supports they encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent? More specifically, the intent was to examine the obstacles that these women faced as they progressed toward and served in the superintendency. The question also explored strategies and support mechanisms that participants utilized to overcome those barriers. The following subsections explore the three themes and related subthemes from the participant interview data that were associated with Research Question 2. These themes included barriers encountered, supports encountered while ascending to the superintendency, and supports encountered while serving in the superintendency.

Barriers Encountered

Participants spoke openly regarding the barriers encountered while ascending to and serving in the superintendent position. Majority of the participants shared stories that clearly illustrated that their professional experiences and exposure to leadership opportunities did not mirror many of those to which a White male superintendent is typically privy. Within the theme, barriers encountered, three subthemes emerged. Each of which contributed to answering Research Question 2. These subthemes included perceptions about African American women as superintendents, exclusion and isolation, and lack of support. The two additional themes

included the supports encountered while ascending to the superintendency and the supports encountered while serving in the superintedency. Participants shared stories about personal obstacles they had to overcome to gain access to and successfully serve in the position. Dr. Phillips asserted:

> There are very few of us in this day, not many at all. So, when challenges and barriers confront you, you don't really have too many people to call on to assist you, or to sort of talk with. I'm driven by the type of work I do, and the type of work that is needed from me. I still keep children at the center of everything I do. When barriers arise, and they arise frequently, I keep it focused on the children.

The other five participants also shared insights into the personal and professional support strategies employed to overcome those obstacles and barriers.

Perceptions about African American Women as Superintendents

A major hurdle to the superintendency that was described by participants were the perceptions that many members of society have of African American women in leadership roles. Dr. Saunders emphasized that due to this perception of African American women as leaders, especially African American women as superintendents in the state of North Carolina, an individual has to "know when to be silent. You have to be strategic about when to be silent but you also must be strategic about when your voice needs to be heard, so I would say silence is loud." Dr. Phillips voiced that she has been known to have "an iron fist but a velvet glove at the same time." She explained that it takes a great deal of skill and will to lead in these two ways. But, she added, both are necessary in the superintendency, despite the perceptions of others. Reflecting on the perceptions of African American women as leaders, Dr. Jackson added that:

> Oftentimes districts will put African American women in positions in which they are cleaning up a situation, but I've been doing that since the beginning of my career so that's nothing new to me. I went in knowing I could potentially be abused, that it was going to be taxing, and that I would be underappreciated.

Dr. Merritt shared a different perspective and, although she didn't reference the craft of being strategic about when one's voice should be heard, she spoke from personal experience regarding the feeling of other leaders that, because an individual is a woman and African American, she isn't even qualified to have a voice in the room. "African American females are always questioned, whether we had the expertise, we've always had to work doubly hard and we're also scrutinized I think, both on the job and off the job." Dr. Wilson shared similar sentiments about perceptions surrounding whether an African American woman should hold the position of public-school superintendent: "There is always a question, is this the right person that can carry on the high standards we expect?" She also noted perceptions surrounding her age; she shared that she was stereotyped and characterized as being "too young to be a superintendent." She noted that she found this to be very interesting due to the fact that she was entering the position at the same age as many of the White males who dominate the ranks of those who hold the superintendent position. Dr. Thomas expressed that in her district, the perceptions of her leadership ability were grounded in her predecessor's leadership. She felt as if she was "always being compared to what [her] predecessor did and that it felt like it was a competition in the mind of the local board members."

Exclusion and Isolation

Throughout the participants' interviews, there were implications of the superintendency being a part of larger systems that alienate minorities and fail to provide traditional networking

opportunities. Dr. Phillips stated that one of the barriers was being the only female in a male-saturated industry like the superintendency. She was often the only minority and female in the room for most conversations during senior leadership meetings. She gave an example of when her district was building a new high school and she was the only female in the planning meetings. She was in the room and learned to adapt to her surroundings: "You take the opportunity to learn, to insert, and to make sure your voice is at the table."

However, when the conversation turned to exclusion or not having an equal role in decision-making or negotiation, Dr. Phillips stated with confidence that when confronted with situations such as being the only female in the room, "I meet those type of challenges head on, they don't shake me." Dr. Thomas added that when she attended state level superintendents' meetings, "there were very few people who looked like me. It was heavily dominated by White males and the good old boys' network could easily be observed as people worked the room." Dr. Saunders described the superintendent position as isolating, "the superintendency in itself is an isolated position, and our numbers are dwindling and more often than not Black female superintendents are then being replaced by White males." Dr. Wilson echoed the sentiments of Dr. Saunders, "the superintendent position is a lonely position and you have to work and learn how to manage it without losing your faith. Your faith is a major part of this."

Lack of Support

Participants shared that there were limited support mechanisms in place for an African American woman superintendent, whether aspirant, novice, or experienced person in the role. Dr. Saunders echoed the sentiments shared by the other participants and shared a personal story regarding how the systems of supports for superintendents were not equitable. She described a

time she was attending a conference for school and district leaders in North Carolina. She recounted that she:

> ...went to a session that talked about essentially this very thing. The lived experience of superintendents. And so, I was just interested in the data and what some of the trends were. There was a superintendent in the room who was a White male. He said that there was a strong network of superintendents and that we have a lot of support here in North Carolina, and from the day he walked in the doors he felt valued and supported. I raised my hand and I said, you know, I'm glad to hear that is your experience; however, I must say no, I would be remiss if I didn't share that is not my experience, especially as a Black female superintendent who came from another state.

Dr. Thomas affirmed that one major barrier is not having the network that you really need. She noted that the absence of people who can relate to and understand the struggles of a Black woman in the superintendency makes the role very difficult and forces one to work in isolation. Dr. Jackson added that there was such a lack of support for women in leadership that she and other women she knew took matters into their own hands and formed their own network. In this network, they leveraged the privilege of their White female counterparts to help gain access to opportunities and interviews. However, she observed that the support of such a network, while useful, was not co-extensive among White and Black women. She stated that she had seen White women who did not even have the credentials to be superintendents leverage their contacts with male counterparts to get what they wanted. She went on to say that "when it comes to strategically supporting African American Women as superintendents, that is non-existent in this state because what we endure is different from what our counterparts endure."

Supports Encountered While Ascending to the Superintendency

The participants spoke extensively regarding the barriers encountered as they ascended to and served in the superintendent position and one of those major barriers was lack of support. However, there were some instances in which participants spoke of the supports that they did, in fact, encounter in their progression to the superintendency. Even in the absence of formalized systems of support, participants acknowledged that they had individual mentors who provided support. Dr. Thomas shared that as she ascended to the superintendency, she had a superintendent who allowed her to shadow them and to observe them dealing with difficult situations. She explained that "having a superintendent who actually let you get a feel for things that they had to do from day-to-day and some of the problems that landed on the superintendent's desk" was very helpful. Much like Dr. Thomas, Dr. Merritt had an opportunity to work with superintendents before she was a superintendent; these leaders provided her opportunities to attend regional meetings and observe superintendents in action. Dr. Saunders participated in an urban superintendents' academy for aspiring superintendents that consisted of training sessions, networking, and support from superintendents and school board association representatives from across the country. She relied heavily upon the relationships and training that came from the academy.

"People always saw something in me that gave me the opportunity," shared Dr. Jackson as she spoke about leaders who had mentored her. One in particular saw her authenticity, drive, and passion for her work and supported her journey to the superintendency. In a very passionate tone, Dr. Jackson spoke about a White female she met at a professional development session. This individual became her coach and more. "I called her my guardian angel; one day she looked at me and she said you exude the superintendency, you are a superintendent."

Supports Encountered While Serving in the Superintendency

In addition to describing supports that they encountered in their ascendency to the role of superintendent, the participants described support provided while they served in the role. Dr. Thomas observed that the North Carolina Superintendents Association provided support once she assumed the position of superintendent. She recalled receiving trainings that were "germane to the superintendency;" this professional development was based on the experiences of practicing and retired superintendents who, as she stated, "have endured the test of time." Dr. Merritt also mentioned the North Carolina Superintendents Association and quarterly superintendents' meetings,

> …to be a part of these professional learning sessions and the consortium that superintendents belong to in our respective regions really was a great support for me. For any superintendent, whether you have no years of experience or seven years of experience, it's a great opportunity to be a part of the collective, and to learn from what others are doing in their school division.

Dr. Merritt added that annually she would attend a women's superintendent retreat that was very beneficial to her leadership as well.

Having individuals support them in the role of superintendent was a reoccurring theme throughout the participant interviews. Dr. Saunders was able to leverage the networks formed through the previously-mentioned urban superintendents' academy to assist her while starting her journey toward the role. "One of the attorneys that's associated with the group negotiated my contract," she said. She also mentioned the mentors and connections that she made provided her with people whom she can rely upon. There are some structured supports for superintendents of

color in North Carolina; she highlighted the convening of an annual meeting for superintendents of color.

Dr. Wilson took a different and more personal approach to answering the question regarding support and indicated that her faith was one of her supports. She also relied on her family.

> I had to have a family support system and I had a very strong support system. My mother, who was a teacher at the time, would come help me with my children, and my husband and I learned how to make sure our children were not compromised by two professionals early in their careers.

In summary, Research Question 2 addressed the barriers and supports that these African American superintendents encountered as they aspired to and served in the superintendent position. The participants were very vocal in sharing experiences and wisdom that addressed both. There were commonalities in their descriptions of the barriers encountered. However, in their descriptions of things that facilitated their journeys, they all told a different story about how they received support and from whom they received that support. Through the interview questions aligned to Research Question 2, the essence of the participants lived experiences in regard to obstacles and opportunities was captured. Similar to Research Question 1, throughout the interviews, all participants conveyed a message of determination to succeed despite barriers.

Research Question 3

Research Question number 3 was posed as follows: What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina regarding the relationship between race, gender, and the underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina? More specifically, this research question's primary goal was to enable me to

understand and expound upon participants' perceptions of whether race and gender impact ascendency of women of color to the superintendency in North Carolina. The following subsections explore the themes for the participant interviews that were associated with Research Question 3. The women with whom I spoke described at length the relationship between race and gender and the inequities that they encountered. Participants shared personal stories detailing how, because of the intense and confluent biases attached to race and gender, they were discriminated against, excluded, and sometimes sabotaged.

Males continue to dominate the superintendent position in North Carolina; this disproportionately is manifested profoundly in the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency. This paucity in the ranks is even more stark among African American women. Regarding this underrepresentation, participants were very forthcoming and expressed their perceptions of how race and gender directly impacted their journey to or within the superintendency. Within these conversations, three themes emerged. These three themes were inequity in pay, discrimination based on perceptions of African American women as leaders, and professional sabotage. Each of these contributed to my answering Research Question 3.

Inequity in Pay

Participants clearly described inequities in their pay compared to the compensation provided to their male counterparts. This, they believed, contributes to the resistant gender pay gap. Three of the six participants offered perspectives on how, even after negotiating their contract in some cases, they still were not adequately compensated. These three participants shared personal stories detailing how the inequities in pay manifested itself in their service as superintendents. Dr. Thomas stated explicitly that while negotiating her contract,

> I really felt that being a female superintendent, I was grossly underpaid compared to one of my male counterparts in a neighboring district. I was paid $30,000 less than my counterpart, although I had just as much experience. I do believe my gender played a role in why they felt they could lowball me with salary.

Others spoke of the inequity in the pay that they received by their compensation to what superintendents with the same credentials received in surrounding districts. Dr. Wilson expressed that when she spoke to the board of education about a potential move to another district, a board member suggested that the current board should have been paying her more. This member urged the board, in an effort to retain her in the district, to pay her more than she would receive if she accepted the job that she had been offered. The board member even offered to make up the difference in pay. Dr. Wilson explained: "He's wealthy, very wealthy, but as a board member, he couldn't use his personal resources to supplement the salary."

Dr. Meritt also shared concerns regarding inequity in pay; she applied for an assistant superintendency in a neighboring school district and was offered the position; however, she was not offered the title held by the person previously in the role, nor was she offered a pay raise. She asserted, "Not only was [the former assistant superintendent] afforded $15,000 more for holding the position, which they didn't give me, nor the other female candidates, they moved to a business model and changed the titles of the position." As a result, Dr. Merritt asked to speak to the board because "I felt that was unfair, and they didn't budge on the pay increase, which is another opportunity of inequitable practices, especially for being female and African American, and unfortunately we're still battling this." Dr. Merritt emphasized that when she assumed her first superintendent position, she had to negotiate quite a bit with her contract. In spite of this,

she was offered a $25,000 decrease from the salary paid to the former superintendent, an African American male.

Discrimination Based on Perceptions of African American Women as Leaders

As double minorities, African American women superintendents have the belief that they must be better qualified, matriculate through the best educational leadership programs, and portray what society generally expects to see in an educational leader regarding what it takes to be a female superintendent. Participants acknowledged that they experienced discrimination due to both race and gender. As a result of this discrimination, their leadership abilities were always questioned and under close scrutiny. These participants uniformly held the perspective that there are still people in the state of North Carolina who question if a woman, especially an African America woman, can handle the superintendency. Dr. Jackson expressed these sentiments regarding leading and serving a community that doesn't look like one's self,

> …being an African American female in Nascar county is no easy feat; they were skeptical, so I really had to forge my way to help people see me other than the skin I was in and just try to change the hearts and minds of preconceived notions. I did experience institutional racism at its best, and it was the first time that I had ever been confronted with that type of racism.

When Dr. Saunders was asked to describe a time in which she felt race or gender directly impacted her journey to or within the superintendency, she jokingly responded, "Gosh! How much time do you have?" She described when she faced uninvited comments about her relaxed hair, a form of microaggression. She was told that the only way she would be able to serve in an urban district was if she had natural hair. She further explained that the comment came from a

person of color and that she did transition to natural hair and has been natural for about three or four years.

When responding to the same question regarding a time race or gender impacted her work as a superintendent, Dr. Phillips shared that it happened regularly. “It’s one of those things if you expect it to happen, then it doesn’t catch you off guard, and you are prepared for it, and it doesn’t hurt as bad when it does. She also added that “learn how to navigate the different populations and the different audiences and learn to use it as an advantage and not your disadvantage.” Dr. Merritt, from a personal perspective, affirmed that one of her children is biracial and that she had to move her child from a school district due to what she coined as jealousy. “[My daughter] was never good enough,” and everywhere she went, she was either the “White girl,” or the “Black girl.” Consequently, moving her child to another school district sparked fuel in the community to the point that people started to find fault in everything she did. Dr. Merritt also shared that race impacted her work as a superintendent because of who she chose to marry. There was even an instance when a board member blatantly commented: “If I knew who she was married to, I may not have voted for her.” Dr. Wilson added, “you know we get a bad rap in terms of what people say we are.”

Ironically, there were rare instances when race/gender served to open opportunities. Dr. Jackson offered thoughts about the degree to which her selection as superintendent was in itself, a form of stereotypical assumptions about what the role in a given location called for based on race. She shared these observations in response to the interview prompt, “describe a time in which you felt race or gender directly impacted your journey to or within the superintendency,” Dr. Jackson responded, “That’s every day. Well, I think I’m in my district because they knew

they needed or felt like they needed to hire an African American, but they wanted the best African American they could find because they had racial issues previously."

Professional Sabotage

While it was not a dominant theme among participants, two of the six individuals gave accounts of instances in which their success was deliberately sabotaged by others. Their experiences with professional sabotage were comparable; however, they were not identical in nature. That said, in each case the participant felt as though their professional work and credibility was being undermined. Described as the worst situation she faced during her tenure as a superintendent, Dr. Wilson described a time when her efforts as a superintendent were intentionally discredited. Her district was participating in a research study regarding the age students reached puberty. The appropriate action steps were taken, as the study was approved by the board of education, and parents provided consent for their children to participate. However, the study created tension and claims of professional irresponsibility,

> …one new board member and his wife went to the press without coming to me, as the superintendent, or going to the board. The press blew up the situation, and it continued for weeks. There was something in the newspaper about it every day and the board member deemed it irresponsible on my part. He was just determined to make my life miserable.

Dr. Saunders shared a story of how individuals deliberately sought to sabotage her success as well. An anonymous tip was made to a local media outlet in regard to Dr. Saunders' integrity in a matter that pre-dated her service in this superintendency. Extraordinary efforts were made by the individual(s) behind the allegation to substantiate the claim. However, Dr. Saunders understood that the issue for which she was targeted camouflaged the actual concerns of the

individuals behind the allegations. She was emphatic that these efforts to discredit her were due to her race and her focus on anti-racist equity work.

In summary, Research Question 3 addressed how race and gender correlate to the underrepresentation of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. The participants emphatically addressed their perceptions of how these constructs were related. The participants attributed the underrepresentation of African American women superintendents to inequities within the superintendency that were stimulated by race and gender. The participants' interviews made it apparent that they felt that these inequities and the exposure to racism and gender bias within the superintendency can have a negative impact on female aspirants and deter them from pursuing the position. Through the interview questions aligned to Research Question 3, the essence of the participants lived experiences in regard to how race and gender affects their work was captured.

Research Question 4

Research Question number 4 was posed as follows: What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina about how race and gender influence their work? More precisely, this research question's primary goal was to enable me to understand and expound upon participants' perceptions of how race and gender impact the work of women of color serving in the superintendency in North Carolina. The following subsections explore the themes from the participant interviews that were associated with Research Question 4. Several participants asserted that race and gender influenced their work regularly, sometimes on a daily basis. Regarding this influence, participants were very vocal and described numerous ways that race and gender impacted their work as the top educational leaders in public school districts throughout North Carolina. Within these conversations, three themes emerged. These three

themes were narrow band of superintendent openings, societal perceptions of African American women's leadership capabilities, and too few African American women superintendents.

Narrow Band of Superintendent Openings

Due to barriers in the career pipeline and inequities in the efforts to recruit African American women, the participants in my study believed that their opportunities for the kind of career advancement that led to a superintendency and from there, to more prestigious superintendencies, were limited. Statistically, women of color tend to lead urban school districts and serve communities with a larger population of people of color (Robinson, 2017). As a result, participants clearly expressed that race and gender influenced the journey to the superintendency. One of the initial ways that race and gender influenced their work was the compelling need for some to accept the first superintendency offered because those offers weren't plentiful. The majority of the superintendencies in North Carolina were held by White males and when they left these seats to explore other professional opportunities the majority of vacancies were filled by White males. This, coupled with a weak pipeline to the superintendency for African American women in North Carolina, meant that the superintendent openings that these participants perceived that they could attain were few in number. Dr. Thomas said, "You have to wait so long until a position becomes available because people stay in the superintendent position for a while; therefore, you have to be flexible and mobile and able to move when a position becomes available." Dr. Merritt added to this observation about mobility that there are increased numbers of opportunities in other states, "There are more female superintendents in Virginia and other states." Regarding being strategic about attaining a superintendent position, Dr. Jackson contended that, in some instances, African American women leaders had to learn to leverage their White counterparts to even get a "foot in the door." She continued by observing that, if they

"bless your name, you're going to get in some doors." Dr. Jackson also added that for that reason, "I think far too often we take what we can get because we get so excited about an opportunity." Throughout the participant interviews, there was a sense conveyed that a buddy system existed in North Carolina, one in which men referred and preferred other men for superintendent positions.

Despite the narrow band of superintendent openings and pressure to accept the first position available, two participants contended that as African American women, you have to be very selective and intentional regarding accepting a superintendent position. Dr. Phillips shared that in some cases, she felt that women sometimes want the title "quick, fast, and in a hurry." She stressed that she didn't just want the superintendency to want it, and despite race or gender, she always "did her homework to make sure it was a good fit for her personality." Similar to Dr. Phillips, Dr. Wilson claimed that when one receives an offer for a superintendency, it is imperative to ensure that it is a good match. She emphasized that if an applicant perceived that she could not count on a unanimous vote among board members, she needed to conduct due diligence to see if the prospective superintendency is right for her before taking the position.

Societal Perceptions of African American Women's Leadership Capabilities

Participants acknowledged that societal attitudes have shifted towards acceptance of African American women as superintendents: however, there are still North Carolinians who fail to warmly receive the idea that a woman, especially an African American woman, could be the top educational leader of a school district. There is still the lingering question among many as to whether minority women can lead. Participants offered personal frames of reference regarding race and gender being ever-present barriers that they faced and would continue to face as they continued to do the work. Some participants even shared that, once they attained the

superintendency, one major hurdle was the lack of trust and confidence; some constituents constantly questioned if they could successfully lead a school district. Dr. Jackson asserted:

> I think they can't deal with how knowledgeable we are. I think people just have trouble yielding to us as the true leader, but we've been leaders since the day they brought us to this country. We carried their families, our families, and everyone else's families, and we don't know any other way of being. This is what we do, and I have embraced who I am. Yet, for some reason, I feel they are afraid of putting us in these positions because we're going to be too successful, too powerful, and they don't want all of that.

Dr. Thomas maintained that some people still have the idea that "this a man's job, you know a man should be leading versus a woman. Men can do a better job at this because it's a tough job." In a very passion-fueled tone, Dr. Thomas voiced, "Yes, it's a tough job, but there are tough women too." Several participants cited the lack of trust and confidence and belief in their professional abilities as major detriments in their work. Dr. Merritt explained that she even saw this disbelief in a woman's ability from some local board of education members.

> Well, the boards have the hiring authority and because we still have board members that just don't think an African American woman can do it until after the fact or it's done somewhere else, and that's unfortunate but that's the reality.

According to Dr. Wilson, race and gender are still impediments; when an individual represents both African American and female demographics, some prejudice comes into play because one is appointed by the board, and some boards continue to play into stereotypes about African American women.

Too Few African American Woman Superintendents

An old adage speaks of strength in numbers. Participants in my study spoke of the ways that they and their counterparts are weakened by the inverse condition; African American women are still not proportionately represented among the state's superintendents. The interviewees believed that, compared to their White counterparts, they faced greater likelihood of disconnection and viable support mechanisms. With these perspectives in mind, participants shared thoughts about disadvantages of being African American women superintendents in North Carolina.

Dr. Thomas spoke openly about not having adequate networking structures in which she could share "...things that you really need to eradicate without getting back to your board members. One major disadvantage is the lack of networking opportunities with people who look like me and have worked in the same context." Dr. Merritt agreed, asserting that the chief disadvantage is the miniscule number of African American women superintendents in the state. The number of current African American women superintendents in North Carolina is less than 10. She used the term unfortunate to describe the conditions. Dr. Saunders was more emphatic, declaring that it's almost like Black females don't exist in the world of educational leadership. There are "so few of us that we can often be overlooked or dismissed easily, particularly by colleagues."

Although not all participants shared that they experienced the same disadvantages, the concerns outlined above each appeared multiple times among the participants' accounts of experiencing the superintendency as an African American woman. Unequivocally, all participants agreed that strategies need to be implemented in an attempt to diversify the North Carolina superintendency.

In summary, Research Question 4 addressed how participants perceived that race and gender influenced their work as superintendents in North Carolina. The participants all listed both race and gender as barriers that impeded their work even before it began. The participants' interviews made it evident that despite their talent, educational background, and skillsets, African American women superintendents' work is and will continue to be impacted by race and gender. Through the interview questions aligned to Research Question 4, the essence of participants' lived experiences in regard to how race and gender affected and continue to affect their work were uplifted.

Ancillary Findings

Participants offered advice to other African American women in educational leadership who aspire to serve in the superintendent position. Participants were afforded the opportunity to offer words of wisdom about becoming a superintendent, to forewarn aspiring women about possible barriers, and to share advice regarding how to overcome those barriers. Participants encouraged future superintendents to seek mentorship, to demonstrate strength and resilience, and to lead with authenticity.

The Importance of Mentorship

The issue of limited structured support mechanisms for African American women superintendents was referenced multiple times throughout the participant interviews. In light of this, it is perhaps not surprising that the most-frequently mentioned piece of individual counsel for prospective and serving African American female superintendents was the importance of seeking mentorship. Unequivocally, all participants stressed the importance of having mentors and a strong network of support. Dr. Jackson affirmed that mentorship is essential: "If you don't have a mentor, you are going to perish. You will have to open your mouth and you can't stay in

your own grouping. You have to cross racial boundaries." Analogously, Dr. Thomas shared that it is advantageous to have a mentor or mentors and to connect with good mentors who will be willing to share things you will encounter in this role. "There may be times when things take place and you just need someone you can trust and feel assured that what you say won't be featured on the five o'clock news. That professional mentor is the cursor who can steer you in the right direction." Dr. Saunders emphasized that, "having a mentor is not an advantage but a necessity." She advised aspirants to be open, vulnerable, and willing to connect with other people in educational leadership. The interviewees believed that mentorship is critical to one's success as a superintendent. Dr. Phillips shared that it is…

> …woefully irresponsible to not have a mentor. Just because you're a superintendent doesn't mean you have hit the pinnacle of learning. So, to sit in the seat without someone to call upon, someone to lead you, or someone to bounce ideas off of is irresponsible. I think every leader with a seat on the bus needs a mentor for at least the first two years.

Participants also indicated that mentorship was necessary to help meet the need of practicing superintendents of informational support. Dr. Merritt maintained that "you need to be able to phone a friend whenever it's needed, a circle of people you can call anytime, to ask anything." Dr. Thomas concluded by sharing, "once you're in the position, connect with the right people, have the right mindset, stay positive, and have some balance in your life."

Demonstrating Strength and Resilience

Two participants emphasized the importance of balancing aspiration with the realities of the job. They indicated that experiencing the superintendency as an African American woman comes with strenuous, all-encompassing demands. In the face of such rigorous expectations, they

noted the importance of being strong and being resilient. Dr. Jackson said of the superintendency,

> You may want to aspire to it, but everyone is not built for it. A lot of people only see the glory of the job. You have to be able to get a collective group of people to carry out a vision and a district plan, you have to know how to problem solve, [and] remember the board is your boss. If you can't take being criticized, talked over, or disrespected, you shouldn't go into it. You have to take the good with the bad.

Participants all shared that attaining and being successful in the North Carolina superintendency was no easy feat. As a result, Dr. Thomas stressed that strength in the superintendency means that aspirants should, "have your credentials in place, be competent, and mobile. You will be an anomaly, so you have to be prepared." She also stressed, "have tenacity and resilience and keep applying if you don't get the position the first time." Dr. Thomas added that a dimension of strength and resilience is self-care. "Don't make it all about work; make sure you take care of yourself and spend time with your family and friends."

Leading with Authenticity

Throughout the participant interviews, participants shared stories of facing adversity and a variety of challenges; however, in their advice to aspiring superintendents, they all echoed the importance of showing up as one's authentic self and remembering the purpose behind the work. Dr. Saunders observed that she leads with authenticity and prides herself on showing up as her authentic self. "Know who you are and who you are not. Don't you back up, don't you blink, and don't flinch." Consistent with Dr. Saunders' advice, Dr. Merritt offered,

> Never let them see you sweat and always keep your composure. Know you have to be a purposeful, visionary, and strategic leader in everything that you do. Don't allow anyone

> to compromise your ethics because at the end of the day you want to make sure you can sleep in conscious. You want to work in a manner that when you're gone, they realize what they lost. Lastly, you have to want to be a superintendent, it's long hours, and if not you, who is going to be there for the students?

Dr. Wilson also advised that aspirants especially be self-aware and true to their beliefs.

> One shouldn't get stuck in thinking that as far as you can go is the assistant superintendency and it shouldn't take you forever to reach the superintendency. It's a mindset, question yourself and be sure that you can do the job. Look at profiles and backgrounds of women who have been successful in the position in and outside of North Carolina in preparation as well. Women, especially African American women have to have a doctorate so go ahead and pursue the doctorate. Also, know yourself, your values, your beliefs, your commitments, and your personality.

Sizing Up Opportunities

As participants offered advice to African American women who aspire to the superintendency, they cautioned that it is very essential to make an informed, knowledgeable decision when choosing a superintendent position. It should be the right superintendency, one that fits the candidate's leadership profile, her professional aspirations, her personality, and her family. The superintendent's and school board's understanding of their different roles, along with the relationship between the two parties, are critical to the success of a superintendent. Dr. Jackson advised, "Interview your board, determine what they can bring to your life. Are they going to deplete you? Or are they going to add to you?"

Dr. Phillips warned aspirants "not to aspire too soon, make sure it is a good fit for your personality and for your family." She also added, "Do your homework because wanting the right

superintendency is important. Know your worth when negotiating your contract. Also, make sure you nurture the relationship with the board."

Throughout the interviews, the message of sizing up leadership opportunities, despite the fact that these opportunities may be few in number, was repeatedly mentioned. Dr. Thomas concluded with "when the time comes, apply, don't get frustrated…be patient."

Chapter Summary

This chapter addressed the findings in my study. The findings are organized around the study's research questions and the themes that emerged during the data analysis phase regarding the perceptions of African American women and their lived experiences as superintendents in North Carolina public school districts.

The predominance of White males in educational leadership and serving on boards of education can pose challenges for African American women that lead to exclusion, isolation, and discrimination. Coupled with concerns about societal perceptions of African American women not being capable of leading school districts, participants perceived that they were in a continuous battle to have people see their leadership potential and not just their skin color. Participants explained that it was difficult to garner trust and to get stakeholders to see that they were capable of planning strategically and making decisions for a school district. Participants had clearly experienced that these challenges are heightened for African American women who aspire to and serve in the superintendency. The participants regarded the role of superintendent as one with substantial time demands and pressures, one in which they continuously had to prove themselves, and one that is very political.

In spite of their concerns about the particular and significant challenges for African American women in the superintendency, participants still shared sentiments about the position

being rewarding and underscored these reflections with stories of triumph. Two participants reveled in the belief that being a superintendent who is both African American and a woman sends a message to young girls of color: “If I can, so can you.” Dr. Saunders asserted, “We are just amazing; for little Black and Brown girls to see a Black female superintendent is overwhelming,” and it is inspiring for them to “see a positive image of someone who looks like them.”

Through participant interviews, there were instances in which the participants proudly spoke about the impact they believed that they were making on future generations, generations of children who look like them and can look up to them. However, they underscored all that they said with a firm message about the pressing need for change in access to the North Carolina superintendency and to acceptance by constituents of a fully representative corps of individuals in the role.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Chapter 5 provides a summary and a discussion of the significant findings developed out of the participants' lived experiences as reported in Chapter 4 and the conclusions drawn from the study. The chapter addresses the implications of these findings in light of relevant research and theory and as policymakers and practitioners review current practices and policies surrounding the superintendent position. This chapter concludes with the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers unfolded. In particular, I explored the perspectives of African American female leaders in K-12 leadership roles, specifically as superintendents, about how race and gender influenced their journey toward obtaining their superintendencies and about factors that impacted their career progression. In order to execute this study and collect data, I utilized a qualitative research design. After the participant recruitment phase, six participants were identified and confirmed. To explore the African American women superintendents' perceptions of their lived experiences and to uplift their vantage point of the superintendency, I conducted a semi-structured interview with each individual. The qualitative interview protocol enabled me to capture not only the participants' perceptions of how race and gender impact their work, but the raw emotion and impassioned tone of voice associated with their telling of their stories.

Summary of Findings

In order to acquire a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina, I analyzed the emergent themes developed from participant responses to questions posed during the semi-structured interviews.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina describe their career progression in the K-12 educational leadership setting?
2. How do African American women in the state of North Carolina describe the barriers and supports they encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent?
3. What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina regarding the relationship between race, gender, and the underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina?
4. What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina about how race and gender influence their work?

Research Question 1 examined African American women's career progression within the K-12 educational leadership setting. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant and utilized to gather data an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of the participants regarding the educational and professional experiences that led to their assumption of the senior leadership role in their respective districts. An analysis of the data disclosed that the superintendency was not originally a career goal for all participants; however, it proved to be one that their commitment to making a difference in the lives of young children led them to.

Therefore, later in the professional careers for some rather than others, the superintendency became a reality.

All six of the participants in the study had earned doctoral degrees and held several administrative positions with varying levels of responsibility that prepared them for the superintendent position. Participants urged females aspiring to the superintendency to ensure that they have their credentials in place prior to applying for the superintendency to make themselves more marketable and to decrease any chance of being denied based upon not having the appropriate credentials. Participants shared strategies that they utilized to gain access to the superintendency. Among these strategies, participants included building professional reputations around their work ethic, seeking mentors, networking, and gaining a variety of leadership experiences. All six participants reported that networking was an essential strategy in gaining access to the superintendency. One participant shared that she leveraged her White counterparts to be considered in circumstances where that wouldn't otherwise be the case. Participants also shared stories of how they had to embrace patience and show determination while applying and interviewing for superintendent positions. Highlighted through participant responses to the interview questions was the determination to persevere. Participants voiced that they did not allow barriers, which they perceived to arise more frequently for African American women, to prevent ascension to the superintendent position.

Research Question 2 examined how African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina describe the barriers and supports they encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent. Participants shared the barriers that they encountered and the supports from which they benefited while ascending to the superintendency. They also described barriers and supports encountered while serving in the superintendency. Analysis of

the participant responses to the interview questions revealed that overwhelmingly, participants felt that there was a lack of a structured support system for aspiring minority female superintendents and that they were not privy to the amount of support available to their White male counterparts.

As participants revealed strategies that facilitated their journeys to the superintendency, there was no mention of a support mechanism that was common amongst them all, they all shared different stories about how they received support and from whom they received that support. Despite the limited existence of formalized systems of support, participants acknowledged that they advocated for themselves and sought individual mentors who provided support. Two participants shared how they utilized the support that they themselves garnered to assist with gaining access and successfully maintaining the superintendent position once they were hired in the role. Participants also noted that the perceptions that many members of society have of African American women as leaders played a significant role in their ability to attain and serve in the superintendency. Throughout the interviews, participants asserted that they had maintained a strong sense of determination to succeed despite barriers.

Research Question 3 examined the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina regarding the relationship between race, gender, and the underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina. White males continue to dominate the role of superintendent in North Carolina. Participants insisted that due to confluent biases attached to race and gender, they were discriminated against, excluded, and sometimes sabotaged. Most of the participants at some point during the interview referred to the fact that exposure to racism and gender bias within the superintendency is likely inevitable. African American women, as double minorities, they consistently believed, will

continue to be negatively impacted by racism and gender bias as they seek opportunities in the senior-most educational leadership positions. As a result, participants felt that there were inequities in preparation and training provided. They further believed that, as minority women, they were not always compensated adequately and there was an inequity in pay. They perceived that they were discriminated against based on perceptions of African American women as leaders, and that they were at times victims of professional sabotage. All of these experiences could become barriers that could deter to aspirants from pursuing the superintendency. Throughout the interviews, the participants attributed the underrepresentation of African American women superintendents to inequities within the superintendency that were stimulated, in part, by race and gender.

Research Question 4 examined the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina about how race and gender influence their work. Participants all noted race and gender as barriers that impeded their work as superintendents even before it began. Participants noted that the narrow band of superintendent openings, societal perceptions of African American women's leadership capabilities, and the limited number of African American women superintendents were obvious ways that race and gender influenced their work. An analysis of participant responses to the interview questions revealed that all six participants felt that race and gender impacted their journey to the superintendency as well as impacted their work on a daily basis. Most shared personal stories that exposed the disadvantages of being an African American woman superintendent in North Carolina. They felt they had to work harder than their male counterparts to maintain the superintendent position and that despite their talent, educational background, and skillsets, African American women

superintendents' work is and will continue to be benchmarked against the that of their male counterparts.

Discussion of the Study Findings

The perspectives of six African American women superintendents were ascertained to examine their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers unfolded. The qualitative research design allowed me as the researcher to delve deeply into the personal, lived experiences of these six African American superintendents through a semi-structured interview process. Through interviews conducted with the current or former African American women superintendents, I obtained important insight regarding their experiences serving as superintendents in North Carolina public school districts. Several themes and subthemes emerged from that data provided from these African American women who were currently serving or had served in the superintendent position in North Carolina. Findings related to each research question were used to draw conclusions and to consider implications of the findings in light of relevant research and theory. The discussion that follows addresses the conclusions drawn based on the qualitative results presented in Chapter 4.

Research Question 1 was stated as follows: How do African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina describe their career progression in the K-12 educational leadership setting? The findings related to this research question addressed participants' perceptions of African American women's career progressions within the K-12 educational leadership setting. Their responses to the qualitative interview questions revealed the theme, precursors to the attainment of a superintendent position, and the following subthemes: career preparedness, strategies for gaining access to the superintendency, and determination to persevere. Notwithstanding the fact that all participants did not originally consider the

superintendent position a career goal, their dedication to education and desire to leverage change was such that they ultimately entered the role with an open heart. That said, participants shared stories that indicated that an African American woman has to have more than just heart in a male-saturated profession, in part, because they're outnumbered. These findings are supported by the superintendency being historically regarded as a male-dominated profession (Alston, 2005; Björk, 2000; Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Burton & Weiner, 2016; Cox, 2017; Dowell & Larwin, 2013; Glass et al., 2001; Jarrett et al., 2018; Pruitt, 2015; Revere, 1987; Rodriguez, 2019; Searby et al., 2015).

According to participants, African American women have to have the right credentials, the right network of support, and the determination to persevere no matter what. They also acknowledged that these requisites for the job were still not sufficient to ensure a superintendency for women of color. The participants posited that it is more challenging for African American women to attain a superintendency than their White male counterparts; O'Reilly (2015) reached this conclusion as well. Additionally, consistent with the findings of Meyerson and Fletcher (2000), my study also found that there were patterns of systemic disadvantages for African American women that reduce the opportunities for career advancement. Participants reported that they had to be very strategic in the strategies that they employed to gain access to the superintendency.

Participants shared their career paths to the superintendency, which aligned to the findings of Robinson et al. (2017) who found that women's routes to the superintendency are typically not as traditional as those of their male counterparts. According to Robinson, men's career path often includes a traditional route from teacher, to principal, and then superintendent. Women's routes, on the other hand might follow a pattern that includes service as teacher,

elementary principal, central office staff, and then superintendent. Notably, all six participants reported that, prior to assuming the superintendency, they served in one or more central office staff position. These findings from Research Question 1 align with previous research regarding the precursors to the superintendency for African American women.

Research Question 2 was stated as follows: How do African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina describe the barriers and supports they encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent? The significant finding from this research question was the participants' perception that the superintendency is a part of larger systems that alienate minorities and fail to provide traditional networking opportunities. As a result of the modern-day paradox of gender and leadership that exists in society, there is limited access of women of color to senior leadership roles across employment sectors. Nearly half of the participants from the Barker (2012) study felt that the United States was unprepared to welcome a woman as the chief executive officer of a Fortune 500 company; this is analogous to the superintendent position in the educational leadership world and indictive of how society views the capabilities of women. Despite this perception, participants confirmed that they employed personal strategies and support mechanisms to overcome the barriers encountered both while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent.

Throughout the interviews, multiple participants described the barriers that they faced as superintendent aspirants and incumbents. Participants highlighted the intricate challenge of being an African American woman seeking to be successful in leading a public-school district despite societal perceptions about African American women as leaders. These findings of the study align with the perspectives of Brown (2014), who concluded that the struggles African American women face in obtaining and remaining in the public school superintendency are related to how

they are viewed and valued as contributing members of society; such societal perspectives about race and gender are major constraints to the ascension to the superinendency. These barriers, they asserted, were intended to place constraints on their ascension or success, rather than create environments that were conducive to equitable opportunities within educational leadership.

Revere, in a seminal 1987 study, noted that for African American women, the climb to the office of the superintendent is a laborious one. The author shared that the climb is particularly laborious due to selection criteria that screens them out. Many years later, the findings of my study document that the climb to the superintendent's office is still laborious. Participants described the limited mechanisms in place to support African American women as they aspire to the superintendent position. However, I found that participants in my study didn't speak to experiencing an imbalance between their professional and personal lives to the point that it affected their performance. They relied heavily on their faith and the support of their families which created instances in which they were less concerned about imbalance. This latter finding depart from those of researchers such as Sampson (2018) who found that participants strongly felt that a superintendent's endurance is often negatively impacted by the imbalance between professional and personal life.

Also notable in the analyses for Research Question 2 was the finding that despite the barrier's participants encountered while aspiring to and serving in the superintendent position, they mentioned supports that they did, in fact, encounter to aid in the attainment of and service in the superintendent position. According to Revere (1987), the following are factors that helped participants be successful as superintendents: competence, industry, self-esteem, strength, interpersonal relationships, and productivity. Comparable to the findings of Revere (1987), participants in my study listed some of the same factors; in particular, they noted the benefits of

competence, strength, and interpersonal relationships as factors that assisted them in being effective in the superintendency.

Research Question 3 was stated as follows: What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina regarding the relationship between race, gender, and the underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina? The findings related to this research question addressed participants' perceptions of how race and gender are correlated with the underrepresentation of African American women in the North Carolina superintendency. As I examined the participants' responses to the interview question aligned to this research question four themes emerged. These four themes were inequities in preparation and training, inequity in pay, discrimination based on perceptions of African American women as leaders, and professional sabotage.

Barrios (2004) found that there were six primary factors that could be labeled as causes of the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency:

1. Women are inexperienced in handling fiscal matters.
2. Women have limited experience in leadership roles.
3. Women's career aspirations have been placed behind family responsibilities.
4. Women lack personal aspirations to seek administrative positions.
5. Women's family commitments are a priority to career advancement.
6. Women have limited administrative experiences overall.

All participants offered insights into the factors that they believed contributed to the underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendent position; however, the factors highlighted by participants in my study don't coincide precisely with those identified by Barrios (2004). Instead the participants in my study highlighted the following as constraints:

1. Inequities and the exposure to racism within the superintendency.
2. Exposure to gender bias within the superintendency.
3. Inequity in pay.
4. Lack of structured support mechanisms for African American women.

Revere (1987) studied 22 African American women superintendents and found that the participants felt that sexism and racism were prevalent causes of the fact that there is a limited number of women who occupy the superintendency. Similar to these findings, the participants in my study concluded that as African American women in an executive leadership position, they would inevitably encounter instances of gender discrimination and racism. Also, notable in the analyses for Research Question 3 was the finding that due to discrimination based on perceptions of African American women as leaders, the opportunity for many participants to attain the superintendency was no easy feat. This strenuous climb further permeates the perceptions of aspiring leaders and contributes to women not seeking the superintendent position. They are thus underrepresented in the North Carolina superintendency. According to Pruitt (2015), the professional ascension of women is much more laborious due to constraints including, but not limited to, slanted hiring practices and other biases held by boards of education and even state departments of education. Consistent with the findings of Pruitt, most participants shared that there were several constraints such as biased hiring practices that served to impede their ascension to the superintendent's office and, as a result, they had to employ particular strategies to gain access. One could posit that the taxing demands for African American women trying to gain access to the superintendency are deterrents for some women and that these obstacles are at the heart of their underrepresentation in the North Carolina superintendency.

Research Question 4 was stated as follows: What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina about how race and gender influence their work? The findings related to this research question addressed participants' perceptions of the implications of race and gender within the superintendency and how these attributes influence their work. Participants uniformly and emphatically shared that both race and gender were barriers that hindered their work even before they assumed the role as superintendent. Participants went on to assert that race and gender had a constant influence on their work, at times a daily, once they assumed the role as superintendent.

As double minorities, these African American women perceived that despite their readiness, their diverse leadership skillsets, comprehension of leadership competencies, and proficiency in these competencies, they are still not regarded in the same light as their male counterparts and that they are subjected to a higher degree of scrutiny. This finding implied that participants feel that social roles placed on them by societal perceptions leave them at a disadvantage. This, they concluded, sometimes results in less qualified White males being selected and African American women continuing to be overlooked despite their merit and qualifications. This finding aligns with the work of Gammill and Vaughn (2011) who found that based on criteria society has developed for how woman should behave and despite strength in leadership abilities, women must concentrate on how they present themselves to others in hopes of being accepted. These findings are also in alignment with those of Pace (2018), who concluded that African American women superintendents are consistently held to much higher standards and have their credibility questioned. Participants acknowledged feeling this pressure to be accepted; however, they also acknowledged taking in pride in who they were and the value that they added to leadership. Hence, despite feeling suppressed by societal expectations,

participants shared that they relied on their internal drive to succeed as they navigated the superintendency.

Women, especially African American women, encounter marginalization by gender. African American women are in two groups that have been traditionally oppressed in this country; therefore, they are in a constant fight to rise to the top of the power structure, struggling in the landscape of race and gender. Participants in my study contended that there was a constricted pipeline to the superintendency for African American women in North Carolina. These findings align with existing literature, particularly the work of Angel et al. (2013) who conducted a study of African American women aspiring to the superintendency in the state of North Carolina. One participant shared that she doesn't think North Carolina was readily open or willing to embrace female leadership. Yet, persons in a hiring role are not forthcoming or ready to admit this unwillingness publicly. This causes one to posit that hidden biases do exist in among those who consider candidates for the North Carolina superintendency. The participants in my study perceived that there are still people who continue to perpetuate a system that disregards equity in leadership and one in which women of color are possibly stymied by these conditions.

Discussion of the Theoretical Framework

Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory are the two pertinent theories that were used to ground this study. In this section, I revisit both of these frameworks and describe how they were particularly advantageous in shaping the research design and the analysis of the study's outcomes. In this study, Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory were employed as guiding frameworks through which I examined participants lived experiences, career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers unfolded. Both had been used in

previous research studies to explore the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in order to articulate their viewpoints.

Black Feminist Thought

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) has six basic tenets: (1) lived experiences as a criterion of meaning; (2) the use of dialogue in assessing claims; (3) an emphasis on the ethic of caring; (4) an emphasis on the ethic of personal accountability; (5) an emphasis on positionality as an agent of knowledge; and (6) the recognition of 'truth' and the complexity of the pathway toward truth (Collins, 2000). Black women continue to be oppressed based on race and gender (Lomotey, 2019). Therefore, I chose this theory for its relevance to examining the lived experiences of African American women, aiming to broaden my knowledge of the intersection of race and gender and the relationship of these attributes to access to leadership roles. Additionally, the study provided a means of clarifying these African American women's stories and giving them space to share their stories. The incorporation of BFT was significant in the formulation of the qualitative the research questions and the related interview protocol for this study. BFT was used as a lens to inspect and understand this oppression in the context in which it was produced.

In consonance with Black feminist theory, the barriers encountered by the participants in this study were twofold. Constraints arose because of their being women and being African American. Through the application of BFT, I was able to garner essential information regarding how race and gender influenced their work as North Carolina superintendency. Unequivocally, all participants shared that race and gender had a significant impact on their ascension to the superintendency as well as on their service in the position. There were times when they felt overlooked, isolated, and even sabotaged. However, participants did not allow the oppressions to thwart their progress. Therefore, having personal strength, determination, and being resilient was

noted as important to the participants, as they felt there were inequities within educational leadership in North Carolina. The theoretical examination of the findings suggests a relationship exists between existing literature and the findings of my study. Black women are the experts of their experiences, and there was no one better to tell these superintendents' story than these superintendents.

Critical Race Theory

Race and racism are embedded in the public education system and educational leadership within the United States. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is employed to analyze the phenomenon of race and to study and transform the relationships among tenets of racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). I chose this theory for its relevance to exploring the lived experiences of African American women who were serving, or had served, as public school superintendents. Additionally, the theory was useful in the exploration of African American women's experiences with leadership through the lens of the Black experience.

To give voice to the oppressed, CRT asserts five basic tenets: permanence of racism, interest convergence, counter-storytelling, Whiteness as property, and critique of liberalism. More explicitly: (1) permanence of racism suggests that racism is hardly acknowledged, which makes it difficult to address; (2) interest convergence asserts that the self-interests of Whites coincides with progress of civil rights; (3) intersectionality contends that the intersections of a person's identity must be taken into consideration; (4) White privilege acknowledges whiteness as a form of property in a society based upon White dominance; (5) critique of liberalism addresses aspects of a system in which equal rights are not properly executed (Delgado et al., 2012).

Through the integration of CRT, I was able to garner additional insights into the role race and gender played in the educational leadership sector. This theory assisted me in the formulation of the of the qualitative research questions and the related interview protocol for this study. CRT provided a robust foundation for an intersectional analysis and for discerning how race and racism manifest themselves in educational leadership, especially the K-12 superintendency. Through employing CRT, I was able to thoroughly examine the stories told by African American women who serve or have served in the North Carolina superintendency by centering on race and its intersection with gender in the recruitment and retention of these leaders. This allowed these participants to tell their stories and communicate their realities in their own voices. Participants shared stories that referenced their feelings about the implications of preparation, support, sponsorship, and access to the superintendency that are part of larger systems that alienate minorities and fail to adequately elevate African American women as candidates for leadership. They called out the inequities in the recruitment efforts of African American women. They consistently noted that they were not afforded the same opportunities as their White male or female counterparts. Additionally, they shared that there are limited processes in place in North Carolina to ensure the retention of African American women leaders.

The utilization of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) enabled a deeper understanding of how race and its intersection with gender manifest themselves in the arena of educational leadership, specifically in the context of the K-12 superintendency. The application of these two theoretical frameworks allowed me to gain important intuitions regarding how these six African American women experienced the North Carolina superintendency. I found that BFT and CRT were both robust tools that were advantageous in the development of the research questions and qualitative interview protocol used for this study.

Additionally, employing BFT and CRT facilitated a rigorous analysis and discussion of my research findings. After the implementation of the study and analysis of the results, I concluded that the employment of the tenets of both frameworks in the creation of an interview protocol had helped me to develop questions and prompts that enabled participants to forthrightly provide detailed accounts of their experiences with search for and service in the superintendency.

The BFT tenet, lived experiences as a criterion of meaning does a great job of placing African American women at the center of analysis, providing a means to investigate their experiences as well as their actions and their fight for justice. In today's society the presence of patterns of discrimination are still deeply-rooted in the K-12 educational leadership settings; therefore, in order to continue to address persistent racial inequities, place race at the center of analysis, and address subtler forms of racism, CRT developed new areas of scholarship which have developed throughout the years, making the approach more complex than its original movement. Acknowledging the important role that both race and gender play within the educational leadership arena, to continue to improve understanding around how to continue to bring into being educational institutions that provide equitable leadership opportunities for minorities, I would not suggest any amendments to the theories utilized in this study. The basic tenets of both BFT and CRT provided study elements that allowed me to gain deeper insights into how race and its intersection with gender influence career progression within the North Carolina superintendency.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The focus of this study was the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. Therefore, this study advances the understanding of the mechanisms and conditions that play a vital part in African American women's ascension to and

service in a superintendent position. Thus, this study gathered participants' perceptions of their lived experiences, career progression, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded in North Carolina. It is of important to acknowledge the delimitations and limitations associated with this study.

The delimitations of this study were associated with the constraints on generalizability; they were acknowledged in Chapter 3 and are outlined as follows:

1. The participants in this study were limited to African American women who have served or are currently serving in the superintendent position. Therefore, findings were limited to the perspectives of these women. The study did not include interim superintendents or associate superintendents.
2. The study did not address private, charter, or non-public school settings.
3. The study was limited to a single state; the state of North Carolina.
4. Participants in this study were African American women superintendents who voluntarily participated.
5. The study was not intended to provide data adequate to understand the nuances of senior-level administrators' perceptions of the barriers and challenges faced by African American women superintendents in other contexts.

This study faced some critical limitations that were constraints to the study that emerged prior to implementation. These factors may have influenced the results and should be taken into consideration as the findings are reviewed by the reader:

1. The study's original intent was to focus on the northeastern region of North Carolina due to the alignment of the region's attributes with the original purpose of the study and perceived access to potential participants. However, due to the limited number of

actual participants from the region, and the related risks to their confidential engagement in the study, I expanded the scope of the study to a statewide sample.

2. The sample size comprised a small number of African American women superintendents who previously served or who were currently serving in the North Carolina superintendency.
3. As an African American woman who is currently employed in a school leadership position in northeastern North Carolina and who aspires to ascend to the public school superintendency, there was potential for bias to be introduced during the research process. Bearing in mind the relationship of my professional goals to this research, to mitigate bias and ensure trustworthiness, I implemented bracketing of my personal experiences throughout the study to maintain an unbiased approach.

While I acknowledge the constraints inherent and incidental to this research, I conclude that this study serves as an important contribution to the body of knowledge about African American women superintendents.

Implications of the Study for Policy and Practice

Against the backdrop of inequity in job acquisition in educational leadership, the superintendency has historically been regarded as a male-dominated profession (Alston, 2005; Björk, 2000; Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Burton & Weiner, 2016; Cox, 2017; Dowell & Larwin, 2013; Glass et al., 2001; Jarrett et al., 2018; Pruitt, 2015; Revere, 1987; Rodriguez, 2019; Searby et al., 2015). Therefore, the findings in this study offer implications for diversifying the North Carolina superintendency, which in turn, will create increased opportunities for African American women to attain the superintendency. This study has implications for African American women currently in practice or seeking to pursue the public

school superintendency. These implications also have relevance for educational leadership and graduate programs that train and prepare educational leaders for the superintendent position. The subsequent subsections bring forth the implications for various stakeholders, including district-level administrators, local education agencies, state-level policymakers, and superintendent preparation programs.

Implications for Policy

Although the face of the superintendency is evolving, and more African American women are assuming the role of superintendent, this growth in access is still not commensurate with that of their White counterparts (Pruitt, 2015). The study's findings suggest that local boards of education, state boards of education, and lawmakers should consider implementing board policies and hiring practices that are more equitable, culturally conscious, and facilitate the ascension of minority women to the superintendency. The aim should be to produce a network of superintendents who are reflective of the demographics of the state. Policies and practices should undergird the development of equitable recruitment and retention practices as well as systems that aid women of color in developing the necessary skillsets, leadership competencies, and dispositions vital for their success.

The study's participants empathetically expressed how the lack of adequate support mechanisms and the absence of experiential leadership opportunities negatively influenced and restricted their ascension to the superintendent position. As a result, the findings of the study firmly advocate for a paradigm shift in recruitment and preparation practices. The state board of education has authorized the creation of the North Carolina School Superintendents' Association to support the state's incumbent superintendents by way of professional development and executive coaching. However, there are inadequate preparation or support mechanisms

established for aspiring superintendents. In tandem with North Carolina superintendents, state leaders should also embrace policies and practices that formally and robustly support aspiring superintendents. For example, the state could design an aspiring superintendents' network within North Carolina to aid in elevating a diverse, capable, and motivated group of prospective superintendents that is reflective of the demographics of the state's public schools.

Implications for Practice

The study's findings reveal that school districts, graduate programs, and superintendent preparation programs need to consider developing a more culturally conscious approach to facilitating superintendent preparation, one that fosters leadership development and continuous improvement. By developing such an approach, programs can initiate the processes of diversifying the discourse, developing a leadership development program, and beginning to establish a more systematic approach to effectively grooming minority leaders aspiring to the superintendency. Such an approach would also create opportunities to redesign the course offerings and doctoral internship to be more culturally responsive and better ensure that the preparation and training is representative of the needs of the aspiring leaders. Additionally, it would offer valuable guidance on how to effectively maintain a diverse superintendent applicant pool in North Carolina. My research study strongly indicates that school districts, graduate programs, and superintendent preparation programs should prioritize involving a diverse set of faculty members governing the decision-making process and bringing forth opportunities for female practitioners to be engaged in discourse regarding the barriers and challenges that impede ascension to the superintendency.

Due to the limited research regarding the lived experiences of African American women superintendents, including their personal and professional experiences, it is critical that African

American women aspiring to the superintendency be provided an accurate account of the superintendency from women who look like them. Such engagement should include the opportunity for these professional exemplars to share their perspectives, personal accounts of their ascension, and how racial identities influenced their experiences. In efforts to offer valuable guidance for minority women aspirants or currently practicing superintendents, the introduction of foundational studies that address the experiences of minority superintendents would notably expound upon how race and gender influence the superintendency. Research from Alston (1999), Jackson (1999), and Revere (1987) could provide a historical vantage point for women who are seeking or plan to seek the superintendency.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study offer important implications for future research. Although the study provided additional information on the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina, there is still much work to be done to diversify the superintendency. Such efforts should be supported by an extensive body of literature. Therefore, the results of this study suggest topics that warrant further investigation.

The study limited participation to participants from a single state, the state of North Carolina and participants were also limited to African American women who have served or are currently serving in the superintendent position in public schools in North Carolina. The study did not include interim superintendents or associate superintendents nor did it address private or non-public school settings. In efforts to enhance the research's generalizability, it is desirable to broaden the scope of the investigation to include a multi-state population of participants and to include interim superintendents from both the public and private sector. Broadening the scope will provide a more sizeable and diverse participant sample, which would be more representative

of the state's diversity and also provide a foundational basis for a comparison of the experiences within the public and non-public educational leadership settings. Furthermore, within future research, incentivizing engagement in the research for potential participants would broaden the pool of study candidates. Including incentives is an effective way to recruit additional participants in order to have an adequate participant sample.

The study's participant sample included early career and veteran African American women superintendents. Superintendent experience ranged from 1 year to 15 years of service in the role. Their lived experiences were vast, but differed significantly based on the amount of experience of each participant. Further research could provide valuable insights by centering the focus of the research on early career superintendents and their experiences with the ascension to the superintendency and the early stages of serving as a superintendent. Gaining a deeper understanding of this stage of the superintendency would elucidate the significance of the prerequisites, formal training, and career preparedness for the role. It is worth noting that there are limited studies that address African American women superintendents' lived experiences from this early vantage point.

Chapter Summary

While the North Carolina teacher workforce is comprised mostly of women, this does not reflect the occupancy of superintendents' offices (Gordon, 2020). Women, especially African American women, are disproportionately underrepresented in the superintendency. This grievous underrepresentation of African American women who hold the position of public school district superintendent is stark contrast with their white male counterparts (Pruitt, 2015). The superintendency is regarded as one of the most gender-stratified positions within educational leadership; the ascension to the superintendency for African American women continues to be

laborious and includes barriers and challenges that are unique to minority women. This is particularly concerning for North Carolina's public school systems, as their diversity is steadily growing. Therefore, it is imperative that the face of senior-level leadership be reflective of the diversity of the student population.

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded. Study findings revealed that race and its intersectionality with gender adversely affect African American women's ascension to and service in the superintendent position and can be a deterrent for some African American women aspirants. These findings are advantageous to state boards of education, local boards of education, North Carolina public school districts, lawmakers, graduate programs, and superintendent preparation programs as they seek to impact legislation, board policies, and culturally relevant course content in hopes of diversifying the North Carolina superintendency.

This study involved the exploration of data from interviews conducted with six African American women who had served or were currently serving in the North Carolina superintendency. Findings obtained from this qualitative research yielded insights into social stigmas, inequities within educational leadership, the barriers and challenges associated with the ascension of African American women to the superintendency, and the support mechanisms employed to aid in successfully ascending to the superintendent position.

These findings advance current research by examining the viewpoints of African American women superintendents in a manner that has not been substantively addressed in the literature in the past decade. The perspectives shared by the participants emphasized the

significance of implementing equitable hiring practices, leadership development, and support networks for aspiring and early-career superintendents. The study revealed that the duality of race and gender influenced the work of these African American superintendents even before the work started. Participants felt that the absence of adequate support mechanisms created unfavorable conditions for continuous improvement and leadership development. Additionally, the study revealed that the current state of the superintendency in North Carolina calls for an examination of organizational values, enactment of equitable recruitment and retention practices, establishment of a professional network that is reflective of minority leaders, and implementation of structures that are conducive to the diverse needs of women, especially African American women.

Implications for policy and practice were offered based on the findings of the research. The discussion of the study's results concluded with a set of recommendations for future research that identify areas that warrant further investigation. Considering these recommendations, future research can build upon this study's findings as North Carolina seeks to employ mechanisms to mitigate the underrepresentation of African American women serving in the North Carolina superintendency. As the diversity of the public schools in North Carolina continues to grow, it will be essential to continue to examine the North Carolina superintendency through the lens of race and gender as educational leaders seek to positively change the educational milieu of all students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Time of the Interview:

Date:

Greetings, I hope you are well today. Thank you in advance for your time. My name is Ronica Watford and I am in the process of conducting research on African American women superintendents in North Carolina. This interview was designed to discuss the lived experiences of African American women superintendents. Before we begin the discussion, I would like to confirm that you have read and signed the informed consent form, that you understand that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, that you may refuse to answer any questions, your identity will not be disclosed, and you may withdraw at any time. Also, this interview will last approximately 60 minutes.

Do you agree to be recorded at this time for the purpose of being able to transcribe this discussion for my notes only?

For those who grant verbal permission to record say: This interview is voluntary and confidential. To ensure I capture your interview in its entirety and adhere to validity, I am recording this interview. Recordings will be kept confidential and will be stored and locked in a secure location. You will be assigned a pseudonym and I will not disclose your name with your interview responses. I will be taking notes during the interview. You can stop this interview at any time without any consequences or penalties. The interview will last approximately sixty minutes. I will be asking you a series of questions relating to the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

For those who refuse to record say: This interview is voluntary and confidential. To honor your audio recording preference, I will not record this interview. To ensure that I capture your interview in its entirety and adhere to validity, I will be scribing your interview by hand. You can stop this interview at any time without any consequences or penalties. Your scribed interview will be kept confidential and stored and locked in a secure location. You will be assigned a pseudonym and I will not disclose your name with your interview responses. The interview will last approximately sixty minutes. I will be asking you a series of questions relating to the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

For those who give permission to record say: The recording will now begin and I will start the interview process. During this process, I will refer to you with a pseudonym to protect your identity.

For those who refuse to record say: I will start the interview process and scribe your responses. During this process, I will refer to you with a pseudonym to protect your identity.

Are there any questions before we proceed? We will begin with some demographic questions.

Demographic Questions

1. What is your race?
2. What is your marital status?
3. Do you have children? If so, how many?
4. What is your age?
5. What is the highest degree you hold?

Background and Path to the Superintendency

6. How many years of experience do you have as a superintendent?
7. What was your age when you assumed your first superintendent position?
8. Can you describe your professional pathway to the superintendency?
9. Describe your experiences with applying for and interviewing for superintendent positions.

Reflections on the Superintendency

10. What kind of barriers or obstacles did you face on your journey to the superintendency and how did you confront and overcome them?
11. What kind of barriers or obstacles do you/did you face as an African American woman superintendent in North Carolina and how do you confront and overcome them?
12. What kind of support did you receive on your journey to the superintendency and how did this support aid in the attainment of a superintendent position?
13. What kind of support did you receive during your tenure as an African American woman superintendent in North Carolina and how did this support aid in your success in the position?
14. Describe what you have found to be particularly challenging about your position as an African American female superintendent? What, if anything, have you found to be easier than you thought would be the case?

The Impact of Race and Gender on the Journey to the Superintendency

15. Can you describe a time in which you felt race or gender directly impacted your journey to or within the superintendency?

16. What are some advantages and disadvantages of being an African American female superintendent?

17. Do you feel it is advantageous for African American women superintendents to have a mentor or mentors?

18. What do you consider to be reasons for the limited number of African American women superintendents in North Carolina?

19. Based on your experience, can you identify some strategies that need to be implemented in an attempt to increase diversity in the superintendency?

Final Recommendations for African American Women Aspiring to the Superintendency

20. What advice would you give African American women aspiring to serve in the superintendent position?

Closing

21. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share?

Concluding: Thank you for your time and willingness to answer the interview questions. It was a pleasure speaking with you

Appendix B: Expert Panel Review Protocol

In Their Own Words: African American Women Superintendents in North Carolina.

Thank you for volunteering to serve on the expert panel for evaluating the interview protocol designed for this study.

The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded.
As part of my study, I will interview African American women superintendents who currently serve or have served in the superintendent position in North Carolina. The study will further explore with African American female leaders in K-12 leadership roles, specifically as superintendents, their perspectives on how race, gender, and culture influenced their journey towards obtaining their current positions and factors that impact their career progression in order to embrace equitable recruitment practices in North Carolina.

Your time, expertise, and assistance are needed to evaluate the content validity of the interview protocol. The attached interview outline is designed to explore the perspectives of African American women superintendents regarding their career progression, barriers, and supports encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent.

Your input and feedback are extremely important, greatly appreciated, and will provide useful information about the clarity, appropriateness, and relevance of the interview questions. Your knowledge and experience in education qualifies you to serve as an expert panel member. Your input and feedback will provide valuable insight for possible adjustments or revisions to the interview protocol.

Please take your time and critique the attached interview protocol by answering either “Yes” or “No” to the questions below, as well as providing your reasoning behind any responses that receive a “No” on the lines that follow.

Questions	**Yes**	**No**	**If you selected No, please write why, and provide any feedback and/or suggestions that you feel would correct this aspect of the survey.** **This section of feedback will be most helpful.**
1. Are the instructions to participants clear?			
2. Are the questions/statements designed in such a way that participants can understand them? *Please note that in order for the survey to be successful, the language needs to be* *understood by a current or former district* *superintendent.*			
3. Do you feel additional information is needed in order for participants to answer these questions regarding their lived experiences, career progression, and how race, gender, and culture influenced their journey towards obtaining the superintendent position? If so, please indicate the type of additional information that is needed in the box to the right.			
4. Do the interviews adequately address factors that will allow the researcher to obtain sufficient information regarding the lived experiences of African American women superintendents' career progression?			
5. Do the interviews adequately address factors that will allow the researcher to obtain			

sufficient information regarding the perceptions of African American women superintendents regarding the barriers and supports encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent?			
6. Do the interviews adequately address factors that will allow the researcher to obtain sufficient information regarding how race, gender, and culture influenced their journey towards obtaining the superintendent position?			
7. Are there any particular items within the interviews that you would modify?			**Please specify the item number(s) with your response if you selected "Yes".* *Please write your suggested* *statement(s) below:*
8. Are there any items within the interview protocol that you believe should be excluded?			**Please specify the item number(s) with your response if you selected "Yes".* *Please write your suggested* *statement(s) below:*
9. Are there any items in the interview protocol that you feel should be included that are not currently included on the protocol attached?			**Please specify the item number(s) with your response if you selected "Yes".* *Please write your suggested* *statement(s) below:*
10. Do you have any suggestions related to the 'readability' of the interview questions (i.e.: wording of the questions, the layout of the questions, etc.)? If so, please write them in the box to the right.			

Appendix C: Recruitment of Participants Email

Dear [African American Woman Superintendent in North Carolina]:

My name is Ronica Watford and I am a doctoral candidate at North Carolina State University. I am conducting a research study on the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina and their perceptions of the barriers and challenges experienced while serving in the role of superintendent.

I am inviting you to participate in this study and through your participation, you will be provided an opportunity to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding African American women superintendents in North Carolina.

The expectations of your participation are as follows to assist with your understanding of the expectancies of this study: Complete and sign an informed consent form indicating that you agree to participate in the study and participation in a 60-minute virtual interview via Zoom video-conferencing platform (session will be password protected).

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns regarding your participation in this study at (252) 287-7894 or rtwatfor@ncsu.edu.

If you accept this invitation to participate in this research study, please complete and return the informed consent form that is attached to this email. I truly hope that you will consider participating in this research study to expand the body of research on African American women superintendents in North Carolina. As a current school administrator, I am very cognizant of the time demands associated with your position therefore, I would like to thank you in advance for your time, consideration, and support. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best Regards,

Ronica Watford, North Carolina State University Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Title of the Study: In Their Own Words: African American Women as Superintendents in North Carolina.

Researcher: Ronica Watford- Doctoral Candidate at North Carolina State University

You are invited to participate in a research study describing the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in North Carolina. You have been selected as a potential participate due to the fact that you are currently serving or have served as an African American woman superintendent in North Carolina in past 6 years. Please read this form in its entirety and ask any questions that you may have prior to providing consent to participate in the research study.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the perspectives of African American women superintendents in North Carolina public school districts regarding their lived experiences, their career progressions, and the institutions in which their careers have unfolded. The research seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do African American women superintendents in the state of North Carolina describe their career progression in the K-12 educational leadership setting?
2. How do African American women in the state of North Carolina describe the barriers and challenges they encountered while ascending to and serving in the role of superintendent?
3. What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina regarding the relationship between race, gender, and the underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendency in North Carolina?
4. What are the perceptions of African American women superintendents in North Carolina about how race and gender influence their work?

Procedures: If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Complete and return this informed consent form.
2. Participate in a virtual interview via Zoom with the researcher. Additionally, the interview will be recorded for transcription purposes.

Time Requirement: It is anticipated that this study will require 60-70 minutes of your time.

Risks: There are no known risks associated with this study.

Confidentiality: Each participant will receive a pseudonym that they will be referred to throughout the duration of the study to ensure confidentiality and to protect identity. All digital files will be stored on a password protected drive on a secure university email account. There will be no public access to the drive and the data will be encrypted. In addition to utilizing pseudonyms for the participants, pseudonyms will also be utilized for the districts that they serve (or served) will be used during the interview process and the reporting of results.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participation in this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. Your decision whether to participate or not participant will not affect your current or future relations with North Carolina State University.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose at any time to withdraw from the study, please use the researcher contact information provided below. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected will be destroyed and not included in the study findings.

Contact and Questions: Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns regarding your participation in this study at (252) 287-7894 or rtwatfor@ncsu.edu. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at North Carolina State University. You may also contact my dissertation committee chairperson, Dr. Michael Ward at meward@ncsu.edu. for any additional inquiries.

Statement of Consent by Participant: I have read and fully understand the contents of the information presented above. I have had an opportunity to ask any questions related to my participation and they have been answered for me.

___ I agree to participate in the virtual interview.

___ I do not agree to participate in the virtual interview.

_____ _____

Printed Name of Participant Date

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date