A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF BLACK WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS: INHIBITING FACTORS, ENABLING FACTORS, AND PERCEPTIONS

by

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An applied dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education in
Educational Leadership

Charlotte

2024

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ABSTRACT

MELISSA D. SMITH. A Qualitative Study of Black Women Superintendents: Inhibiting Factors, Enabling Factors, and Perceptions (Under the direction of DR. WALTER HART.)

There is growing concern about the pervasive underrepresentation of qualified Black women superintendents, despite women significantly outnumbering men in public education. This study sought to shed light on the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in North Carolina. The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the perceptions about inhibiting and enabling factors Black women leaders faced when ascending to the superintendency and while serving in the role. Specifically, this study sought to contribute to the existing body of scholarly work and inform aspiring Black women superintendents about the experiences of Black women superintendents *in the role*, as this area has not been explored. By considering the intersectionality of race and gender for Black women superintendents, the study findings were grounded in the theoretic frameworks of Black feminist theory and the glass ceiling effect. These informed current practices related to hiring superintendents to create career advancement opportunities for aspiring Black women leaders. Results of the study from semi-structured individual interviews with five Black women superintendents in North Carolina indicated a substantial discrepancy between the number of women, particularly Black women, and men in the superintendent's role. Implications included the need for career pathway training for prospective Black women superintendents, further research on the topic, new school board policies related to fair hiring and recruitment, and preventing suppression of opportunities by White power structures.

DEDICATION

If it had not been for the Lord on my side, I would NOT have made it. Jesus, You are my ROCK! This dissertation is dedicated to:

My loving and God-fearing parents- I am grateful for my parents, Bishops James and Charlotte Neal, and our humble beginning in a little country town called Charleston Park. My parents are an example of love, guidance, protection, hope, and obedience. Both reflect the value of Godly parenting, faithful leadership, strength, and integrity, as evidenced in their eight children's upbringing. Just as roots run deep into the core of the earth and remain grounded beyond measure, so do my honor, respect, and love for both of them. Dad and Mom, the sacrifices and prayers you made just for me are immeasurable. The life you lived before me has shaped me into the woman that I am today. The well-rounded and solid foundation you laid for me to build on has abundantly strengthened me. Because of you, I am forever changed!

My sister, Re'Joyce Baskin- You are an amazing inspiration to me and my biggest cheerleader no matter what. You have ALWAYS been there for me. Thanks for being a sounding board for me and listening to me without judgment as I worked through this dissertation. When I felt like I could not go further, you reminded me of the greatness I had harnessed inside of me. Because of you, I am forever changed!

My Man- Last but certainly not least, I am also grateful to my husband, Deacon Tim Smith. Thank you for putting up with me through thick and thin in this dissertation journey. I know it was not easy but thank you for supporting me and giving me the space I needed to complete this dissertation. Thanks for working tirelessly for me and filling in the gaps and voids I created during this process. You are the Priest, Provider, and Protector in our home. Because of you, I am forever changed!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Walter Hart is more than a supervising professor at UNC

Charlotte. His name is very fitting for him because he is full of HEART! He has been my rock

throughout this process, and I could not have wished for a better mentor than him. Please do not

get it twisted. Dr. Hart is assertive and his standards extremely high, but he balances

assertiveness with understanding and compassion. One thing I have learned is "If you do not

bother your dissertation, it will not bother you." It is amazing how busy Dr. Hart is, yet he

would make time and stop the world for his students to assist in any way he could. Dr. Hart

works with his students throughout holidays, during times of distress, rain, snow, sleet, hail, or

sunshine; Dr. **HEART** is there. Thank you, Dr. Hart, for a job well done!

Dissertation Committee: This team was my navigation system that kept me on track. I am

indebted to Dr. Jim Watson, Dr. Chance Lewis, and Dr. Scarlett Zhang for giving feedback and

insight in this dissertation process. UNC-Charlotte's professors rock! Anytime I needed you or

had questions, you didn't hesitate to respond. Thank you for helping to make this great feat

possible.

Ari Sigal: I am so grateful to my editor. Ari has traveled with me throughout this

experience and has been another source of inspiration along the way. Thanks for the endless

hours you put in to help me win this victory. I call you FRIEND!

Shannon Clemons: Shannon was assigned to me as a mentor from UNC-C, but, in my

opinion, she exceeded the university's expectations. Shannon took time to share her research

study experiences with me and shared some interventions and tools to overcome and master

obstacles in the dissertation journey. She constantly sent encouraging messages to stay on track

and even referred me to my wonderful editor (Ari). When I needed her, she shared resources

with me and counseled me, especially through the IRB process. When I wanted to give up, she was relentless and pushed me on. Thank you, Shannon. I will be in touch.

Nicolette Grant: I call Ms. Nicolette the GREAT CONNECTOR. I had the distinct opportunity to meet her in one of Dr. Hart's classes. When she heard of my struggle to connect to participants, Nicolette immediately located contact information and keeps me informed about career advancement opportunities in the surrounding areas.

Black Women Legacies: You are some of the strongest, lifechanging women I know. You took special time to become vulnerable and sacrificial by sharing your stories to add to the literature. Through your experiences, aspiring Black women superintendents will gain hope, insight, and voice in their plight to the superintendency. I am humbled by your extraordinary leadership and service to children. Each of you will continue to do great things for children, their families, educators, stakeholders, and the greater communities you serve. I am grateful for you and forever changed.

Crystal Johnson: What a friend! What a friend! Crystal and Lily (her puppy) and I met in a UNC Charlotte class and immediately connected. Thanks for all the phone calls, seasonal cards, and texts filled with dissertation tips, empowerment, support, and laughter.

My University Cohort: We tried, and we cried, but we made it. Thanks for all the comradery, encouragement, hard work, and humorous-filled moments. Brother Dev and Brother Chris both know I love them! Emily K.--Thank you!

Corner Church Family: Thank you, Bishop Clarissa H. Young, and the church family for all the prayers. patience, and understanding throughout this process. I am grateful.

Mr. Jack Hoke, Executive Director of the North Carolina Association of School Superintendents- Thank you!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RQ1   Research Question 1

RQ2   Research Question 2

RQ3   Research Question 3

RQ4   Research Question 4

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Women have historically been marginalized. This disempowerment is particularly true for Black women, as they experience being twice a minority (Andrews & Simpson-Taylor, 1995; Revere, 1987; Rowan, 2006; Tallerico, 2000; Wiley et al., 2017). This means that they have historically faced all the gender-based inequities experienced by women coupled with the racially discriminatory behavior faced by people of color. Therefore, a significant body of literature has sought to identify the challenges of interlocking oppressions that hinder Black women from ascending to the school superintendency (Angel et al., 2013). However, there is a paucity of studies that identify the inhibiting and enabling factors Black women face while working in senior-level administrative roles in school districts.

A growing concern is the underrepresentation of qualified Black women in district superintendencies, even though women significantly outnumber men in public education (Angel et al., 2013; Gregory, 2016; Hart et al., 2022; Marshall, 2007; Sharp et al., 2000; Skrla et al., 2000). According to the 2022 *Teacher Demographics and Statistics* report (Zippia.com. 2022), over 4.5 million teachers are employed in the United States. Women comprise 74.3% of the teaching workforce compared to 25.7% of men (Zippia.com, 2022). In North Carolina's 115 school districts, 94,410 teachers were employed in the 2019-2020 school year (Department of Public Instruction, 2021). Of that number, 71% were women. Clearly, education is a female-dominated field (Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Sharp et al., 2000). Still, a sizable discrepancy exists between the number of women, particularly Black women, and men in the superintendent's role.

According to the *School Superintendent Demographics and Statistics in the U. S.* report (Zippia.com. 2022), 71.5% of U. S. superintendents were men and 18.5% were women. Additionally, the ethnicity of school superintendents was White (68.6%), followed by Hispanic

or Latino (14.0%) and Black or African American (10.2%) (Zippia.com. 2022). While the national percentage of female superintendents grew marginally from 24.1% in 2010 to 26.7% in 2020, the number of Black women superintendents remained much smaller (Clark-Saboda, 2022). According to the latest American Association of School Administrators (AASA) survey (2020), 8.6% of the nation's superintendents are people of color but only 2.5% are women of color (Collins, 2021). In North Carolina in 2021, 30 women comprised 26% of the state's superintendents (Hart et al., 2022). Of these, only eight (7%) were Black women (Hart et al., 2022).

Though the superintendency is viewed as the highest-ranking position in local American public education (Sharp et al., 2000), women, and especially Black women, are more likely to be excluded from this high-paying, high-status job (Sharp et al., 2000). From another perspective, complex conditions of traditional sanctions rooted in White colonial history considered a woman's place in the home, while a man's was in the public sphere (Bloch, 1978; Kahn & Gorski, 2016; Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Welter, 1966). Ideologies of this nature have long-lasting effects and still exist in contemporary America.

Statement of the Problem

The underrepresentation of Black women administrators in the superintendency is pervasive (Campbell & Campbell-Whatley, 2020; Hart et al., 2022; Tienken, 2021). In interviews with Black women district-level administrators, Angel et al. (2013) found that while women make up a large percentage of the educational labor force, gender inequity in the superintendency is still a concern both in North Carolina and nationally. For example, women educators are composed of 78% percent of central-office administrators, 52% of principals, and 76% of all teachers, but only a small percentage of superintendents (Brunner & Kim 2010;

Campbell & Campbell-Whatley, 2020; Superville, 2017). Specifically, "men are 40 times more likely to advance to the superintendency than women" (Skrla, 2000). The superintendent is viewed as the most powerful position in local public schools and is consistently male-dominant.

A body of research already exists for this subject. Pruitt (2015) described relevant topics related to women and the superintendency as they aspired to and served in this role while facing inhibiting circumstances rooted in social, racial, and gender biases, but also enabling factors (Pruitt, 2015). Existing research reveals a variety of factors that limit the ascension of women to this role due to various gender-based biases and racial discrimination (Blount, 1998; Glass et al., 2000; Hinds, 2016; Tallerico, 2000).

For example, women, unlike men, are likely to experience greater pressures to lead families, encounter established social networks designed to promote men, and have limited access to mentoring and social resources that can support their success (Alston, 2000; Brunner & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Dobie & Hummel 2001; Goines-Harris, 2020; Sales et al., 2019; Walton, 2019). Limited research exists that details the supports women receive along the way to the superintendency. Also, studies examining the experiences of Black women superintendents tend to focus on their ascension to the role more than their experiences in it.

By exploring the intersection of race and gender for Black women superintendents through their lived experiences, this research will increase the understanding of challenges they face and supports they receive. This research can inform current practices related to hiring superintendents and creating more equitable opportunities for Black women leaders (Tallerico, 2000). This subject has practical significance because by giving voice to the lived accounts of Black women superintendents, more career advancement opportunities may be created for women and hiring practices may become more equitable (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Perry,

2023). The literature clearly shows that more research is needed in this area (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Johnson, 2012).

Purpose

This basic, interpretive qualitative study seeks to understand the lived experiences of African American women district superintendents in North Carolina. Specifically, the researcher seeks to understand their perceptions about the inhibiting and enabling factors they faced when working toward this role, as well as inhibiting factors and enabling factors they experience while serving in the role.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this study:

1. What do North Carolina Black women superintendents perceive as inhibiting factors they overcame when ascending to the role?

2. What do North Carolina Black women superintendents perceive as enabling factors they experienced when ascending to the role?

3. What do North Carolina Black women superintendents perceive as inhibiting factors they face while serving in the role?

4. What do North Carolina Black women superintendents perceive as enabling factors they experience while serving in the role?

Theoretical Framework

This study will use two theoretical frameworks, both of which examine the marginalization of women. These are Collins' Black feminist thought (BFT) and the glass ceiling effect. Both are described in the narrative that follows.

Black Feminist Thought

Multifaceted oppressions of gender, race, feminism, and social class form interlocking intersections that develop barriers to leadership for Black women who aspire to be superintendents. The interrelatedness of these oppressions are crucial components of BFT (Angel et al., 2013; Collins, 2000). As cited in Hague and Okpala, 2017, "Black feminist thought came about during the era of abolitionists to end slavery." This phenomenon is explored using the work of Collins (2000), who focused on the voices and lived experiences of Black women intellectuals. The resulting theory, BFT, "has contributed significantly to contemporary and critical thinking about the social condition of Black women in the United States" (Hague and Okpala, 2017; Lloyd-Jones, 2014; Lloyd-Jones, 2009).

Collins (1990) references Black women as scholarly representatives of knowledge based on their lived "experiences that stimulate distinctive consciousness concerning their" reality (Collins, 2009). Her theory addresses the distinctiveness of the women's movement through the lived experiences of Black women, thereby blending activism and theory (Collins, 1990; Lockhart, 2022; Wiley et al., 2017). "Black feminism functions in two ways: first, as a body of knowledge, it serves as a guide" (Johnson, 2010) using interview data that is collected, described, analyzed, and interpreted and second, it allows for exploring the leadership factors North Carolina's Black women superintendents face (Angel et al., 2013; Johnson, 2010).

Though Black women do not have the same experiences or necessarily agree on the significance of their experiences, Black women commonly encounter similar barriers and challenges distinctively different from White women (or men): "Failing to acknowledge that White women retain White privilege; women of color do not hold a color privilege, thereby making African American women's experiences similar in some ways to women in general but

deviant from the White female norm" (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p. 344). Though Black women encounter similar barriers that all women face with attaining the superintendency, there are experiences unique to Black women (Kingsberry, 2015). These experiences give Black women a common basis for sharing and lead to developing a unique, self-defined standpoint because they "interpret their realities differently" (Collins, 1989; as cited by Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Wiley et al. (2017) wrote, "Using this framework, Black women are viewed as agents of knowledge regarding the interconnectedness of sexism, class oppression, and racism" (p. 20).

Glass Ceiling Effect

The glass ceiling, a metaphorical phrase, remains unbroken and seemingly impenetrable today in education and affects Black women aspiring to the superintendency. The term glass ceiling was "originally coined by Hymowitz and Schellhardt in a *Wall Street Journal* report in 1986" (Kingsberry, 2015). The phrase represents inhibitors/barriers that women face as they seek top-ranking management positions (Wilson, 2014). The glass ceiling is not something tangible that is written in policy or procedure or has a face to it. Rather, it is a covert and unspoken barrier between women and the C-suite.

This barrier points to stereotyped women's roles and preconceived limits on their ability to succeed in high-ranking leadership roles (Wilson, 2014). Even while serving as superintendents, the glass ceiling remains intact. Many Black women contribute to the economy but do not receive comparable pay in comparison to White counterparts or Black men (Mitra, 2003). Despite school systems' efforts to promote equitable, cross-cultural experiences to stakeholders, the glass ceiling phenomenon is pervasive in that workplace.

One of the external, challenging factors identified by Black women leaders relates to the glass ceiling as inhibiting advancement to the superintendency (Angel et al., 2013). Globally,

women must contend with a glass ceiling in the workplace that prevents them from reaching top-level positions in the labor force despite qualifications, experience, and skills (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Glass, 2000; Griffin 2021). This barrier is even more pronounced for Black women or minorities pursuing top-ranking positions. A glass ceiling does more than prohibit "gender equality between women and men, but also "embraces the quest of all minorities and their journey towards equality in the workplace"" (Wilson, 2014, p. 83, as cited in Kingsberry, 2015). Yet, Black women face race and gender issues which are understudied.

Glass (2000) found several reasons why women lag behind men in the superintendent position nationally. "The American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the professional organization for superintendents," released a report over two decades ago entitled *Where are All the Women Superintendents?* (AASA, 2000). This document exemplified many of the overarching inhibiting factors leading to a lack of equitable female superintendent representation. Women face implicit and explicit bias, and gender inequity in education remains a significant issue. School boards may view the superintendent position as a 'man's job' and are therefore reluctant to hire women (Glass, 2000). About 82% of the women superintendents in the AASA study stated that most school boards do not view women as competent executives or managers of districts (Sollberger, 2020). Approximately 61% of women in the study also felt that the glass ceiling is a reality in education management, indicating a belief that school board representatives are more likely to choose men (Glass, 2000).

Historically, the glass ceiling undervalues women, particularly minority women, by generalizing them as the weaker vessel. Women are expected to be nurturing, bear and care for children (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010), and take care of their men. Males, on the other hand, are expected to be in the upper

echelons of an organization as senior executives and managers (Brunner, 1999; Tallerico, 2000). These social constructs control so many of the decisions made by local boards of education and policymakers.

It has been over a century since the ratification of the 19th Amendment legalizing women's suffrage. Following that, women activists felt empowered to use politics to reform social conditions. Nonetheless, women remained underrepresented in executive positions of which superintendent positions are a notable example (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Glass, 2000).

Overview of Methodology, Participants, and Data Collection

This study will use an interpretive qualitative design that focuses on the lived experiences of five Black women superintendents in North Carolina. Qualitative research is an appropriate methodology for this study because the researcher seeks in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Davis, 2022; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Francis, 2021; Hinds, 2016; Kingsberry, 2015; Pruitt, 2015). This qualitative study, which aligns with the study's theoretical framework, could shed more light on the topics described to better understand the challenges and successes of Black women in the superintendency. A questionnaire and interviews will be used to prompt participants to reveal the realities of their personal and professional experiences in their journeys to the superintendency and while serving in the role. Barriers and supports that had a role for the participants will be analyzed and described.

The study will consist of five Black women superintendents selected from the database of the North Carolina School Superintendents' Association. These women will be located in several

regions of the state. Given the very low number of Black women superintendents in North Carolina, no additional criteria will be used in the study.

Semi-structured individual interviews will be conducted to gather data. In addition to gathering contextual data about participants, the interview questions are designed to gather information about barriers to entry, supports, and challenges experienced during their professional journeys, and any struggles they have faced. Each interview will be recorded, transcribed, and coded for thematic findings. This iterative process will help identify commonalities across data sets. The qualitative method will provide rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences that will be analyzed and interpreted for meaning (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Significance of the Study

There is a limited body of research that examines the inadequate representation of Black women superintendents (Alston, 2005). The scarcity of Black women superintendents has been sustained by many social and personal inhibitors (Short, 2015). Angel at al. (2013) posited that Black women leaders desiring the superintendent role would potentially benefit from a greater understanding of the challenges, barriers, and perspectives shared by Black women already in the role. Therefore, the significance of this study is its contribution to accounts of the professional experiences of Black women superintendents.

Black women superintendents are understudied. However, having their views would expand the literature. Future generations of aspiring Black women superintendents could find voice, hope, and strategies in the narratives of Black women in the superintendent role, thereby not only improving and changing the condition of public school districts nationally, but positively altering social conditions as well. Wiley et al. (2017) contended that understanding the

perspectives of Black women superintendents may compel districts to develop policies and practices, especially hiring processes, needed to help Black women superintendents combat the negative aspects of their leadership experiences.

Researchers have identified a variety of race- and gender-based barriers and suggested there is a critical need for qualified Black women administrators aspiring to the superintendent position to be exposed to and reflect on perceived challenges, barriers, and strategies (Tallerico, 2000). By understanding the views and experiences of Black women superintendents, education policymakers and universities can become informed, analyze societal barriers, and develop superintendent preparatory programs that address the challenges of becoming a Black woman superintendent in K-12 public school districts (Mason, 2016, 2021; Odum, 2010; Pearson 2020).

In addition, high-quality preparatory strategies, positioning and networking, fair hiring policies and practices, and mentorship programs could be made available to assist Black women seeking superintendent positions. When exploring the experiences of Black women superintendents and the inhibitors and enablers in the position, other women aspiring to that role may reject negative images or assumptions about Black womanhood, examine their career pathways, and seek needed support to help them attain and succeed in the role (Edwards, 2016; Goines-Harris, 2020; Pruitt, 2015).

This research can also give insight into school boards in their hiring of superintendents. Though there is a body of research on the lived experiences of Black women's ascension to top district positions, there has been limited research about their experiences as superintendents. The findings of this study will add to this limited literature.

Assumptions and Limitations

Qualitative researchers acknowledged that individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Davis, 2022; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Francis, 2021; Hinds, 2016; Kingsberry, 2015; Pruitt, 2015). While seeking to discover these individuals' truths, this researcher assumed that participants will answer interview questions honestly. To that end, participants will be reassured that anonymity is paramount and pseudonyms will be used to protect their identity. Consequently, they may be transparent and share their lived experiences without hesitation, making the study credible and rich. Each participant's ability to voice their perspectives openly will lend credibility (trustworthiness) to the narratives and bolster the assertions made by the researcher. Additionally, the researcher assumes that participants' responses will ensure an adequate understanding to answer the research questions.

Parameters were set to strategically organize and structure the research, leading to three possible limitations. First, while semi-structured interviews will be used to collect data and the participants' words will be used to support assertions, researcher bias may be a limitation. As the researcher is a Black woman aspiring superintendent who currently serves as a school district administrator, her own leadership experiences and cultural predispositions may affect how the participants respond. Intentional steps, described in detail in Chapter Three, will be taken to protect against researcher bias.

Second, as is common with qualitative research, the generalizability of findings is limited. While generalizability is not a primary goal, transferability is limited because all participants will be Black women and the number of participants is necessarily low. Also, the research is limited to Black women superintendents in North Carolina. All data will be gathered during the summer and fall of one year. Finally, the purposeful limitation of those to be

interviewed was done because the researcher seeks to understand the perspectives of this group. The researcher's decision to include only North Carolina is based on her own career in the state.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used in this study and are defined below:

Disproportionality: "Unequal or out of proportion; lack of proportion, symmetry, or proper relation; disparity" (*Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, 2023).

Domestic: "Of or relating to the household or the family; devoted to home duties and pleasures" (*Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, 2023).

Enablers: "A person or thing that makes something possible; something or someone that enables another to achieve an end" (*Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, 2023).

Feminism: "Belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests" (Britannica, 2023; *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, 2023).

Black feminist thought: References Black women as scholarly representatives of knowledge based on their lived experiences that stimulate consciousness concerning their reality (Collins, 1990).

Glass ceiling: "A glass ceiling is an invisible barrier that hinders women or minorities from reaching upper-level positions in the workplace despite qualifications and skills" (Cain, 2015, p. 8).

Good 'ole boy network: "A networking system that actively and deliberately provides information and assistance to males in the network regarding job opportunities" (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). "This definition states that this network's affiliation is for men only, and women are excluded" (Allen-Thomas, 2021, p. 8).

Inhibitors: "To discourage from free or spontaneous activity especially through the operation of inner psychological or external social constraints" (*Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, 2023); to restrain or prohibit from doing something; for the purposes of this study, barrier is a synonym for inhibitor (*Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, 2023).

Intersectionality: A framework for conceptualizing a person, group of people, or social problems as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages (Dube, 2020). Intersectionality considers "people's overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face" (Dube, 2020); "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups" (McBride, 2020; *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, 2023).

Jezebel: Urbandictionary.com (2013) defines Jezebel as an attention-seeking woman, specifically from a wealthy or desirable man to gain societal influence and status; In addition, she knows her beauty and uses it "to her advantage to 'lure in' her next victim" (urbandictionary.com, 2023). Jezebel "will do anything and will use anyone to get what she wants" (urbandictionary.com, 2023). After getting the person she desires to help her gain status, she "will toss them away and move on when they no longer satisfy what she wants" (urbandictionary.com, 2023).

Lived experience: "An experience a person has encountered in a lifetime is a lived experience" (Exkano, 2013, p.8). "Lived experience includes what life is like in daily endeavors, occupations, perceptions, and relationships" (Mason, 2016; Van Manen, 1990). Lived experiences also provide "a source and object for study" and "have been defined as immediate,

natural fodder for reflection; starting point that can emerge as a relived experience through reflection" (Mason, 2016; Van Manen, 1990).

Mammy "(Offensive): A Black woman serving as a nurse to White children especially formerly in the southern U. S." *(Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, 2023); "A toxic Black woman with internalized misogyny who engages in Black male worship. Any Black woman who doesn't participate in this foolery is seen as self-hating or a feminazi" (urbandictionary.com, 2023).

Marginalization: MasterClass (2022) defines marginalization as the process whereby certain classes of people are socially excluded or denied access to specific societal areas "and participation in the dominant culture" (Ferguson et al., 1992; MasterClass, 2022).

Sapphire: A woman that is not a person to be messed with because she will go all out to get back at someone (urbandictionary.com, 2023).

Sisterhood: Black women as a collective making connections to form interdependent relationships with other Black women who have shared experiences with interlocking oppression.

Sisters of the Academy (SOTA): A leadership organization was formed in 2001 to support Black women "who have a tenure-track position in academia" (Cain, 2015; Davis et al., 2011). It gives Black women the opportunity to connect/network with other women in academia (Cain, 2015; Davis et al., 2011).

Superintendent: *"*The chief executive officer of a school district employed by a board of directors to improve education" (Johnson, 2012). "For the purposes of this study, the superintendency will be defined as the lead administrator of a public school district, hired by and accountable to a school board or other public body" (Allen-Thomas, 2021, p.8).

Underrepresentation: "Inadequately represented" (*Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary*, 2023).

Welfare Mama (Offensive): "A woman who has babies every two years to stay on welfare" (urbandictionary.com, 2023). Example: "On the first, welfare Mama goes to the club and gets us a new daddy" (urbandictionary.com, 2023).

Organization of the Study

This dissertation has five chapters. Chapter One introduced the phenomenon and gives the problem and purpose of the study. Next, research questions were presented, followed by the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework was presented and how it explains the phenomenon, connects to the literature, and describes why the research problem exists. This was followed by an overview of the methodology, participants, data collection, the significance of the study, assumptions, definitions of terms, and concludes by describing the organization of the study.

Chapter Two reviewed relevant literature about Black women superintendents. Chapter Three details of the methodology used. Data from participant responses and an analysis of key findings comprise Chapter Four. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for future practice and research.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Women have had multiple roles through history: healers, caretakers, nurturers, cooks, nurses, midwives, and educators. In general, women have commonly had lower-level jobs than men in the workplace. According to Nadelson and Bernstein (2015), this phenomenon has transcended national boundaries and continues to be pervasive. Yet, when given the opportunity to engage in professional leadership roles, women have had remarkable impacts.

Despite the progress and visibility of women, the top positions in corporations and education are still dominated by men (Gregory, 2016; Hart, et al., 2022; Marshall, 2007). This dynamic has occurred as women have been wrongly viewed as too interpersonal, needy, and overly emotional; they are vulnerable, vigorously pursue social attachments, and unfit to reach the highest levels in major organizations (Barak, 2022; Major, 2004). Klenke (1996) suggested that this gender-based inequity is so pervasive that women often do not recognize it. Rather, they succumb to external pressures and prejudices and thereby develop beliefs and habits that impede their ability to lead (Klenke, 1996).

This literature review provides a description of salient topics related to Black women and the superintendency. It is divided into the following sections: disproportionate representation in the superintendency; women and Black women in leadership; inhibiting factors facing Black women leaders; enabling factors/supports for Black women leaders; and the theoretical framework. Table 1 gives supporting studies for each topic.

Table 1

Black Women Superintendents: Themes from Literature Review

Theme	Sources
Historical Marginalization of Women	Angel et al., 2013; Alexandersson, 2021; Allen et al., 2007; Bell et al., 2018; Branch & Wooten, 2012; Collins, 1990, 2002, 2009; Cooper, 2011; Copeland, 2010; Copeland, 2013; Davis, 2015; Davis, 2016; Denmark & Paludi, 2007; Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996; Gilmore, 2019; Green, 1998; Hinton et al., 2018; Jones-Rogers, 2019; Koven & Michel, 1990; Loury, 1998; Menges & Exum, 1983; Neale Hurston, 1990; Palmer, 2010; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Pinkney, 2016; Romero, 2000; Stewart, 2017; The School Superintendents Association, 2021; Tillman, 2004; Webb, 2022; West & Knight, 2017; Wiley et al., 2017; Wilson, 2014
Disproportionate Representation Nationally and in North Carolina	Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Estler, 1975; Hart et al., 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012, n.d.; Tienken, 2021
Women and Black Women in Leadership Women in Leadership	Banks, 2019; Branch, 2021; Campbell & Campbell-Whately, 2020; Collins, 2000, 2009; hooks, 1994; Leake, 2021; Mason, 2016; Schnall, 2020; Stewart, 2017; Stewart & Richardson, 1987
Black Women Leaders	Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Moore, 2017; Smith & Nkomo, 2021; Wingfield, 2020
Broad Experiences	Allred et al., 2017; Andersen and Collins, 1992; Angel et al., 2013; Carnevale et al., 2018; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Wilson, 2005; Sales et al., 2019
Inhibitors Facing Black Women Leaders	Allen & Dika, 2020; Angel et al., 2013; Banks, 2019; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007

Table 1 *Black Women Superintendents: Themes from Literature Review* (continued)	
<u>Enabling Factors for Black Women Leaders</u> Internal and External Supports	Angel et al., 2013; Cain, 2015; Campbell & Campbell-Whatley, 2020; Carter & Peters, 2016; Christman & McClellan, 2008; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Johnson, 2012; Kingsberry, 2015; McLaughlin et al., 2009; Roberts et al. 2018; Sales et al., 2019
<u>Theoretical Framework</u>	Angel et al., 2013; Collins, 1990, 2020; Hague & Okpala, 2017; Guy-Sheftall, 1986, 1995; Simms, 2001
Feminism, Conceptual Development Black Feminist Thought	Banks, 2019; Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006; Collins, 1989, 1990, 2000, 2020; Hague & Okpala, 2017; Leake, 2021; Lloyd-Jones, 2009; Simms, 2001; White, 1999
Glass Ceiling Effect	Alexandersson, 2021; Angel et al., 2013; Babic & Hansez, 2021; Becker, 1985; Bowles and McGinn 2005; Collins, 2009, 2020; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Eagly & Karau, 2002; FeKula & Roberts, 2005; Fritscher, 2017; Garn & Brown, 2008; Glass, 2000; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Hoyt & Blascovic, 2007; Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; Konrad & Cannings, 1994; Montz & Wanat, 2008; Polka et al., 2008; Pruitt, 2015; Rudman 1998; Rudman & Glick 2001; Sharp et al., 2000; United States Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009; Vargas, 2018
Conclusions	Angel et al., 2013; Benincasa, 2020; Brunner & Peyton-Claire, 2000; Carroll, 2021; Shakeshaft et al., 2007; Webb, 2022

Historical Marginalization of Women

The marginalization of women can be found throughout American history. However, this marginalization occurred very differently for women based on their race. With few exceptions, White women were expected to manage the home and be seen and not heard. This role is

illustrated by the lack of women's suffrage and the fact that managing the home was considered the most reasonable service for women (Flexner & Fitzpatrick, 1996; Gilmore, 2019). Only White women who were noteworthy or accomplished were recognized (Denmark & Paludi, 2007).

Collins (1990) wrote that White women's cardinal virtues were piety, justice, prudence, and purity. Other virtues were submissiveness, temperance, and domesticity. Thus, when it came to the affairs of men, women, like their children and enslaved Africans, were to remain silent and stay in their place (Welter, 1966). Colonial American women were viewed as less self-disciplined or dedicated to the workforce than men, and many of the accomplishments of women were attributed to their husbands (Collins, 2000; Lerner, 1973; Welter, 1966). Thus, private life took precedence over public life for women. Women often resorted to using their feminine traits as a mother, wife and sometimes manipulator to foster change or make powerful or influential contributions and decisions. As a collective force, women could still have a social impact (Collins, 2000).

Married women were obedient to their husbands, had children, and cared for the home as their primary responsibilities. Upon marriage, women took their husband's names and became their husband's property. Women having a voice or serving in political or economic matters was forbidden, and women's services were limited to domestic jobs of nurse, teacher, and housekeeper (Koven & Michel, 1990). Women's lives changed dramatically after the Revolutionary War. In the early 1800s, some glass ceilings shattered when women moved beyond their petticoat status and began to form and participate in early social reform movements related to women's equality, rights, and abolitionism. After the Civil War, the women's suffrage

movement gained momentum in the public sphere to enact changes in the Constitution for equal voting rights and citizenship.

During slavery, Black women were especially dehumanized and regarded as merely property by White men and women (Jones-Rogers, 2019). Often, enslaved women were treated as invisible, ignorant, and were denied participation in church and other educational opportunities afforded to White children (Copeland, 2010). However, enslaved African women were often used to assist with childbirth, wet-nursing, gardening, baking, sewing, cleaning, and other household demands. In fact, the Black woman's milk created a physical, communal closeness amidst a racial divide between the enslaved wet-nurse and White woman owner (West & Knight, 2017).

Davis (2015) wrote that though the slave was without social status and viewed as having no value, she remained a poised, 'strong black woman.' The strong lack woman motif has a long-established image of strength, resilience, and indestructible essence (Davis, 2015; Romero, 2000; Stewart, 2017). Zora Neale Hurston boldly proclaimed that Black women were the "mules of the world" (Neale Hurston, 1990, p.14) and tasked with preserving and caring for the home while doing the same job as Black men for less pay. These historic inequities highlight why Black working-class women remain economically marginalized today.

For a century after Emancipation, prejudice persisted, and Blacks still faced brutality and mistreatment from racist Whites (Green, 1998; Hinton et al., 2018; Loury, 1998). Nonetheless, during Reconstruction, Black life improved but there was much opposition and challenges from social, economic, and political barriers (Menges & Exum, 1983; Wilson, 2014). Blacks began participating in land ownership, government, citizenship, and education (Allen et al., 2007; Copeland, 2013; Pinkney, 2016). During this era and into the 20th century, Black women were

often employed as domestic servants (Branch & Wooten, 2012; Palmer, 2010). Today, many remain trapped in persistent poverty (Bell et al., 2018; Cooper, 2011).

Intersectionality is at the center of Collins' (2009) analysis of racism in the post-civil rights era. Collins (2009) maintained that an imbalance of power and equality, along with continuing disparities and injustices exist to hinder Blacks in a variety of ways. In Black feminist theory, the power for Black women to obtain freedom lies in the power of knowledge. Therefore, suppressing the voices and knowledge of Black women was important work for oppressing groups. The historical exclusion of Black men and women leaders in education, politics, and economics was a form of White social control of Blacks that continues today.

This history of discrimination still shows itself today and is seen in the limited number of Black women who reach the public school superintendency. Nationally, the district school superintendency has been a male-dominated profession. (Alexandersson, 2021; Davis, 2016; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Wilkinson et al., 2016, p. iii). Despite women making up the majority of the educational workforce across the U.S., historical data is replete with examples of male dominance in the public school superintendent position.

Though the superintendency is viewed as the leading position in American public education, women (and especially Black women) are more likely to be excluded from this high-paying, high-status job. Given this discriminatory dynamic, it is also not surprising that women managers in education are often paid lower salaries than men (Collins, 2009). Since the mid-19th century, the public education system has been largely guided by women (Wiley et al., 2017) with males, particularly those of European origin, at the helm. From 1860 on, women have moved from the classroom to leadership. Yet, Black women leaders have not achieved the superintendent position at a rate consistent with their White peers (North Carolina School

Superintendents Association, 2023; Tillman, 2004; Webb, 2022). Foundational and hierarchical principles of employment in education, established by men, are still in force.

Various studies identify the challenges of interwoven oppressions that have prevented Black women from achieving the superintendency (Angel et al., 2013). Few studies, though, identify the inhibiting and enabling factors Black women face while being the superintendent. Therefore, this gap in the literature supports the need for a study that examines the inhibiting and enabling factors facing Black women superintendents. This research was designed to determine how the intersection of race and gender contribute to the theme of leadership development as seen in the lived experiences of Black women superintendents in North Carolina. Specifically, this study sought to expand research focusing on the intersectionality of race and gender in Black women's ascension to the superintendency by examining oppressions related to these factors while serving as superintendents.

Disproportionate Representation in the Superintendency

Gender patterns in educational roles are clear. Women have historically held the overwhelming majority of teaching roles, yet their presence in the highest levels of school leadership has been limited. In 1971, education was a female-dominated field with women representing 67.2% of the workforce, particularly teachers. However, males dominated senior leadership (Estler, 1975). That trend has continued. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported that by 2010, women represented approximately half the U. S. population, but 75% of all teachers. Again, males dominated higher levels of educational leadership (Bollinger & Grady, 2018). More recent reports revealed that in 2017-2018, the total number of public school teachers was 3.5 million, with women comprising 75% of that workforce but only about 25% of superintendencies (Bollinger & Grady, 2018; NCES, n.d.).

While historical data shows that there was a slight increase in the number of women superintendents over time, districts hire women as superintendents at a slower rate than their male counterparts. Women significantly outnumber males as educators, yet their numbers decrease with each step up the administrative ladder to the superintendency (Estler, 1975; Hart, et al., 2022).

Similar patterns exist in North Carolina. Though women historically outnumbered men in teaching roles in the state, the reverse was true of superintendents. Several state and national comparisons were made in *A Portrait of North Carolina School District Superintendents, 2000-2021* (Hart et al., 2022). Based on this report, and shown in Table 2 below, there were only 15 women superintendents (13%) among the 115 superintendents in 2000. By 2010, that number had increased to only 17 (15%). The number of women superintendents, though, continued to increase during the next decade, with 30 (26%) by 2021. However, about 80% of the teaching force was comprised of women during this time. Further, only eight of the 26 women superintendents were Black, representing just seven percent of all superintendents.

Table 2

Gender Trends of North Carolina Superintendents, 2000-2021

	2000		2010		2021	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Male	99	87	97	85	85	74
Female	15	13	17	15	30	26
Total[1]	114	100	114	100	115	100

[1]North Carolina had 115 superintendents in 2000, 2010, and 2021. However, a record for one superintendent was missing from the 2000 data. A record for one superintendent was also missing from the 2010 data, again leaving only 114 records for analysis. Table from Hart et al. (2022).

Hart et al. (2022) noted that North Carolina data mirrored national statistics. Hart et al. (2022) further reported that in a decade (2010-2020), the national percentage of women

superintendents increased by only two-and-a-half percent (from 24.1% to 26.7%). From 2000-2020, the national percentage of women superintendents increased from 13.1% to 26.7% (Tienken, 2021).

Black Women Leaders: Historical Overview

Though remaining at the intersection of targeted oppressions, Black women have still impacted social change. Black women trailblazers led social change by fighting for their civil rights as leaders in the women's suffrage movements, protecting constitutional rights against sex discrimination, and fighting against male dominance while advocating for equal pay (Schnall, 2020). Schnall (2020) stated that Black women leaders are needed to support other women leaders in the workplace, challenge masculine viewpoints, show how individual differences and similarities benefit the human experience regardless of cultural background, and serve as role models for women and men from all walks of life. Nonetheless, gender biases limit the presence of Black women in leadership roles, even in Black civil society where few Black women hold such roles. This biased thinking, though, is directly related to the historical roles of men as dominant, and Black women as known for their domestic acts of servitude (Schnall, 2020).

According to Banks (2019), some Black women had been reluctant to pursue professional advancement because of the subconscious impact of discriminatory practices associated with negative representations of Black women. Historically, Black women in the labor force have faced poor government legislation and practices that have disadvantaged them as compared to those for men and White women. Specifically, Black women have primarily been regarded as mothers and caregivers in the home rather than members of the professional class (Banks, 2019).

Banks (2019) explained these discriminatory views have contributed to Black women historically having a unique place in the workforce. Black women in the United States have been

in the labor market at higher rates than other women regardless of personal characteristics such as their age or marital or parenting status. For example, during the late 1800s, about 7% of married White women were in the workforce, and about 24% of single White women worked outside of the home. By contrast, a little more than one in three Black married women and three of four single Black women worked outside of the home. While White women commonly stopped working outside of the home following marriage, the trends for Black women lasted throughout their lives regardless of marital status. Differences in Black and White women's labor participation were due to societal expectations of Black women's gainful employment and discrimination against Black men (Banks, 2019).

Banks (2019) found that Black women disproportionately make up service or domestic work. Many Black women still hold modern versions of "mammy" jobs (Collins, 2009; Leake, 2021). According to Branch (2021), stereotypical images or representations of Black womanhood derive from American slavery, and these attitudes and beliefs persist in current American media culture. To keep Black women devalued and subordinate to Whites and Black men, socially constructed images were developed (Collins, 2000).

The mammy is a historical image that originated during slavery to represent a Black motherly woman who worked for a White family, usually nursing young ones, and caring for the home. The mammy is often portrayed as a Black woman who is asexual, good-tempered, heavy, large-breasted, dark-skinned nursemaid and in charge of White children and domestic work (Branch, 2021). The mammy is in opposition to standards of White beauty, with the Black stereotype being unappealing, fat, and dark.

In 1835, Maria Stewart, born a free woman in Connecticut and an early activist for Black women, made a powerful statement: "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled

to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?" (Mason, 2016, p. 51; Stewart, 2017, p. 63; Stewart & Richardson. 1987, p. 67). The mammy is often portrayed through racist and sexist lenses in which the Black woman is a non-threatening domestic servant of White people (hooks, 1994). She continues in the culture today (Branch, 2021).

There is a false assumption that the struggles of women in leadership are universal and that all women support each other (Smith & Nkomo, 2021). Despite the advancement of some women in the workforce, Black women are still behind (Wingfield, 2020). Amid political and ideological divides, the struggle to achieve race and gender equality is still evident in the workplace (Moore, 2017). Smith and Nkomo (2021) revealed how structural disadvantages cause significant problems for Black women compared to White women on their way to the top. Moore (2017) believed that with systemic racism and biases continuing to plague organizations, Black women must find strategies to leverage their talents.

Within this context of racism, Black women face multiple oppressions (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Wingfield, 2020). According to Davis and Maldonado (2015), in addition to gender biases endured by all women, Black women also face racial prejudices that have created a dynamic in which Black women are in an interesting spot; they are at the intersection of two powerful forces of oppression which have created the social position of Black women. This means that when Black women fail, there is a dual effect. Race and gender work together in the minds of those looking on and cannot be separated. Black women thus face race and gender discrimination simultaneously (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Black women who hold graduate education degrees remain underrepresented in executive positions in corporate America and in the superintendent position, though they obtain advanced degrees at a higher rate than men (Allred, et al., 2017; Carnevale et al., 2018; Grogan &

Brunner,2005; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Wilson, 2005). For example, Angel et al. (2013) found

that the underrepresentation of women superintendents is a widespread problem, specifically for

Black women in North Carolina. Not only is male dominance present in the public school

superintendent position, it is prevalent in upper-management positions: "In spite of the history of

African American women engaging in leadership practices, they have been excluded from the

cycle of progression in leadership in the labor force" (Andersen and Collins, 1992; Sales et al.,

2019, p. 356).

Inhibitors Facing Black Women Leaders

Black women leaders face obstacles related to the intersectionality of race, gender, and

class (Carter & Peters, 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Morgan, 2020; Sanchez-Hucles &

Davis, 2010). For example, research indicated that women who obtain the position of school

superintendent continue to face challenges such as financial inequality, unforeseen barriers, male

dominance, and gender bias (Bollinger & Grady, 2018; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Kowalski et al.,

2011; Montz & Wanat, 2008). The literature disclosed a variety of factors which serve as

impediments to Black women leaders both along their path to the superintendency and during

their tenure in it. These inhibitors are described next.

Feelings of Inferiority

Collins (2003) believed that to create change and overcome injustices, Black women

leaders must rely on their voices and those of other Black women. Despite the challenges, Black

women must explore their values and beliefs and reflect on making sense of their experiences

while moving through the ranks in organizations. When consciousness is activated to create

knowledge about intersections of oppressions and actionable political steps, Black women

become intellectually empowered to lead (Mosley et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2011).

Similarly, Walker (2014) noted that a strong sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy can empower and motivate aspiring superintendents toward reaching their goal. Successful women leaders believe they have the power to contribute to their career by performing required actions to achieve desired results. As was true for Black women education pioneers in overcoming obstacles, contemporary Black women leaders must be inherently motivated to take risks, set productive goals, make good decisions, and achieve those goals (Walker, 2014). However, self-efficacy for Black women is situated in a public arena that is based on a masculine viewpoint. Collins (2003) found these viewpoints contribute to feelings of inferiority experienced by Black women as they grapple against White male explications of the world to develop a self-defined viewpoint (Collins, 1990; Marion, 2021).

According to Smith and Nkomo (2021), Black women face an internal struggle regarding cultural boundaries stemming from the historical segregation and systemic racism in America that has left them behind. The authors described how Black women must deny their own cultural understandings and navigate cross-cultural boundaries to fit in a predominantly White space. This is especially true for Black women seeking leadership roles (Smith & Nkomo, 2021).

Other studies (Castelin & White, 2022; Gilligan, 1977; Liao et al., 2020; Morgan, 2020) have suggested that negative thoughts and assumptions about themselves inhibit Black women leaders. Some Black women unconsciously harbor feelings of resentment, abandonment, depression, low self-efficacy, and low expectations. Webb (2022) noted that many Black women face self-perception and confidence issues and lack the needed mentors to see positive reflections of themselves in daily life and counteract negative narratives. These feelings can make Black women reluctant to ascend through the ranks of the organization, choosing instead to accept lesser roles.

Family Structure

Family structure and marital status may be inhibitors that negatively impact a Black woman's attaining executive positions. As society commonly views women as the primary caregivers, they often assume extraordinary responsibility for the care of the family. This gender norm may create pressures on Black women that are more challenging than those faced by men, even in Black communities (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). Irwin et al. (2022) suggested that Black women are more likely to navigate family challenges related to poverty.

Davis (2022) found that family may be a hindrance in obtaining the superintendency. For example, family responsibilities may lead to negative assumptions about commitment to work for those who have double minority status. Societal expectations have been placed on women to maintain the home, thereby making the home-career balance a hardship, especially for Black women leaders. For example, Black women executives may face maternity leave issues in the workplace and fear being penalized for using the *Family Medical Leave Act* to secure time off. On the other hand, if women choose to work instead of taking adequate maternity leave, they may be criticized or negatively perceived as neglecting their newborn (Davis, 2022).

Negative Experiences

Wiley et al. (2017) examined how negative experiences for aspiring Black women superintendents in Texas posed challenges when obtaining the superintendent position. These women, who were serving in supporting leadership roles in the district, did the work of superintendent without receiving credit or the position. Nonetheless, these Black women leaders were not provided with sufficient opportunities to gain knowledge of that role or professional experiences to effectively prepare them for high-level leadership. Thus, Black

women had to find inner strength to refine positional knowledge and experiences in preparation for top leadership positions (Wiley et al., 2017).

Lack of Mentoring and Leadership Support Programs

Adequate leadership preparation and mentorship programs result in positive outcomes for career advancement (Washington, 2007). Diverse mentoring programs that provide coaching relationships and nurture talent are essential to assist women with strong leadership identity development (Carter & Peters, 2016). Effective mentors understand that strategic career planning based on short- and long-term goals help Black women internalize a leadership identity and develop a sense of purpose (Ibarra et al., 2013). Leading women administrators can serve as role models for building professional resilience in aspiring Black women leaders (Brunner, 1999; Christman & McClellan, 2008; Hall, 1999; Kawakami et al., 2000; Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013).

However, Black women do not always have access to these programs and the mentoring needed for career advancement and success (Washington, 2007). Though locating influential leadership programs and mentorships is challenging, mentoring and sponsorship for Black women leaders are vital tools to help break the barriers of stereotypes, exclusion, and isolation in the workplace (Carter & Peters, 2016). To decrease workplace discrimination, mentors may provide aspiring Black women leaders strategies to increase awareness of inequalities (Cain, 2015). Making the inequalities more visible may open the opportunity to discuss the obstacles faced by Black women leaders and seek organizational resolution (Cain, 2015).

Angel et al. (2013) found there is often a lack of supportive social systems or formal networks accessible to Black women leaders. Hart et al. (2022) found that women, and especially women of color who aspire to become superintendents, would benefit from school-based and

university-based career advancement programs. In a similar study, Black women leaders felt that having supportive relationships with others, or reflecting on past relationships, were significant in obtaining a superintendency (Webb, 2022). Relationships, particularly mentoring relationships, were beneficial even when they were challenging or negative because it was essential that aspiring leaders learn to navigate these experiences in preparation for the superintendency (Webb, 2022).

Systemic and Structural Inequities

Plagued by "persistent, racial inequities" (Allen & Dika, 2020, p. 229–230), the American Black population suffers from having equal access to resources to overcome the racial divide (Allen & Dika, 2020). Loden described an invisible barrier to advancement in 1978 as the "glass ceiling effect" (Vargas, 2018). The glass ceiling is an "intangible barrier within a hierarchy that prevents women or minorities from obtaining upper-level positions" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). The glass ceiling can also be described as the good-'ole-boy network.

A very subtle or covert limitation that serves as a significant barrier is the good-old-boy network (Angel, et al., 2013; Campbell & Campbell-Whatley, 2020). This is an informal yet powerful influence in which Black women are devalued by high-ranking decision makers as less-educated subordinates and passed over for top positions while their White counterparts and Black men are selected. Campbell and Campbell-Whatley (2020) found that discriminatory practices and social systems are the most pervasive barriers associated with the relatively few women in higher-level education roles.

The most frequent inhibiting factors for obtaining the superintendent position was a network of longtime acquaintances accompanied by preconceived assumptions or stereotypical attitudes. Unlike other researchers, Campbell and Campbell-Whatley (2020) found that a

woman's role as a mother and having multiple roles was not as much a barrier in the pursuit of professional goals as not having access to professional networks.

Goines-Harris (2020) suggested that the hiring process is a structural barrier for women, and noted that unfair treatment (e.g., gender and racial biases in the screening and selection processes) was a commonly perceived barrier for African American women who became superintendents.

Tallerico (2000) concluded that hiring processes that are flawed and opaque cause salary and limitations of positions available for aspiring Black women superintendents. Angel et al. (2013) found that Black women perceived the hiring process as a barrier to career advancement; they reported feelings of uncertainty about factors that affect the hiring practices and decisions of school districts when selecting a new superintendent. Researchers have also learned that Black women consider that hiring practices for top academic leadership is filled with uncertainty (Allen & Dika, 2020; Glass, 2000). Further, Jabbar et al. (2022) suggested that Black women may be treated differently in the selection process; their lack of connection to formal and/or informal social networks of Black women may contribute to feelings of uncertainty. Specifically, Jabbar et al. (2022) said that some Black women felt potential employers used a different set of rules and agendas to disadvantage them.

Enabling (Protective) Factors for Black Women Leaders

Enabling or protective factors are those characteristics within a "person or the environment that mitigate the negative impact of stressful situations and conditions" (Henderson & Milstein, 2003) and thereby help leaders overcome obstacles or challenges. "It is well-established that the racial/ethnic minority experience in the U. S. is characterized by many stressors, including but not limited to, acculturation, discrimination, socioeconomic hardship,

and marginalization" (Kingsberry, 2015; McLaughlin et al., 2009, p. 356). Therefore, when overcoming difficulties and building resiliency, Black women leaders should use protective factors en route to the superintendency. They must also embrace enabling factors to help them remain resilient and overcome hardships and unforeseen challenges (Kingsberry, 2015). A variety of factors were found in the literature that could enable/protect factors Black women leaders encounter on their way to the superintendency and during their time in that position. The two most important were resiliency and support networks.

Resiliency

Researchers (Cain, 2015; Christman & McClellan, 2008; Kingsberry, 2015) have suggested that one of the most important factors enabling Black women superintendents is resiliency. Kingsberry (2015) found that African American women superintendents were resilient in acquiring and maintaining the position despite their underrepresentation in the role. They pressed past self-doubt and negative thoughts and exhibited a determination to perform skillfully and successfully despite whatever they faced. Besides facing challenges related race and gender, these Black women leaders navigated through the ranks strategically to overcome other inhibiting factors associated with career advancement.

Kingsberry (2015) discovered that Black women leaders relied on internal protective factors such as service, connectedness, sense of humor, and shared responsibility to enhance resiliency. For example, the participants reported that they work to serve others by making personal sacrifices. To build resiliency, they also valued having a sense of humor, accountability, social connectedness, engagement with stakeholders, and shared responsibility to leverage expertise in addressing the problems of education. Consequently, Black women leaders found the inner strength and confidence to consistently give their best effort (Kingsberry, 2015).

Angel et al. (2013) found that the pressure to achieve impacted resiliency. Whether spoken or subtly imposed by community or family, Black women leaders internalized having high standards of achievement at an early age. These researchers also reported that Black women educators addressed having proper credentials as prerequisite for the superintendent position. As a result, Black women education leaders worked on eligibility requirements by seeking certification for the superintendency and earned other credentials to gain personal satisfaction and achievement rather than just a particular position.

Support from Others

Just as the absence of mentoring can be an inhibitor, support from others, particularly effective mentoring, is an enabler for Black women leaders (Carter & Peters, 2016). Black women need a diverse population of mentors and role models to help them navigate their career paths. Receiving multiple perspectives assists them in developing a balanced level of professionalism. Effective mentoring provides Black women leaders guidance when facing unfamiliar aspects of the role. Also, having other Black women leaders can be particularly helpful to share experiences.

Support from others is vital because it also fosters resiliency (Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Kingsberry, 2015). Kingsberry (2015) wrote that Black women leaders can overcome barriers by having family and community support systems as allies to add to their sense of autonomy, personal strength, self-competence, and purpose. Kingsberry (2015) said that enabling factors for Black women leaders are fostered through supportive relationships due to past and present interactions with schools, family, and community. These protective factors were associated with setting goals and being determined to be effective in the job (Kingsberry, 2015).

Collaborative relationships and experiences with others supported Black women leaders as they learned how to leverage knowledge to make productive decisions and perform as skillfully as their counterparts despite the inequities and negative assumptions facing them (Johnson, 2012; Kingsberry, 2015). To access the superintendency, some Black women nurtured themselves mentally and physically and asked for help from trusted peers, colleagues, or mentors when needed (Roberts et al., 2018). These women leaders were often viewed as outsiders within predominantly White organizations and thus sought change using outside training, sponsorship, and support such as professional development, mentorship, allyship, and role models to confront barriers and other unforeseen challenges (Sales et al., 2019).

With the support of others and a sense of resiliency, these Black women found a way to break the glass ceiling to obtain top managerial positions by maintaining credibility and integrity within the education bureaucracy. They navigated and adapted leadership abilities to the conditions of the workplace and gained the ability to exercise decision-making power in an authoritative role with equal ability as their White counterparts and Black men (Roberts et al., 2018; Sales et al., 2019).

Campbell and Campbell-Whatley (2020) found several elements that have been successful for women to reach professional career goals. According to 70% of those interviewed in their study, successful factors for career advancement include finding advanced training for strong leadership skills, increasing visibility, and providing strategies to help develop a positive self-concept. More than 60% of the participants found that improving professional image, obtaining familial and peer support, setting professional goals, and being more assertive were also successful elements of career development (Campbell and Campbell-Whatley, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study used two theoretical frameworks to examine the marginalization of women: the Black feminist thought of Patricia Hill Collins (1989, 1990, 2000) and the glass ceiling effect (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986; Konrad & Cannings, 1994, United States Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Vargas, 2018). These are described below.

Black Feminist Thought

The history of gender, race, feminism, and social class overlap in ways that form intersections of oppression. The convergence of these elements form barriers to leadership for women. This dynamic is explored in the work of Collins (2020, e.g.), who undertook significant research on the voices and lived experiences of Black intellectuals. The resulting theory, BFT, has made meaningful contributions "to contemporary and critical thinking about the social condition of African-American women in the U. S. (Hague & Okpala, 2017; Lloyd-Jones, 2009).

BFT advocates that stereotypical images of Black womanhood must be challenged and not internalized as normal (Collins, 1990; Simms, 2001). Such images or symbols are created to make poverty, sexism, racism, classism, and other elements of social injustice appear as acceptable aspects of life (Collins, 2000). If such stereotypes are portrayed as normal, then the intersecting oppressions of Black women are justified and are further internalized. The images of Black womanhood include matriarch, mammy, welfare mother, being sexual and aggressive, and baby producers. In BFT, Black women's work is viewed as the connection between knowledge and power (Collins, 2000).

Though viewed as offensive today, the image of the 'mammy' is portrayed as a passive and compliant servant of domestic work and childcare (Collins, 2000). Historically, the term refers to an enslaved African woman who worked in a White household and nursed the children.

With this stereotypical legacy in mind, the mammy trend continues with most Black women's employment concentrated in low-paying, service jobs that lack adequate insurance, retirement, PTO, and medical leave (Banks, 2019).

Another stereotypical image, the 'matriarch,' refers to a powerful woman of a tribe or organization. The matriarch is viewed as overly-masculine, serving as mother and father in the home or leader in an organization. The matriarch is viewed as the mother figure or cornerstone of Black society and in Black homes. Followers flock to her for spiritual guidance, direction, and advice. The matriarch image was an outcome of racial oppression and poverty (Collins, 2000).

Welfare mother' is still another derogatory term referring to an inner-city, passive, uneducated, and lazy woman who feels entitled to access benefits with little or no intention of becoming free from government assistance. She is viewed as a ghettoized, failed mammy who was not aggressive enough to gain an independent life for her children and herself (Collins, 2000). White (1999) strongly disliked literature referencing Black women as sexualized and aggressive hoochies or freaks. Some literature suggests that through sexually aggressive images, Black women are viewed as little more than baby producers (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006).

These stereotypes contribute to a Eurocentric masculinist worldview or White male standpoint that regularly prevails over the viewpoints of women, and more specifically, Black women (Collins, 2020). Like Collins, Leake (2021), also a Black woman intellectual, mother, coach, mentor, and educator, believed the work world for women is one of ambivalence and uncertainty, profoundly affected by racial, sexual, and social oppression. All these negative aspects are especially true for Black women.

Glass Ceiling Effect

The 'glass ceiling' effect is a global phenomenon that tremendously impacts women in the workforce. It is an invisible barrier that prevents women and minorities from advancing to the highest ranks in an organization (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Glass, 2000). Though many corporations encourage and promote diversity, the glass ceiling limits the reality of that goal. Despite gaining voting rights nationally in 1920, feminist groups promoting equality for women, and legislative mandates for increased diversity in the workplace, women remain poorly represented in high-ranking leadership positions (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Glass, 2000).

The glass ceiling illuminates a dynamic in which women must exercise caution when trying to access leadership positions because they have been viewed as weaker and have been almost exclusively seen in nurturing and feminine roles (homemaker, sexual partner for men, and mother). Consequently, women are often undervalued, overlooked, unappreciated, marginalized, and rejected. Women leaders are still seen as competent if their nature is confident and caring, while men are assumed to be competent leaders by just appearing confident (Alexandersson, 2021; Bowles & McGinn 2005; Eagly & Karau 2002; Hoyt & Blascovich 2007; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Glick 2001).

Angel et al. (2013) wrote that one of the external inhibiting factors identified by Black women leaders is the glass ceiling in the workplace. In their study, the political structure within an organization or community was identified as an oppressive external factor that Black women leaders face. Influence within the organization was a powerful determinant for decision-making in the work world.

A number of studies have demonstrated the glass ceiling effect. Researchers have noted that women were perceived as less committed than their male counterparts under the assumption

that they would need to take leave or stop working to follow the traditional 'mommy path' (Collins, 2020; Fritscher, 2017; Konrad & Cannings, 1994). According to Becker (1985), working women have less desirable human capital to invest than males because they also commit energy to the household and not exclusively the workplace. Consequently, Becker (1985) believed women were less able to compete with men in upward job mobility due to the perceived imbalance between a high-powered job and home management. Fritscher (2017) acknowledged that the problem of the glass ceiling remains. Nonetheless, women must remain proactive, diligent, and focused on their career path (Babic & Hansez, 2021; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Fritscher, 2017).

BFT and the glass ceiling were both important to this study as it sought to give an additional voice to the experiences of Black women superintendents. Research shows that women encounter a number of barriers while seeking the position of superintendent (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; FeKula & Roberts, 2005; Montz & Wanat, 2008; Sharp et al., 2000). This phenomenon is especially true for Black women leaders who continue to face challenges while superintendents (Garn & Brown, 2008; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Polka et al., 2008; VanTuyle & Watkins, 2009).

Conclusion

The teaching profession is primarily women and has been so for over a century. Webb (2022) found that school systems are ready to create systems to support Blacks in public higher education. Though the research reveals that education is a female-dominated field with opportunities for women to ascend through the ranks, the superintendent position generally remains one dominated by men (Benincasa, 2020; Carroll, 2021). The ongoing scarcity of Black women administrators in the top district position is especially concerning (Angel et al., 2013;

Brunner & Peyton-Claire, 2000; Shakeshaft et al., 2007). The lack of women superintendents has prompted researchers to investigate the causes why this is the case (Angel et al., 2013).

The purpose of this literature review was to analyze and interpret significant themes associated with Black women superintendents. Researchers have identified a variety of gender-based barriers and suggested a critical need for qualified Black women administrators aspiring to the superintendent position to reflect on perceived challenges, barriers, and strategies. High-quality preparation, including coaching/mentoring and access to fair hiring policies and practices, should be made available to assist aspiring Black women candidates. While there is extensive research on the lived experiences of Black women's ascension to top district positions, there has been limited research about their experiences during their tenure in this role.

Black women superintendents are understudied. Researchers acknowledges the need for more studies focused on the inhibitors, perceptions, and enablers of Black women leaders in school districts, including those seeking the superintendency. This study also sought to partially close this gap. The methodology that was used is described in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Research Questions

The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of African American women school district superintendents in North Carolina. Specifically, the researcher sought to understand their perceptions about inhibiting and enabling factors they faced when ascending to the role and continued to experience while serving.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What do North Carolina Black women perceive as inhibiting factors they overcame when ascending to the role?

2. What do North Carolina Black women superintendents perceive as enabling factors they experienced when ascending to the role?

3. What do North Carolina Black women district superintendents perceive as inhibiting factors they face while serving in the role?

4. What do North Carolina Black women school district superintendents perceive as enabling factors they experience while serving in the role?

This chapter provides information about the methods used in this study. The research design, a description of participant selection processes, and data collection and analysis processes are given. An overview of ethical considerations and measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the study conclude the chapter.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative method that allows researchers to explore phenomena and establish a detailed understanding of complex issues (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) maintained that qualitative research is an effective way for researchers to

understand how participants develop meaning from their lived experiences. Qualitative research also provides insight and an-depth understanding of participants' perspectives that cannot be gained using other methods.

Qualitative research acknowledges that individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences (Bailey-Walker, 2018; Francis, 2021; Hinds, 2016; Pruitt, 2015). Therefore, a qualitative design was selected for this study as it explored how Black women superintendents construct meaning and experience their world. A qualitative technique was preferred because it let the researcher examine the perspectives of Black women superintendents as they shared their personal and professional experiences in their journey to the superintendency, and while serving in that role. This methodology was preferred for this study because the number of Black women superintendents in North Carolina is very limited. There were only eight Black women superintendents in 2021 and six in 2023. Therefore, quantitative research was not feasible.

This research used semi-structured interviews. Each participant's ability to voice their perspectives openly gave credibility (trustworthiness) to the narratives and supported the assertions made by the researcher. The researcher assumed that participants' responses will ensure a complete understanding of the answers to the research questions. A semi-structured interview design was also appropriate because it guided conversation in which the researcher carefully listened so as to hear the meaning (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Positionality Statement

I am a 52-year-old spiritual Black woman from a devout family of eight siblings composed of teachers and preachers and was raised in Fort Myers, Florida. There are seven girls and one boy from the same mom and dad in my family, which I say with pride. In addition to having Christ as head of everything, obtaining higher education has always been a priority for

my family. Before my birth, my mother and father were preachers and remain so to this day. I have a set of twin sisters, one of whom holds PreK-12 teacher certification and owns and operates government-subsidized daycare centers. Another sibling owns a mental health practice as an adolescent psychologist. Two of my sisters are an attorney and banker, while my brother is a veteran and UPS supervisor. Re-Joyce Baskin is my oldest sister and my inspiration for becoming an educator like her.

Before earning college degrees, I worked in our home daycare while attending college. In 1992, I graduated from the University of South Florida with a bachelor's degree in elementary education. In 2003, I completed my master's degree in educational leadership through NOVA Southeastern University. Teaching and leading are part of my occupational DNA.

In June 2003, I relocated to Albemarle, N.C. and began my 11th year of teaching. After teaching at North Albemarle Elementary School for one year, I transitioned to Albemarle High School as assistant principal for three years. There, I lost my firstborn, which ignited a renewed and more profound passion for giving my all to others as my very own. In 2006-2007, I transitioned into the principalship at Central Elementary School in Albemarle, a role that I held for 14 years.

During my years at Central, I had three miscarriages. Another low-performing school merged with Central, increasing the student population of 345 to approximately 640 students. As consolation for my traumatic losses, I viewed enlarging the school population as a blessed 'double for my trouble' scenario. After all, my passion is loving those babies! Despite heartaches and pain, I have eagerly embraced my calling to teach and lead for over 29 years. In my professional life, I have served public education in and out of the classroom as a teacher and administrator.

Reading inspirational and educational literature is my favorite pastime, and I love to attend church and do mission work. Serving on auxiliaries (e.g., school superintendent, youth leader, and missionary) allows me to reach the larger community through various venues. I have been blessed to serve on the boards of a wide array of community organizations and service agencies. I have also participated in professional activities beyond the minimum required for the job. I am honored that my service has been recognized with a number of awards: the 2020 Life Changer Award nomination, Historic Preservation Award of Merit, Florida Writes Award, and National Junior Honor Society. As a recipient of these awards and a member of many schools and community-related organizations, I am a faithful participant in all my endeavors.

I will persist and succeed through Christ, which is why I am here. This statement is what I strive to live out each day. Having been an administrator for many years in one of the most diverse and challenging areas of Stanly County, my leadership must continue to be thought-provoking and innovative to meet the changing needs of the families I serve. Though I am celebrating being an administrator for over 17 years, I am only touching the tip of the iceberg concerning learning progressions and improvements. To keep from becoming stagnant and ineffective, I wanted to be a more thoughtful and skillful researcher and this is why I embarked on an Ed.D. through UNC-C. I want to propel the institutions I lead into greatness!

Being threaded throughout the greater school community keeps me highly involved in many educational capacities. Though I have no children of my own, it is essential to possess the unique ability to educate all ages, as well as their parents, with care and diligence to make a powerful impact in the lives of the next generation. Students and teachers must be challenged daily to be their very best selves. My greatest hope is that through my leadership, teachers, parents, and students discover learning to be meaningful in their lives. Valuing a strong sense of

efficacy and encouraging my staff to guide students in making connections in reading, math, and writing, as well as developing compassion for others, is paramount.

Recently, I was selected to serve as Director of Community Engagement and Dropout Prevention for Stanly County Schools, while attending UNC-C. I have the motivation, stamina, initiative, and drive to work hard. This is an intense undertaking for me. It is a means of growing for me, and I have a progressive and reflective mindset. There is still good in me to offer to others. My position as a district-level administrator allows me to make systemic changes through education reform strategies and disrupt marginalized communities' offensive and unpleasant narratives by developing new ideas and equity-focused practices.

As I transition through various phases of leadership, I also want to explore how Black women superintendents and aspirants construct meaning and experience the world. In my work, I am passionate about the impact God's foot soldiers and collective efficacy efforts have on teacher and student growth. With God, anything is possible.

Ethical Considerations

It is imperative that qualitative researchers protect participants in their studies. Therefore, measures were taken in this study based on Ravitch and Carl (2016) to meet common ethical standards and procedures, and protected the rights and welfare of human subjects in such research. These measures included protecting the identity of participants, maintaining data securely, ensuring voluntary participation, and adhering to the IRB process of UNC-C.

The researcher protected the identities of the participants by using pseudonyms for them. Their responses were anonymous to all except the researcher and their dissertation chair. Further, for the purpose of data protection, research study information (coding, interview recordings, and transcripts) were kept on the university's password-protected cloud storage. All research and

devices storing identifiable data will be destroyed or properly disposed of following completion of the study, as required by the IRB.

Each participant was given an informed consent form (see Appendix A) clearly detailing what was entailed in participating and to which they signed to indicate their willingness to be part of the study. The researcher gave participants a description of the study so that knowledgeable, informed, and voluntary decisions about participation could be made. To ensure participants fully understood the study, the researcher allotted participants adequate time before they commit to being in the study. The researcher asked participants to explain their understanding of the study process and answer any questions they might have had. Ongoing interactions during the study were maintained rather than just at the initial session. For their protection, all participants received verbal and written communication to ensure they understood that participation was entirely voluntary.

To comply with UNC-C guidelines, this study had minimal risks to participants with no "exposure to physical or psychological harm or experimental treatment" (Mangiaracina, 2020). Participants could withdraw at any time. The researcher further safeguarded their privacy by assuring them that no identifiable information was given to their employers or the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. The researcher communicated all these measures verbally and in writing to all participants at the outset of the study. Finally, this research did not begin until formal approval was given by UNC-C's IRB.

Setting, Participant Selection, and Sampling

This research was done in North Carolina. This state was chosen because it has adequate potential participants. The researcher lives and works in North Carolina, allowing reasonable access to participants. The researcher also believed that her current work as a Black women

district administrator in North Carolina and her long-time work as a teacher and principal in the

state enhanced the willingness of Black women superintendents to participate. Further, the state's

history of marginalizing people of color, particularly Black women, let the researcher examine

participants' experiences through a lens of historical marginalization.

The individuals selected for this study identified as Black women and work as North

Carolina superintendents. Therefore, purposive sampling was used. Purposive sampling ensured

that participants possessed the knowledge, experience, and membership in a specific group, or

held a particular role that the researcher sought to understand (Creswell, 2013). Being a Black

woman superintendent in North Carolina was the only criteria used to identify and recruit five

participants. Currently, there are so few Black women superintendents in the state that any

additional criteria would likely not made it possible to recruit an adequate number of potential

participants.

Convenience sampling was used in this study. Convenience sampling means that the

researcher had some ease of access to the participants, either through proximity or established

relationships (Creswell, 2013; Kilmer & Cook, 2020). In this study, the researcher had some

familiarity with potential participants through professional organizations. Additionally, the

researcher was assisted by the North Carolina School Superintendents Association to identify

potential participants. This organization had a registry of all North Carolina superintendents, and

the researcher had established contacts within this organization. Also, the researcher used

snowball sampling, a technique in which participants helped the researcher find additional

participants for the study.

A recruitment email (see Appendix B) was sent to all Black women superintendents in

North Carolina who were identified by the North Carolina School Superintendents Association.

The email included the voluntary nature of participation, a brief introduction to the purpose of the study, and the criteria to participate. Additionally, a short survey was included with this initial contact that was used to collect demographic information and the professional backgrounds of participants (see Appendix C).

As part of the selection process, the researcher will obtain participants' written permission to take part in a one-hour semi-structured interview (Appendix A). Before any data collection was done, the researcher provided participants with the purpose and details of the research, participants' right to voluntary participation, risks and benefits of the study, and how confidentiality of participants and data were maintained.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were used to collect data for this study. First, a *Google* recruitment message form (Appendix B) was sent to potential participants to introduce them to the study, share criteria for participation, and provide the opportunity for those willing to share contact information. The demographic survey (Appendix C) was used to verify the race and gender of participants. It was also used to gather information about their professional background, such as the number of years they have worked in education, the number of years they have served as superintendents, and the number of districts they have served in as superintendent. It also sought information about other professional roles they held.

The second instrument was the interview protocol. The interviews were designed around six categories of questions: background information; challenges participants faced when ascending to the role; challenges participants faced while in the role; supports and enabling factors; gender, race, family, and age; and perceptions of the experiences of other

superintendents. The interview had 22 questions designed to provide answers to the research questions. A copy of the interview protocol is in Appendix D.

The researcher obtained participants' written permission (Appendix A) to participate in a one-hour semi-structured interview (Appendix D). Before any data collection, to protect all participants, the researcher provided those selected with the purpose and details about the research, their right to voluntary participation, risks and benefits of the study, and information about how the confidentiality of participants would be maintained.

Data Collection

Participant selection and data collection will begin after approval of the study by the IRB. Following approval, the recruitment email (see Appendix B) was sent to the Black women superintendents in North Carolina to gather descriptive survey data and gauge interest in participation. Their responses were used to schedule *Zoom* interviews with participants at a mutually convenient time.

Data were collected from the selected participants with semi-structured interviews. The interviews were instrumental in documenting the responses and perspectives of the participants' lived accounts. Each interview was done using *Zoom* and lasted approximately one hour. The purpose of using the semi-structured interview was so the researcher could gather detailed and contextualized descriptions of the participants' realities and interpret common themes by obtaining reliable data. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), interviews help researchers explore how participants' lived experiences correspond or relate to the study topic and illuminate how those experiences relate to other participants. Participants were able to freely share without pressure or coercion.

The researcher used 22 questions based on the research questions (see Appendix D). The interviews began with several background questions as icebreakers. Interview questions were contextual, non-critical, and focused on the participant's experiences in order to gather a deeper understanding of experiences and perspectives.

Transcriptions were also done using *Zoom*. The researcher reviewed each transcript. Any identifying information was deleted, and pseudonyms were assigned to participants on the transcriptions. Data analysis then began.

Data Analysis

After data collection, the researcher interpreted the data through the lens of the theoretical frameworks. "Qualitative data analysis is a process of the description, classification, and interconnection of phenomena with the researcher's concepts" (Graue, 2015, p.8). Therefore, a coding process was used to organize data in a meaningful way. The researcher made thematic connections that related the framework to the participant's experiences and perspectives.

After the data had been organized to show thematic relationships or differences between data sets, the researcher examined and interpreted the categorized data to capture what it represented. Coding qualitative data enabled the researcher to interpret and summarize information more effectively (Flick, 2022; Liamputtong, 2009). It was essential to read and analyze the information regularly in its entirety to effectively assign descriptive codes (Liamputtong, 2009). The data analysis aligned with guidelines established by Saldaña (2021) for qualitative research. Specifically, the researcher did multiple rounds of coding. With each round, the researcher moved closer to identifying themes that arose from the findings.

The researcher began the data analysis by doing an uninterrupted reading of each transcript. The researcher then manually coded portions of material from transcripts. Manual

coding is recommended for novice investigators so they can become engaged with and reflect on the material. The first round of coding used *NVivo* codes (the participants' own words) and descriptive coding. Notable quotations by participants were highlighted for potential use in the findings. Using the constant comparative method, codes were compared with one another iteratively.

After the initial round of coding, the researcher conducted a second round of analysis. This time, the focus was on categorizing *NVivo* and descriptive codes that were found. Similar codes were grouped to establish categories and subcategories. Finally, these categories and subcategories will be used in a third round of coding to determine major themes. An Excel database will be used to organize findings during coding.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the researcher is actively involved in all phases of the study. Therefore, the trustworthiness of the researcher and the study must be established (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In other words, the researcher must establish that the research is objective and worthy of consideration. Lincoln and Guba (1985) considered the constructivist nature of qualitative research meant that four primary criteria must be considered to ensure trustworthiness. These are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the accuracy and truthfulness of the qualitative research findings (Trochim, 2006). Member-checking was used to support the credibility of this research. Member-checking is a tool to enhance credibility by allowing the participant to be engaged with the research (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). To perform member checking, interview transcripts and results were returned to the participants to review for accuracy. Merriam and Tisdell (2015)

defined member-checking as a strategy to obtain clarification, confirmation, revisions, input, and capture participants' reactions, opinions, and feedback about the findings.

Transferability

Transferability is defined as the degree to which the research findings can be transferred or applied to other settings, studies, and participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Trochim, 2006). It is the extent to which findings can be generalized to other contexts or situations. While generalizability is not usually the primary goal of qualitative research, or this study, measures were taken to enhance this characteristic. During each interview, a list of open-ended questions was used with participants. Also, rich descriptions of participants were provided, and direct quotations from participants supported assertions made about the findings.

Dependability

Dependability relates to the consistency of data analysis and replicability by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Trochim, 2006). Several measures were taken in this study to enhance dependability. First, participant interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy of data. Next, the researcher transcribed each interview to help internalize the information. Participants were asked to review copies of their transcribed conversation to ensure clarity and accuracy. The researcher listened to the recordings and took notes repeatedly to ensure a thorough understanding. The researcher also did multiple rounds of coding.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the last element of trustworthiness. To enhance confirmability, the researcher checked and rechecked data. The researcher also confirmed the data analysis process to ensure findings were legitimately related to the data.

Assumptions and Limitations

Qualitative research acknowledges that individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences (Davis, 2022; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Kingsberry, 2015; Pruitt, 2015). In seeking to discover these individuals' truths, the researcher assumed that participants answered interview questions forthrightly and honestly. Each interviewee's ability to voice her perspectives openly lent credibility and trustworthiness to the narratives and bolstered the assertions made by the researcher. Additionally, the researcher assumed that participants' responses gave a full understanding of the answers to the research questions.

Limitations are often found within the scope of most research and may affect study outcomes. Standardized data collection and analysis protocols can minimize reliability issues (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). However, the central limitation of this study was studying only Black women superintendents in one state instead of a larger geographic area. This limitation was intrinsic in the study as the researcher sought to understand the perspectives of this group. The researcher has a special interest in this group because of her professional experiences as a Black woman school administrator in the state. However, the researcher took care to minimize potential biases created by the similarity of backgrounds.

Roulston and Shelton (2015) reported that assumptions, misinterpretations, and pre-existing ideas may shape the information collected and data analysis, causing confirmation bias. To eliminate biases, the investigator was thoughtful and reflective concerning this research and committed to seeking reliable information and focused on the participants' viewpoints (Gouldner, 1971). Additional steps were taken to protect against the threat of researcher bias. A research plan was developed to minimize bias. A pilot study was used to refine interview questions and ensure clarity for the procedures.

A third limitation was the sample size. As often happens in qualitative research, the generalizability of findings is limited. However, the goal of this study was to obtain the voices of participants, share their stories, and discover insights about their experiences rather than seeking to generalize. Further, the research was limited to the summer and fall of 2023.

Summary

In qualitative studies, data collection and analysis can be daunting, and a researcher needs to be able to make sense of the voluminous amount of data obtained. Therefore, researchers need a comprehensive research plan and have peers and other researchers add their insights and perspectives to rule out bias and misinterpretation (Saldaña, 2021).

This exploratory qualitative study used several surveys: recruitment (Appendix B), demographic (Appendix C), a post-recruitment, pre-interview follow-up email script, (Appendix E), and semi-structured interview questions (Appendix D). The researcher intended to invite all Black women superintendents in North Carolina (eight as of 2021) to participate. However, only five remained in 2023. The method selected enabled greater understanding of participants' perspectives and gave a means by which the researcher could share their stories. Findings were reported and discussed in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS OF THE DATA

This basic interpretive qualitative study explored Black women school district superintendents' perceptions and lived experiences in North Carolina as they ascended to the role. Additionally, this study sought further understanding of what they experienced while serving. The research examined the subjective human experience by interpreting participants' thoughts through the meaning they made of contexts (Willig, 2017). Specifically, this study was done to answer the following research questions:

1. What do North Carolina Black women district superintendents perceive as inhibiting factors they had to overcome when ascending to the role?

2. What do North Carolina Black women school district superintendents perceive as enabling factors they experienced when ascending to the role?

3. What do North Carolina Black women district superintendents perceive as inhibiting factors they face while serving in the role?

4. What do North Carolina Black women school district superintendents perceive as enabling factors they experience while serving in the role?

This chapter includes an analysis of data used in this basic interpretive qualitative study and the themes from each research question. The study analysis was consistent with phenomenological methodology and directly related to the research questions. Aligned with the theoretical frameworks of BFT and the glass ceiling effect which explore the marginalization of women, this chapter describes the situations these women faced in their paths to the superintendency and continue to encounter in that role. Also, cumulative and individual demographic information about participants are given, using tables to complement the summary.

The process used to analyze interview transcripts is discussed, and the detailed themes and code data by research question are shared.

Summary of Participants

The individuals selected for this study identified as Black women working as superintendents in North Carolina. Using purposeful sampling, five participants were interviewed for this study. This type of sampling ensured that participants had the knowledge, experiences, and membership in a specific group or held a particular role that the researcher sought to understand (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher was familiar with potential participants through professional organizations. Additionally, the researcher sought assistance from the executive director of the North Carolina School Superintendents' Association to identify potential participants because this organization maintains a registry of North Carolina superintendents. Also, the researcher used snowball sampling, a technique in which participants helped the researcher find additional participants for the study.

A recruitment email (Appendix B) was sent to six Black women superintendents in North Carolina who were identified by the North Carolina School Superintendents Association. The email described the voluntary nature of participation, a brief introduction to the purpose of the study, and participation criteria. Additionally, a short Google Forms survey that sought demographic and professional background information was sent to each potential participant's email address (Appendix C). Five of the six agreed to participate in the study. The participants were intentionally selected because their participation was vitally connected to the research problem.

Table 3 depicts aggregate data to describe the respondents' information from the administered demographic survey (Appendix C). Of the five Black women participants who responded, 100% earned their doctorate in educational leadership before becoming a superintendent. Three-fifths (60%) of the participants had no undergraduate teaching preparation program courses related to the superintendency. In comparison, one-fifth (20%) had three courses related to the superintendency, and one-fifth (20%) had four or more such courses. Three-fifths (60%) of the participants had four or more graduate teaching preparation program courses related to the superintendency. In contrast, one-fifth (20%) had no courses related to the superintendency, and one-fifth (20%) had three related courses.

Table 3

Aggregated Demographic Survey Results

Indicator	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
40-49	3	60
50-59	0	0
60+	2	40
Education		
Doctorate	5	100
Total Yrs. in Role		
1-5	4	80
6-10		
11-15		
16-20	1	20
Yrs. in Current District		
1-5	5	100
Yrs. in Similar Districts		
1-5	4	80
6-10	0	0
11-15	1	20
Parents' Education		
Mother's		

Table 3 *Aggregated Demographic Survey Results (continued)*

Diploma	2	40
Associate's	1	20
Bachelor's	0	0
Master's	0	0
Doctorate	1	20
N/A	1	20
Father's		
Diploma	3	60
Associate's	0	0
Bachelor's	0	0
Master's	1	20
Doctorate	0	0
N/A	1	20
<u>Courses Related to Role</u>		
Graduate		
0	1	20
1	0	0
2	0	0
3	1	20
4 or more	3	60
Undergraduate		
0	3	60
1	0	0
2	1	20
3	0	0
4 or more	1	20

Demographic details for the participants are shown in Tables 4-8. In addition to the categories given above, 60 percent were married, 80% had one or more children, and 20% were not married or parenting. Of particular interest, 100% of the respondents have served only 1-3 years as a superintendent in North Carolina. Eighty percent of the participants were in their first superintendency, and 20% have served more than 15 years in the role.

Charlotte has been a superintendent for between four and five years in North Carolina, was aged 60-64 years, and has a doctorate in education. Though she had served in multiple supporting leadership roles, this was her first superintendency. None of her undergraduate or graduate preparation included topics related to the role of superintendent. She is married and also served as a consultant and has grown, successful children. Her mother earned an associate's degree, and her father received a high school diploma. Charlotte's board of education currently includes two men and five women. Fifty percent of the children served in the district qualify for free or reduced meals. Fourteen percent of the children served are Black, 49% are White, 28% are Hispanic, and 2% are Asian.

Cassie has been a superintendent for between one and three years in North Carolina, was 45-49 years, and earned a doctorate in education. Though she had served in multiple supporting leadership roles, this was her first superintendency. Two of her undergraduate courses included topics related to the position. Four or more of her graduate courses included topics related to the superintendency. She is married, a mother, and has been an education leader throughout her career. Her mother and father earned high school diplomas. Cassie's board of education currently includes one man and four women. Fifty-eight percent of the children served in the district qualify for free or reduced meals. Thirty-one percent of the children served are Black, 31% are White, 29% are Hispanic, and 1% are Asian.

Victoria has been a superintendent for between one and three years in North Carolina, is aged 40-44 years, and earned a doctorate in education. Though she had served in multiple supporting leadership roles, this is her first superintendency. None of her undergraduate teaching preparation program courses included topics related to her current work. Three of her graduate courses included topics related to the superintendency. Though married and a mother of two, she

has also served as an education leader throughout her career. Her mother and father had high school diplomas. Victoria's board of education currently includes two men and five women. Thirty percent of the children served in the district qualify for free or reduced meals. Twelve percent of the children served are Black, 50% are White, 19% are Hispanic, and 13% are Asian.

Elizabeth has been a superintendent for between one and three years in North Carolina, is 45-49 years, and earned a doctorate in education. Though she had had multiple supporting leadership roles, this was her first superintendency. None of her undergraduate courses included topics related to the superintendency, but four or more of her graduate courses did so. Single with no children, she has been a multifaceted education leader throughout her career before becoming a superintendent. Of note, her mother earned a doctorate, and her father earned a master's degree. Elizabeth's board of education has three men and four women. Seventy-four percent of the children served in the district qualify for free or reduced meals. Thirty-two percent of the children served are Black, 17% are White, 37% are Hispanic, and 3% are Asian.

Tamara has been a superintendent for 16-20 years, is 65+ years old, and earned a doctorate in education. She has served for between one and three years in North Carolina. She has had multiple supporting leadership roles, and this is her second superintendency. Four or more of her undergraduate and graduate courses included topics related to the superintendency. She is married, a mother, and also served as an education leader throughout her career. Her mother and father both did not earn high school diplomas. Tamara's board of education currently includes two men and six women. Seventy-five percent of the children served in the district qualify for free and reduced meals. Eighty-one percent of the children served are Black, 8% are White, 6% are Hispanic, and <1% are Asian.

Table 4

Age, Years of Experience, and Education of Participants

Participant	Age	Total Yrs. as Superintendent (Yrs.)	Education
Charlotte	60-64	4-5	Doctorate
Cassie	45-49	1-3	Doctorate
Victoria	40-44	1-3	Doctorate
Elizabeth	45-49	1-3	Doctorate
Tamara	65+	16-20	Doctorate

Table 5

Detailed Experience of Participants as Superintendents (Yrs.)

Participant	In NE U. S.	Current District	Similar District	All
Charlotte	4-5	4-5	N/A	4-5
Cassie	1-3	1-3	N/A	1-3
Victoria	1-3	1-3	N/A	1-3
Elizabeth	1-3	1-3	N/A	1-3
Tamara	1-3	1-3	11-15	16-20

Table 6

Parents' Education

Participant	Mother's	Father's
Charlotte	Associate's	Diploma
Cassie	Diploma	Diploma
Victoria	Diploma	Diploma
Elizabeth	Doctorate	Master's
Tamara	N/A	N/A

Table 7

Participants' Family Status

Participant	Children	Married
Cassie	Y	N
Charlotte	Y	Y
Victoria	Y	Y
Elizabeth	N	N
Tamara	Y	Y

Table 8

Courses Related to Role

Participant	Graduate Courses
Cassie	0
Charlotte	2
Victoria	0
Elizabeth	0
Tamara	4+
	Undergraduate Courses
Charlotte	0
Cassie	4+
Victoria	3
Elizabeth	4+
Tamara	4+

Findings by Research Question

Five interviews with Black women superintendents in North Carolina served as the primary source of research data, while the demographic survey provided supporting data. After

completing the interviews, the information was manually coded and examined for emerging

themes. The original interview protocol and demographic questionnaire are given in appendices

C and D. After being transcribed in *Google Meet* and *Zoom* platforms, the researcher manually

transcribed the documents again and compared manual and electronic transcriptions for

accuracy.

Coding the interviews and comparing them helped uncover overarching themes and

commonalities in the analyzed data that let the researcher emphasize key points and themes. This

is essential for using the critical method in grounded theory methodology. Themes and

subthemes that aligned with each research question are described in the remainder of the chapter

and summarized in Table 9.

Table 9

Themes and Sub-themes from Research Questions

RQ	Theme	Sub-theme
1	Perceived Personal Barriers	Neg. Observations of the Role
		Contentment in Support Role
		Work-Life Balance
		Self-Imposed Barriers
		Politicized Space
		Hiring Process
2	Personal Supports	Be an Authentic Leader
		Be a Reflective Leader
		Personal Significance
		Supportive Family
		Leverage Strong Networks
3	Inhibiting Factors—Personal	Proving Season
		Work-Life Balance
	Inhibiting Factors—Work	Politics and the Board
		Relationship with the Board
		Feelings of Isolation/Exclusion
		Intersection of Race & Gender
4	Enabling Factors—Personal	Faith and Humility; Sisterhood
	Enabling Factors—Work	Professional Networks
		Focus on the Work (Students)

Research Question One

The first question sought to answer what North Carolina Black women school district superintendents perceive as inhibiting factors they had to overcome when ascending to the role. Data analysis was conducted to examine participants' perceptions as they aspired to the superintendency. The overarching theme was that participants were forthright about personal and professional inhibitors they overcame while ascending to the top role.

Perceived Personal Barriers: Inhibitors

The main theme organized around this research question examined the perceived personal and professional challenges (inhibitors) Black women superintendents faced while ascending to the superintendent role. The respondents admitted that their aspirations for the superintendency were influenced by their perceptions of it. These influences caused personal challenges involving reluctance due to their observations of the role, complacency seen while serving in supportive roles, having work-life balance, and self-imposed barriers.

Negative Perceptions of the Role Based on Observations. Initially, participants viewed the superintendent role unfavorably and were reluctant to pursue the position. Their past education experiences and negative observations surrounding the field affected their perceptions. For example, Tamara initially had no desire for the superintendent position and shared her negative perceptions about pursuing a career in education. She stated:

I graduated from college and vowed I would never be a teacher, never be an educator. Because during that time, when I finished, there was starting to be such negativity around education and teachers. So, I decided that I was not going to pursue a pathway in education and went back to get my master's degree in psychology.

Tamara also shared how attaining the superintendency would change her locus of control, which brings about a loss of control over time, relationships, and daily commitments. She commented:

I think one of the hardest transitions is when you are learning to lead, and I think you have to learn to lead first. We lead in a school building in a classroom, but it's different because your locus of control as a teacher is so defined.

Victoria noted similar perceptions about pursuing the "unappealing" superintendency role. She described her concerns:

I did want something different, but I knew working alongside a superintendent for so many years that I did not want to be in that seat. And so that's what made me go into the chief of staff role, which further confirmed that I did not want to be in that seat.

Cassie echoed the same. She stated, "I don't know because I don't want to do the superintendency." Charlotte observed superintendents she worked for and stated how these experiences affected her pursuit of the role. She explained:

And again, I did so reluctantly because I saw what he went through. I saw what many superintendents that I had worked with, particularly at that central office level. It was awful. And I don't know of any of the ones that I worked with, whether it was direct or indirect, who deserved what happened to them.

Contentment in Supportive Roles. The participants had similar professional educational experiences; all had worked in support leadership roles such as principals or assistant superintendents, before becoming a superintendent. A theme emerged that while participants were enthusiastic about leadership, all said that they were content to serve in these supportive leadership roles rather than seeking the superintendency. For example, Elizabeth used the language of contentment when she stated:

I did the SUPES [Superintendent Professional Preparation Series] Academy, not because I really wanted to be a superintendent but more because I was trying to make sure that I was supporting the superintendents that I worked with. So, I really enjoyed being the number two or number three in the district. I understood how to make sure that I took care of my superintendent.

When asked about her intentions to become a superintendent, Tamara responded, "And the answer is no. I never thought, never even considered, never considered even being an administrator." She further explained her contentment with not being a superintendent by describing a conversation with her mentor:

He said, "You want to be a superintendent, don't you? I'm like, no. Why would I? No. Never gave it any thought. He said, "I'll help you." And I'm thinking, you're not listening to me. And I had no desire, no desire whatsoever, to be a superintendent. And then, six years later, I became a superintendent.

Victoria had similar inhibiting responses about her aspirations to become superintendent. "I did not aspire to be a superintendent. When I was the assistant and assistant superintendent, I really enjoyed that role. She further shared, "I really enjoyed being number two. I really enjoy working in the background and staying in back and helping somebody else look good, you know, and accomplish their goals and so forth."

The participants felt a sense of gratification working in protective or benevolent roles for former superintendents. With a chuckle, Charlotte said:

"I absolutely did not aspire to be a superintendent, assistant principal, principal, supervisor, director, executive director, chief academic officer. . .I didn't aspire to any of those positions."

When encouraged by others to pursue the office of superintendency, she recalled:

> I was very satisfied and happy being the executive director to the deputy superintendent of teaching and learning. My sweet spot is really in a supportive role, and yet, I would find myself being ushered into more of a front-line role. And so, at any rate, no, I did not aspire to the superintendency but had people who encouraged and (*pause*) motivated me to do so. I heard a lot of "you need to do this."

Initially, Cassie responded to the question regarding her aspirations to be superintendent with a resounding "Yes." As the interview progressed, an instance of using language that referenced reluctance was in her response. She shared that one of her sponsors talked with her about potentially becoming a superintendent. The researcher noted that Cassie admitted a sense of skepticism and reluctance about the superintendency as she shared the discussion with her sponsor:

> Cassie's sponsor: Have you ever thought about the superintendency?
>
> Cassie's response: And I was like (*giggling*) huh? I said, Well, sometimes I do, then other times, I don't. Because it's a lot and from what I am seeing, it's a lot. It's challenging; challenging personally and professionally, people attack your character. Like I was telling her all the bad stuff. She said, "Well, I am a retired superintendent," and she said, "And I'm here to tell you when we see you all out in the field, it is our mission to tell you what you are. And she said, "You are a superintendent, and you are going to grow."

Work-Life Balance. A theme was found related to work-life balance. Language referencing work-life balance suggested that family life and structure were critical to participants. Some participants noted that the work life of a superintendent was sacrificial.

Tamara stated that when pursuing the superintendency, having a strong family is critical. When describing the impact of the superintendency on family life, she noted:

> Being a mother, a wife, uh, a sister, a sister, and all of those roles that we play, maintaining a household and helping to make my home at my house a home and serving in those roles are in addition to the daily stresses and the anxieties and the responsibilities that come along with the superintendency. So, understanding that family is everything. And I used to say to people when I would mentor is that you have to make sure, prior to going into the superintendency, that home is strong. Because if you don't do that, it will fall apart. You cannot make home strong during the superintendency. You're going to be pulling on everything that you've ever invested in your relationship with your husband and, your relationship in your home so that you can get the supports that you need in order to continue to do the work. So that is out, that's my advice to anyone. The job will eat you up. And it will digest you if you let it.

Other participants echoed Tamara's sentiment, noting that the superintendency is a complex and demanding job that can challenge the work-life balance. Charlotte admitted, "There wasn't much work-life balance."

Victoria knew a professional challenge as a superintendent would be the need for strong family support. She transitioned into the role with the support of her husband and having a strategic plan. About her husband, she said, "He makes sure that the household is taken care of. He is what I call the CFO of our household. He keeps the kids straight. He keeps our schedule straight."

Cassie reflected on her struggle regarding work-life balance as she ascended to the superintendency. She was stressed and articulated the fear of not being able to adequately raise a

family, one of the challenges of everyday life. When asked by a mentor about pursuing the superintendency, Cassie responded, "And, of course, I worried about my family and my responsibilities and all of that." Later in the interview, she said that she told her husband before becoming superintendent, "I'm just worried about what will happen with our family." Often, there is a strong emphasis on the woman to be at home and choose children over a career. Cassie battled with having her husband take care of the home while she adjusted her career toward superintendency.

Barriers Placed on Self. Participants suggested that Black women leaders feel the need to prove their leadership instead of just skillfully leading. Rather than grappling with distractions and losing focus on the work they were hired to do, participants recognized that sometimes they placed unnecessary, burdensome, and unintentional barriers on themselves. During the progression to the superintendency, participants' preconceived notions caused further anxiety and discontentment in pursuing the role. As they reflected on the challenges they faced along the way to being superintendent, a theme from the interviews was the limitations participants placed on themselves. In various ways, each participant's aspirations to become the superintendent, they negatively or positively influenced themselves and by their concern for others' perceptions.

Victoria thought the board of education would be reluctant to hire her because the Black woman superintendent who preceded her struggled in the role. She stated, "The challenges or barriers that I think I put for myself; I said they are never going to pick me as another Black woman." In addition, she emphasized that because she is a Black woman leader, people were always in her ear, sharing their ideas about why she could or could not be a superintendent in a particular area. She said, "You know, I did have other people and voices in my ear who shared

with me all of the reasons why they didn't think it was the right place." Reflecting on barriers of

self, Victoria noted:

> ...or, you know, why I wasn't ready to be a superintendent. I was told I'd never be a
>
> superintendent unless it was in an urban district with natural hair. I was told, you know, I
>
> have school-aged children, so you can't do that job as a mother of children that young.
>
> So, those were the type of challenges that I think as I was going through the process. But
>
> a lot of that, I would say, I was listening to what other people were saying, or I put those
>
> things on myself.

Many of the 'people in her ear' were predominantly Black people Victoria knew. In a

positive vein, though, participants placed barriers on themselves by remaining in supportive roles

and making themselves "second best." Victoria overcame these challenges by changing her

views about herself and focusing on these challenges as opportunities for growth instead of

barriers. She described them:

> So, there are two things I would say. One, as I started to transition to the superintendency
>
> I was (*self-correction*) early on, I was concerned with the approval rating of others, and
>
> that dissipated quickly. And that's where I really started to hone in on the importance of
>
> leading as my authentic self.

Victoria stated her second point:

> And then, I would say, I say this when I do, like, keynote speeches or like leadership
>
> sessions, that I just (*self-correction*) there was this turning point where I decided that I
>
> was going to use all of my challenges as opportunities rather than hindrances.

In her transition to the superintendency, Elizabeth reflected on how she placed hardships

on herself. She said, "I think the other thing that I had to really navigate is the challenge of how

you take care of yourself in the transition." She shared how a mentor encouraged her to take a sabbatical to refresh and reinvigorate herself before transitioning to her new role. Elizabeth described how she succumbed to the stereotype of being a "strong Black woman" that society has impressed on many and did not rest properly. There were implications that the decision to keep going caused her difficult challenges to endure along the way. Participants implied that Black women leaders have the self-perception that they should be expert 'superwomen' to lead. Tamara said, "You know, we've been trusted with these positions, and we're supposed to be experts. Strong women! And so, you have to, in your way, start to grapple with that."

Perceived Professional Barriers: Inhibitors

Another theme that emerged from this research was that participants were very clear about their knowledge and understanding of the professional challenges (inhibitors) faced while ascending to the superintendency.

Politicized Space. Along the way to the role, participants noted that the superintendency is encapsulated in political spaces that can impede good leadership in an already complex education landscape. The language used by participants can be characterized as admissions of experiencing difficulty in navigating the superintendency in politicized spaces. Charlotte stated, "So the biggest challenge, I think, was, and while I had all of this strong network, every context, all politics are local." When describing her frustration with the political climate, she said:

> I don't like politics. I loathe politics, and I don't like playing games, although politics are everywhere. They're in our churches, they're in our homes, or at the grocery store. So, I mean, we all live and breathe politics. I just didn't want to do it at that level.

Participants also articulated the importance of understanding the politics of the job as a reality, getting a strong grip on what that entails, and how to navigate the nuances associated with those politics. Elizabeth stated:

Boards—they are politicians first. They have to get re-elected, so they might be all about equity in a closed session. But when they have to stand up and say that they have appointed someone of color, or an issue that might come up with, there might be an issue of equity. They might be reluctant to do that, especially in conservative areas, because they're politicians first. It doesn't mean they're bad people, but they're politicians first.

Elizabeth went on to describe the importance of relating to the board for a superintendent. She said, "Then it's about learning about the board, and is the relationship with the board gonna be a match. So, in terms of overcoming those challenges, I was always very strategic and deliberate." Tamara echoed a similar response about politics. She said, "And there will be challenges as to how to understand the politics in the community and the political winds that can blow." Based on the language used by the participants, with all the complexities and demands of the role, superintendents must factor in politics by giving forethought to the implications of decisions.

Hiring Process. All participants described their hiring process as challenging and political. Preparedness for the process was a major finding. Three of the five participants had mock interviews and feedback with mentors and former superintendents before the actual interviews. Elizabeth shared:

So, my mentors helped to give me feedback on my resume. They set up Zoom calls with me and did mock interviews. They gave me suggestions on, you know, how to speak

from a certain lens so that I can really, fully understand that my answers need to be

something that is going to come from the lens of a board member, right?

I spent a lot of time researching, if I did not already know about that community,

researching the community. I tried to make sure that I watched about six months of board

meetings prior to sitting in front of an interview. I'm very meticulous, and so the way I

prepare for board presentations, even in my previous roles, is I would really script

everything. So, I had a bucket of questions that I had gotten from SUPES Academy and

from my mentors, and for every interview, I scripted answers to those questions based on

that particular school district.

Participants also learned about the hiring practices from school board associations and

academies, mentors, and veteran superintendents. Local, state, and national preparatory

organizations were considered beneficial. Respondents recalled having strong, apprehensive

feelings about the hiring process and shared that strategic, intentional, and deliberate

preparations should be made for this rigorous process. Elizabeth stated, "I think I would describe

the hiring process as exhausting, exciting, and challenging. I mean, the preparation work is

exhausting, but it is super important." To be adequately prepared for the interview, Elizabeth

wanted to understand the nuances associated with the superintendent hiring process. She said:

So, I did a profile for every board member so I could make personal connections to their

undergraduate work or where they had been, a connection so that they would know that I

had done some research about them because they wanted to connect to you as a person.

You want to connect to the community. You know, I worked really, really hard."

When asked about the hiring process, there were commonalities in the participants'

responses. Tamara said, "Oh yeah, for the superintendency! It was really rigorous." Charlotte

shared her thoughts about the hiring process: "And so it's not just clicking off multiple choice questions. You have to provide some written statements. It is usually a pretty hefty cover letter that goes along really explaining like why you want this job.

Cassie reflected:

Oh, that was hard! It was. That was the hardest process I've ever been in in my life. And I'll tell anybody that. I thought my dissertation was hard. This was hard. For me, it was. Applying. Doing the application. The interviews.

She also commented how a Caucasian woman mentor convinced her to change her mindset to overcome the board interview process:

But like I said, my mentor, my Caucasian mentor, she told me, "When you go in, don't think of it as the board is just going to interview you. You're gonna interview the board, and that's what's gonna get you to the finals every time. And she was right.

When reviewing the hiring process, a matching leadership profile or skill set to the board's strategic plan or job description was mentioned by every participant. Participants shared the need to conduct research about a district in which they wished to serve. Demographics often dictate district developments, board relations and structure, and organizational direction for leaders for favorable educational outcomes. Participants talked about how research provides reliable data that gives insights into effective superintendent leadership matches for specific districts.

Victoria emphasized the importance of the leadership profile being a match for the desired position based on the board and school community needs. "For me, I was very intentional about looking at the leadership profiles, so I was very selective about the superintendency that I applied for," she said. Preparations for the hiring process were embedded

in developing the leadership profile. These intensive preparations included participants

conducting research on boards and their districts. Tamara shared her perceptions about why this

research is highly recommended:

> You really should do the research. You should know the school district in a manner that
> you can weave it into your responses rather than laying it all out in front of them. You
> want it to be natural. You want to understand, but you still want to feel and give the
> impression that you are malleable and that you are (*self-correction*) want to still learn the
> community and get to know the community.

The participants were apprehensive about the hiring process but never alluded to any unfair

treatment by school boards during the selection procedure.

Research Question Two

The second question was written to answer the question of what North Carolina Black

women district superintendents perceived as support factors they experienced when ascending to

the role. Several interpersonal themes were found.

Personal Supports

Participants had various outlooks in common regarding their perceptions of enabling

factors they experienced when seeking the superintendency. These include having a forthright

attitude about being comfortable in their "skin", being unapologetic and leading as their

authentic self, being reflective, having mentors to support them in the role, exercising faith and

humility, understanding their personal significance in the role, accepting challenges as

opportunities, and allowing their families to be supportive of the call to lead.

Be an Authentic Leader. Participants shared their views about leading authentically and

unapologetically as Black women. Victoria said, "I am really big on really analyzing and doing

some self-reflection on who I am as a leader and leading unapologetically as my authentic self." Cassie summed up her thoughts as: "So I tried my best to pride myself on being authentic and just being who I am." She added, "I just put it out on front street. I told the staff members and the board members that were there. I said I know who I am. I know what skin I am in." Regardless of the scarcity of Black women as superintendents, the participants believed they possessed the skills necessary to lead school systems authentically and unapologetically.

One of the respondents implied that she took pride in being a Black woman and is comfortable in the skin color she wears. Elizabeth claimed, "And I don't want to be a White man, and I'm okay. I'm old enough that I'm okay in the skin that I'm in." Elizabeth further stated:

> And I really do believe that my experience as a woman of color, and especially my experience in the districts that I've been in, even my undergraduate experience having gone to predominantly White institutions, there are lots of experiences that I can lean on that have helped me in this role."

Participants' words suggested that the way to make achieving the superintendency a positive experience is for Black women administrators to realize that they have the potential to establish their place as top-ranking leaders in society. But rather than fighting to make it happen, one of the participants recognized that too much weight may be placed on the intersections of race and gender, which may worsen the perceptions and experiences around attaining the superintendency. Victoria shared, "And so, the biggest challenges are overcoming the narrative, the false narratives that are created about me, and staying focused on the work. And so, I have to be very intentional about that."

While it is apparent that inequities and injustices are real barriers. The participants realized the importance of leading intentionally and unapologetically and finding strategic ways to bring in their leadership experiences that impacted their career advancement to the superintendent role. Victoria shared further:

I find myself often saying, White males do this all the time. Or, you know, people of color always have to, you know, explain or make sure all of our t's are crossed and i's are dotted. But I also try not to pay much attention to that. I'm cognizant of it, but I don't spend too much time or energy worrying about it because that can be a distraction in itself. But I am cognizant of the fact that I have to move a certain way, do things a certain way, and document things a certain way because I am a Black female superintendent.

Elizabeth added:

. . .but also, when you think about enabling factors, there does have to be, I think, a little bit more grit for women of color when you're going after the superintendency. If you're a White man, you can walk into a room, and everyone thinks you don't have to say anything. People already automatically think that you're a leader and that you can do the job.

Charlotte reflected on gender and race in her search for the superintendency:

Gender and race played a role in my search for a superintendency. When researching districts with superintendent openings, I was very interested in knowing if a district ever had a woman, a Black woman, or a person of color in the role previously, and if so, how long ago and how did that person or those persons fare. And, if not, how open would they be to considering me as a Black woman? I also had to ask myself if seriously considered or offered a superintendency where there had not ever been a woman, Black woman, or

person of color in the superintendency, would I be willing to be the "first" as being the first definitely comes with its own set of challenges that would be layered on top of my gender and race.

It was apparent, though, that all participants were confident and had the credentials and experience to do the job.

Be a Reflective Leader. Participants discussed the importance of self-reflection, which can take on different forms in leadership. Tamara shared, ". . .and you will see your journaling will evolve, and that helps you so much with your leadership. You cannot be a strong leader until you know you." Participants realized that despite the barriers faced along the way to the superintendency, they were made for this role as they unpacked and explored their values and beliefs. It was also important to reflect on making sense of their experiences while moving through the ranks in their district.

Tamara believed that in order to make sustainable change, leaders must know who they are. A reflective strategy she used was journaling. Through journaling, she shared her deepest pains and victories:

I had to trust that I could write down my feelings. I didn't have to act out my feelings. So, by journaling, I got to put it down. I cried. I wrote I was Black. And I knew I was, and I had to tell somebody. And I had to ask for help to navigate this road that I'd never been down before. And I'm surrounded by people who don't look like me, and I'm trying my best to go through every day and show how proficient I am in this education profession. And every day, it felt like an uphill battle.

And every day, I felt like they withheld information from me that sometimes there were meetings that were going on and nobody ever told me about the meeting. And somehow,

God always got it to me though. Even though I was late sometimes for those meetings.

And it was just those little nuances. People can exclude you without excluding you. They

can exclude you with their body language. They can exclude you from invaluable

information that you need in order to do your job, and you can be excluded from having

the supports that you need. And in this this particular position, I'm a director, and I had

no staff. I had zero people and staff.

Personal Significance. All participants shared their purpose for leading in the

superintendent role and contributing to the narrative of Black women. When asked about their

perspectives on their leadership journey, profound and enlightening details were shared which

illuminated personal significance (value and meaning) and the deeper implications of their

participation in the study. Most participants believe they could be regarded as effective leaders if

given top leadership roles to amplify their voices and illuminate the suppressed voices of others.

Cassie shared why she agreed to participate in the study: "It's because I know that it's

rare to encounter us. But it's also hard to catch up with us and for us to make time for each other,

and I wanted somebody to do that for me."

Elizabeth said:

And so, I graduated in 2010, and it seems like truly a lifetime ago, but I remember how

hard it is. I always am trying to, when I do have the opportunity, to just help others

because it's rough in the streets, honey, to try to figure all this out and get it all done.

Victoria shared her personal significance about why this study has value. Charlotte voiced her

input about why this study has meaning to her:

So, I participate in opportunities like this for two reasons. One, I want to continue to

contribute to our profession, and when I was working on my doctorate, I certainly had to

engage with others. And without folks engaging, I certainly would not have been successful in my research study. So, it's important and we should be elevating our profession by being of support to those who are seeking a higher degree. But I also think everybody's story is important, and we can learn from it right, and it can add to the profession.

So it is for those reasons that I typically don't turn down opportunities to participate in research studies. What is it? A couple hours of my time is not asking a lot, and if it will help the person and help the profession, so be it. I believe in really amplifying the voice but also the leadership abilities of females of color. I think it is important, and it's time for us to be able to tell our stories so that people really know what, honestly, people would never really know. Unless you are a Black female in a leadership position, you will never truly know. But I think it is important to, again, amplify the voice and experiences of people who look like me, and so, anytime I get a request like this, I'm going to say yes because our stories matter.

The narrative remains strong regarding negative assumptions about Black women leaders. These include:

- Black women being viewed as not good leaders, with their counterparts being more competent.
- Deemed incapable of a healthy work-life balance.
- Placing an overemphasis on the intersectionality of oppressions related to gender, race, and social status.
- Having limited access to professional organizations, mentors, and role models.
- Lacking the stackable or layered skills necessary to manage a school system.

The respondents viewed these challenges in aspiring to the role as opportunities rather than deterrents. They relied on their experiences to prepare them to combat the narrative surrounding gender and race biases pervasive in American culture, finding strategic and innovative ways to leverage their talents, and succeed in their leadership. Tamara recalled:

And they were great, and great experiences, a variety of experiences, and having a cohort experience was invaluable, having colleagues to be able to talk to. I have had some of the best superintendents that any person could ever dream of having, who have mentored me, and shared with me, and been so selfless in providing for me in opportunities, and that has been incredible.

She firmly believed:

. . .you have to keep amassing those skills along the way in order to be able to meet the challenge, the challenges of the superintendency; the political challenges, the community challenges, the academic challenges, all of those challenges, you have to develop a stack of skills all along the way in order to do it.

Through an analytical approach, the findings of this study give weight to assumptions that career advancement for women leaders of color has been greatly influenced by having mentors and role models, and participating in professional organizations, training, and social networks.

Supportive Family. Having a strong, supportive family was a priority for participants. Tamara mentioned that, "You cannot make home strong during the superintendency." Several participants referred to their families in a gracious way because of the sacrifices they made and

the ways in which they supported them as they ascended to and served in the superintendent role. Participants described some of the ways her family successfully offered support. Victoria said, " . . .my parents were both very supportive. My mom is very much a no-nonsense type of mom, and that's how she raised me. And my dad was very much a Black and proud, unapologetic type of guy." When describing her husband, she added," . . .he said, it's time for me to step aside, and it's time for you to grow because so many people are speaking, you know, over you and saying that they see so much more for you from a leadership standpoint and ministry cannot get it in the way of that." Victoria added later, "So it's just he has been very supportive and pushing me and also protecting me. As you know, those false narratives are created."

> Elizabeth reported that even though she is single with no children,
>
> And then now that I am a superintendent, I think, you know, my family, you know, is extraordinarily supportive, and they were supportive through the process. And so, but they also recognize that I have a job, and sometimes that job means that I might be interrupted during, but that's always been my life.

Cassie shared, "So, my husband and my family are just remarkable. I mean, in terms of supporting me. . ."

> Tamara offered a strong statement that was quoted above, but bears repeating:
>
> So, understanding that family is everything. And I used to say to people when I would mentor is that you have to make sure, prior to going into the superintendency, that home is strong. Because if you don't do that, it will fall apart. You cannot make home strong during the superintendency. You're going to be pulling on everything that you've ever invested in your relationship with your husband and the relationship in your home so that

you can get the supports that you need in order to continue to do the work. So that is out,

that's my advice to anyone. The job will eat you up. And it will digest you if you let it.

Professional Supports: Enablers

Leverage Strong Networks Using Organizations and Mentors. Participants described

the importance of professional networks and implied that mentorship experiences were the result

of personal and professional organizations and networks. Victoria shared that "I have a mentor

who encouraged me to apply for the AASA [Aspiring Superintendents Academy from the

American Association of School Administrators] and Howard University's Urban

Superintendents Academy." She further shared:

> A mentor is someone who I can lean on, I can check in with, I can bounce ideas off of. A
>
> sponsor is someone who I know is going to take care of my name when I'm not in the
>
> room, right?

Leveraging strong networks and sponsors to create a safety net, participating in

professional organizations such as aspiring superintendent programs, school board associations,

and the SUPES academy were common professional development (PD) and training themes

found in the data regarding participants' perceptions of enabling factors they experienced on

their paths to the superintendency. Cassie said:

> I did the aspiring superintendency program. I felt like that was very helpful, too. I met
>
> more colleagues across the state who were trying to achieve the same things that I was
>
> trying to achieve. So again, they became support partners. You know, as you are applying
>
> or as you're thinking about different things or need encouragement, even if you're not in
>
> the seat of the superintendency, that group alone has been my safety net. It's always been
>
> there, that group that I had in Cohort 3.

Elizabeth shared her thoughts "So you've got to know the process and how to navigate the (interview) process. And so, part of that I learned from the SUPES Academy doing that." When afforded PD opportunities, participants said they capitalized on leading and learning supports that offer hands-on experiences, new content, relevant and meaningful teaching and facilitation, and leadership guidance and implementation as they ascended to the role. Charlotte shared, "So again, just leveraging my network. I had a strong network of current and former superintendents." Tamara participated in professional networks to help build her skill set:

> I will also tell you that state, local, state, and national organizations [are significant]. So when I think about those and the role that they have played in my development, it is invaluable what I've learned from the workshops of AASA, USAA, every one of those organizations, and their mentoring programs.

In preparation for their superintendent interviews, the participants shared their mentors' role in the process. Elizabeth said:

> I spent a lot of time researching if I did not already know about that community, researching the community. I tried to make sure that I watched about six months of board meetings prior to sitting in front of an interview. I'm very meticulous, and so the way I prepare for board presentations, even in my previous roles, is I would really script everything. So, I had a bucket of questions that I had gotten from SUPES Academy and from my mentors, and for every interview, I scripted answers to those questions based on that particular school district.

Cassie shared her experience with her mentor when preparing for the superintendency. She said:

My Caucasian mentor told me, When you go in, don't think of it as the board is just

going to interview you. You're gonna interview the board, and that's what's gonna get

you to the finals every time. And she was right.

Victoria said, "The preparations were mostly feedback and input from mentors and classes of

people who served as superintendent."

Research Question Three

Personal Inhibiting Factors

Proving Season. Participants felt they had to spend much of their lives proving their

worth. Tamara shared an instance when a board member questioned her writing ability: "But the

challenge of questioning is when you go in new, and you are a woman, and you are a woman of

color. Automatically, I believe there is a question about your skill set." She further commented,

"So, it is the assumption that your skill set is lacking in some way and that they (*self-correction*)

someone will need to point that out to you. So those are the kinds of challenges." Participants

noted that as leadership titles change, so do the layers of responsibility. Inclusiveness and

diversity awareness contribute to the need for Black women to be recognized as a force to be

reckoned with, reflecting the idea that "Black women were built for adversity."

Work-Life Balance. Just as work-life balance challenged participants as they ascended

to the position of superintendent, it continued to challenge them while serving in the role.

According to Victoria, the role of the superintendency can only be lived and experienced because

". . .the position is not necessarily something that is written into a superintendent job description

for a leadership profile, but it's something that, as being a CEO of an organization, you get to

dictate uh, to a certain degree, what you focus on." Victoria used language that referenced a lack

of understanding about how to balance work life and family life:

Mom guilt. So, in my school district, I try to model for the leaders in my school that, you

know, you really have to compartmentalize. The work will always be here. And you got

to take care of yourself; you gotta take of your family. And I don't always do a great job

at that. I have an amazing husband, and amazing partner who makes sure that I am taken

care of and that the kids are taken care of. But I also try really hard not to miss, you

know, my children's games or parent meetings or, you know, those types of things, the

performances, and try to spend quality time with my children. That can be difficult when

I have, you know, several evening meetings a week, or I have to go to a community event

on the weekend. So, what I try to do is take my children with me to the places that are

appropriate, of course, for children that have spaces for children to be in. And then try to

find time for us to connect with that same space. All right. But I would say the biggest

personal challenge that I'm still trying to figure out is the mom guilt.

Cassie recognized the complications with work-life balance before and during her role in the

superintendency. "So, I said I need work-life balance. I'm going to apply for some of these tiny

districts." She also admitted that the struggle away from family is real. Cassie stated aloud as she

reflected on her board and their perceptions.

I mean, I already got to leave every other weekend, and know that it's bothering you

(referencing the board). Like, I know that. I know it's bothering you. But I've been

honest with them. They know I get emotional about it. Like, it's not my preference. My

family said that they are supporting us. They're supporting the board. They're supporting

me, and I'm happy. And that's what matters. My board should be concerned about my

happiness. My family should be concerned about my happiness. And I'm happy.

Professional Inhibiting Factors

This research question sought to explore what North Carolina Black women district superintendents perceived as inhibiting factors they faced while serving in the role.

Relationship with the Board. In almost every interview, participants alluded to the challenge of their boards on their leadership. According to their responses, school boards impact their work significantly. Participants described the divisive political environment that affects boards and increases stress on the superintendent. They noted that to operate successfully, superintendents must be astute and strengthen the leadership and relational skills to combat politicized environments.

In some instances, school boards were described as "crazy" or "political". Charlotte said, "There's such a thing as crazy boards, and there's a such thing as personality clashes and new board members coming up, and culture and politics wars, which is what we are experiencing now." Similarly, Cassie said, "But board relations is challenging because you can't have fragmented relationships with your board members." She further stated, "So just trying to keep them all in the loop, on the same page, keeping the communication open. I just thank God that I only have five [board members] and not nine. I used to have nine." Table 10 gives the composition of the participants' boards by race and gender.

Politics remained an inhibitor for these Black woman superintendents, who understood that board changes and relations, in conjunction with their day-to-day work, are often complex and at times, overwhelming. The same is true for leaders seeking the role. Charlotte shared her experiences with the school board in her district:

And so, the first three years were beautiful, because the board that hired me and that was what they were looking for, they retained the majority of the board. There was, I think, one or two elections over the course of time. And the board started shifting to be more

and more conservative. And my last year, which was last year, the majority became

conservative, including one who flipped from being more progressive to becoming that

final majority that flipped the board. And so, I knew that this was going to be difficult.

And it was a very challenging year to do anything with an equity lens.

She also talked about how the political change of the board led to equity concerns. Thus, a cultural and political war ensued throughout the school community. The board seemed disjointed, and the leadership became a challenge for Charlotte. She continued:

And I'll never forget a board member asked, "Why does it say Black and Brown or

African American students with special needs and multilingual learner children?"

Because this is an equity-based strategic plan and those are the students who are the

furthest behind–we have to do more to catch them up while ensuring all students continue

to access rigorous instruction. And so, with things like that, the book challenges started,

and Moms for Liberty got involved.

According to Tamara, even boards sometimes struggle with societal stigmas and perceptions based on their experiences with Black leaders, particularly Black women leaders. She shared, "All of the board members said they never ever thought that they would hire another Black superintendent."

Table 10

Participants' Board of Education by Race and Gender

Participant	White Female	White Male	Black Female	Black Male
Charlotte	4	1	1	1
Cassie	2	1	2	0
Victoria	2	2	3	0
Elizabeth	2	1	2	2
Tamara	0	0	6	2

Feelings of Isolation and Exclusion. Victoria stated, "In the superintendency, though particularly, and there aren't many of us [Black women] in the state of North Carolina for Black women superintendents. The support is nonexistent. I'm just gonna be real." She related that she had not experienced good networking support within her state and how this made it lonely for her. She often sought support from national groups, the 'Sisterhood', or veteran superintendents. Victoria alluded to intersecting constraints of race and gender as possible reasons for the exclusion of the "great networks" used by White male peers. She shared:

> You know that I think that's great, but that is not my experience. And I said perhaps it's because, you know, I am here from out of state. So, I'm new to the state. Perhaps it's because of the color of my skin. Perhaps it's because of my gender. I don't know exactly, but I can tell you those are the things that make it lonely for me, and I do not have the supports that, you know, my colleague here has shared.

Though substantial evidence is not provided, gender and racial biases are present in the role in a predominantly covert manner. Charlotte echoed a similar reaction to access to professional networks to support the Black woman superintendent:

> I kept those connections and built a network of superintendents that I could connect with and help me navigate the role. So no formal training, definitely informal and some of that being very intentional about securing mentors, etc., once I sat in a seat."

Feelings of inequality and inferiority were only lightly touched upon when the participants reported support or enablers received by Black women. Except for the local school board association, support was not readily available, so participants had to seek out national organizations to connect with and find commonalities related to a woman's and, specifically, a Black woman's leadership experience.

Intersectionality of Race and Gender. A theme emerged related to the intersectionality of race and gender. Specifically, participants' comments suggested diverse views about the subject. Victoria pointed out that the intersectionality of race and gender matters in the superintendency. Using numbers, she pointed out that racial and gendered oppression still exists.

It's just that there's an annual convening for superintendents of color in the state of North Carolina, and I'll give you an example. Two years ago, there were 28 of us [women superintendents]. Last year, or we did it in June of '23, there were eight [Black women superintendents] of us. There are a number of (*self-correction*) have been a number of resignations, and those superintendents of color have been replaced by White females or White males. So, I don't know what the number is now, but we definitely went from 28 to 8 in 2 years out of 115 school districts.

When asked, "How do you think you were perceived as being a woman? Do you think gender is viewed differently now that you're in the role? Cassie responded, "Everybody's watching your mood swings, and everybody's trying to figure out if you're going to throw a fit because they are not doing something that you wanted them to do to see how you're going to react. Every day!" Victoria shared:

I find myself often saying, "White males do this all the time." Or you know, people of color always have to explain or make sure all our t's are crossed and i's are dotted. But I also try not to pay much attention to that. I'm cognizant of it, but I don't spend too much time or energy worrying about it because that can be a distraction in itself. But I am cognizant of the fact that I have to move a certain way, do things a certain way, and document things a certain way because I am a Black female superintendent.

Tamara shared:

You know, as female superintendents, some of my other female colleagues, superintendents, we would always talk that when the men walk into the room, the men superintendents, they have automatic credibility. They do. When we walk into the room, we have to earn our credibility almost every time. Also, when we make comments or we add to the conversation, there are times that we don't get the same response from our male colleagues. Actually, they take our words and reframe them and say the exact thing that we've said was a great idea, and we would just like, "Oh God". But that happens. Because of the way people have been groomed to take on their gender and so, oftentimes, that will happen. And it's not just the White man. No, it's not. It's all of them. It's all of them. And there are ways that we, as females, also assert ourselves in the conversation and assert ourselves professionally in the opportunities.

I can remember when I realized I was Black. And that was not until I went into the superintendency. I didn't know. I didn't know that people had conversations about race the way they did in District 12. Everything was based on race, and I had come from a very wealthy suburban area in District 22. I developed an incredible skill set in District 22 and never wanted for anything and never had discussions about race. We all just did what we did, and we excelled in what we did, although there was still racism there. But there was not an everyday discussion. When I went to District 12, I had to be Black every day. Every single day, people wanted me to be Black and to talk about being Black. And I said I will not do that. You will not turn me into someone that I am not. I am Black, ethnically. I am a person first, and I am a well-qualified superintendent, and I do not have to start every conversation with race.

Programs that I developed have to be based on race. I have to consider this race and that race, and it's, it's exhausting to have to prove that you are Black in everything that you do. I think the biggest challenge that we have now as leaders is society wants us to be something that is so ill-defined because we're Black. They want us to be something that is not defined and to represent something that has evolved over the years and their image of what Black people are and who they are. They want us to represent that rather than looking at us as experts in our field, looking at us as CEOs running a multi-million dollar organization. That's who we are.

Participants commented that as issues with the intersectionality of gender and race unfold, Black women leaders are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy but must focus on the students. Charlotte said in response to perceived challenges and experiences with gender and race faced by Black women serving in the superintendency:

Based on my own experiences and conversations with other Black women superintendents, we work/lead at the intersection of being women and being Black. Which means, that despite our wealth of experiences, expertise, degrees, people skills, know-how, etc., we are too often disenfranchised and marginalized because of our gender and race. With regards to support, Black women superintendents often support themselves through comradery and friendships formed through the superintendency, other women support groups such as the Women of Color Executive Coaching Collaborative, their faith, family, and through other means, as only we know how challenging it is to lead while being a woman and Black–two of the longstanding demographics that are among the most undervalued in American society.

Gender and race certainly played a role in my superintendency as sometimes I was disregarded, overlooked, undervalued, misunderstood, etc., simply because of my gender and/or race. Sometimes, I called it out, addressed it, and dealt with it head-on; at other times, I simply ignored it. However, what I never did was let those slights stop me from doing what was best for children and the district.

Research Question Four

Personal Enabling Factors

    Faith and Humility. While ascending to and serving in the superintendent role, participants reflected on the physical and spiritual energy it takes to navigate workplace environments tainted by bias and systemic inequities. Tamara commented, "And because I had that good book [the Bible] beside me and I was reading that, it helped me so much to channel my energy and to use it to really tap into creativity and innovation during that time in order to keep moving forward." Later, as she referenced the importance of journaling, Tamara continued, "You cannot be a strong leader until you know you."

    Charlotte spoke about how she faces obstacles in leading her school system: "So, I'm a woman of faith. And so, like every other challenge, life is not been anywhere near a crystal stair for me. And so, my faith in God gets me through." Tamara shared her response about when she had to face a tumultuous time leading to the superintendency: "It was incredibly difficult. I think I cried every day, almost every day at least. And my faith gets me through everything, and it was during that time that I started to journal."

    Cassie would often reference God in a thankful way throughout the interview. She would say, "God is good," "God blessed me with the four-year contract," or "I thank God" to acknowledge her faith and belief in His trustworthiness. Victoria recalled another Black woman leader and referenced her in the interview. She said, "So, she is a Black woman of faith, and her dissertation topic, she did some research and she talked about the role that faith plays in the lives of Black female, educational leaders." The participants in this study are influenced by their faith to lead with heart in the superintendency. These Black women superintendents were forthright about where they stand spiritually. Though they were at different levels careerwise and

spiritually, each participant applied her faith in the superintendent role to help guide her leadership.

Sisterhood. A theme was found concerning sisterhood (a network of Black women). Based on participants' responses, there are challenges they faced not only for being Black but for being a woman. They referenced sisterhood as a supportive family that creates sustainable bonds with other women. Sisterhood refers to professional and personal networks of Black women.

Philanthropic organizations are formed for women of color with common interests to come together and serve the greater good in some capacity. The sisterhood is saturated with Black women experts and provides training, mentorships, and a host of other services and resources. Based on the participants' comments, it is evident that Black women leaders have the mindset that in order to acquire knowledge, experience, and expertise, they must advocate for themselves and hold themselves and others accountable to achieve. Charlotte shared her experience with an online collaboration group.

I spoke out about other atrocities in this country that impact people who are historically marginalized. I speak up about those things and, you know, you get hit for that too. So yes, without question my gender and my race played a big part. And I'm not sure if you're aware, but there's now a collective of Black women superintendents who have formed a collaborative. It's not a formal collaborative (*self-correction*); it's a *WhatsApp* group; but as a way of supporting each other.

Tamara said:

We as [Black] women superintendents depend on one another. We talk to each other, we share with one another, and we make sure that we try to ask about and be concerned about the well-being of our colleagues, other women superintendents.

Professional Enabling Factors

The purpose of research question four was to determine what respondents perceived as enabling factors they experienced while serving in the role.

Professional Networks. Professional networking remained a top priority for participants in their journey to the superintendent role and while serving in the position. Through these networking opportunities, participants enhanced their leadership by learning from mentors, colleagues, and others with relevant knowledge. Elizabeth stated, "But I think you do have to have a network. You have to have people that you can lean on."

Mentors. A theme that developed from participant responses related to having mentors to help guide them and navigate their role as superintendents. When asked about supports for her role, Elizabeth described having mentors for various areas:

And I think, finally, I would say just the network of mentors. So, I do have a formal mentor. My formal mentor is Susan Mitchell, who's the previous superintendent in a city near the Piedmont Triad area in North Carolina. But Susan was also my principal when I was a teacher at Jordan High School, and I taught her daughter. And so, she and I have stayed in touch, and so it's a really unique relationship. But, you know, I've talked to my mentors for different reasons. So, Dr. Tony Stephens, who's recently retired, he promoted me, so most recently retired in Polk County. Dr. Travis Simmons, I actually talked to him last night. We had an athletic situation, so I texted him. And Tonya Pierce just recently retired from Polk, Joyce Kimbrell from Tanver County, and obviously Shawn Patel, who is my previous boss.

And so, it's nice to have a network of people that, I mean, I texted Dr. Simmons, it was probably nine o'clock, and I said, I've got a situation. Can we chat tonight or in the

morning? And he called me. You know. And so, I think that network of mentors is also, you don't call everyone, so when I'm, specifically for your research, if I am dealing with something that I think is gonna be nuanced because I'm a woman of color, I call a Vicky Smith. If it is someone that I need to because they have experience of several districts being in a county, I'll call my formal mentor, Susan Mitchell, because that's her experience. This was an athletic issue. Travis has worked with my board. So, I call Travis Simmons, you know what I mean? So, you use your mentors like if I have a budget or HR question, I'm gonna text Dr. Tony Stephens. So, using your mentors to kind of help you and support you in different ways if that makes sense. So, I think those are the things that I think have prepared me for this role.

Tamara said:

I had a mentor that was assigned to me by our state association, the Samurai Association of School Superintendents. And every new superintendent gets a mentor, and that was a White male. And it was powerful. He had been successful as a superintendent, he knew the area, and he helped me to navigate many of the areas that would be challenging. So I've had both Black and White [mentors]. Males and females.

Stay Focused on the Work (Student-Centered Leadership). A theme around the participants' belief that they could minimize prejudices concerning race and gender by pursuing desired initiatives and focusing on the work pertaining to student-centered leadership. Participants voiced in various ways that with equity (including gender and race) issues becoming more prevalent in school systems, their student-centered leadership made the superintendency feel less like a rollercoaster. The participants implied that if the board relations change and

politics attempt to override student-centered leadership, the focus must remain on the work for which they were hired. Cassie said:

> I work with my board. I have five bosses and I'm clear about that. Those five are who I work for, and children of Brewton County Schools. I can't go everywhere and I can't speak to everybody and I can't do all of that. I just can't and work for my board. I am professional, stay focused, and do the job that they asked me to do. That's what it's about.

Tamara stated, "It is so important to me that we stay focused on the needs of our staff and our students and that I develop a healthy relationship with my current board members." Charlotte believed:

> If you don't understand that your work has lasting implications for children, then [*sigh for emphasis*] you're in the wrong line of work. You should not be working in a school district. And so, for me, that was always my focus. I am in service to children and I made that clear.

Elizabeth also stays focused on the work she was hired to do even when she recognized that she underestimated her current district and community status. To paraphrase Elizabeth, that work must be student-centered, the leader must be visible, and forthright, and competing priorities should be balanced in the workload. Though she endured personal character attacks in the superintendency, Victoria captured this sentiment:

> And I remind my team to stay focused on the work and to stay focused on the kids and that I model what I expect of them in doing that. So, some of the biggest challenges have really been centered around, you know, the personal attacks that come and that are part of the seat, particularly for a Black woman superintendent.

Cassie commented, "I am professional, stay focused, and do the job that they asked me to do. That's what it's about. Participants agreed it is vital that Black women superintendents continue developing strong stakeholder relationships.

Summary

This chapter summarizes findings that were embedded in the participants' responses to the research questions. In this basic interpretive, qualitative study, the researcher analyzed interview transcripts to organize and report the findings to the research questions. The analysis conducted was consistent with phenomenological methodology and tied to the research questions. The research questions addressed inhibitors, enablers, and perceptions of five Black women superintendents experienced as they rose through the ranks to serve in the superintendent position.

The results were transcribed, evaluated, and interpreted. Aligned with the theoretical frameworks of BFT and the glass ceiling effect, this chapter captured the factors Black women faced in their paths to the superintendency and continue to encounter in the role. Chapter Five reflects on each research question and elaborates on the implications associated with the study's findings. Recommendations for future research will also be presented.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

Chapter 5 summarizes this study's research problem, purpose, methods, and ethical considerations. The chapter also discusses each research question and its associated findings along with the implications and recommendations associated with the study. While it is true that a substantial disparity exists between the number of Black women and men in the superintendent's role, Black women superintendents can use their voices to share their rich professional and personal experiences and positively impact the social condition.

Nationally and statewide, women, particularly Black women, continue to be superintendents at lower rates than their non-Black peers, resulting in a dramatic underrepresentation of Black women leading public school districts. For example, men comprised 74% of all school superintendents in North Carolina in 2021, and 26% of North Carolina's superintendents were women. Eight of these women were African American, representing 7% of all North Carolina superintendents. The state had one Latinx woman superintendent (Hart, 2021). Additionally, data gathered from the North Carolina School Superintendent's Association for this 2023 study revealed that of the 115 school districts in North Carolina, there are currently only five (4.35%) Black women superintendents and no Latinx women superintendents. Statewide, 26% of superintendents are women, with no change from 2021. Three (10%) of the 30 women superintendents are in interim positions.

Based on previous literature, Black women leaders have limited access to leadership in high-ranking educational positions such as the superintendency. Because discrimination can be subtle, it would be difficult to identify or prove it played a part in the selection process (Holley, 2021). However, the literature reflects unfair employment practices, such as the "good-ole-boy"

system of hiring practices or subtle stereotypical barriers that prevent qualified Black women candidates from securing the superintendent position despite their experience and competence for the role (Angel, et al., 2013; Campbell & Campbell-Whatley, 2020). In this study, it is possible that participants avoided the subtle stereotypical barriers associated with employment practices by being strategic and intentional about their selection of districts. If so, this intentionality still contributes to disproportionate representation in the superintendency for Black women, which remains a growing concern (Alfred, 2001; Alston, 2000; Blount, 1998; Bollinger & Grady, 2018).

There is limited research exploring the factors that supported or hindered aspiring and practicing Black women superintendents. Therefore, this qualitative study was conducted to better understand the lived experiences of Black women school district superintendents in North Carolina. Through interviews, the researcher examined participants' perceptions about the inhibiting and enabling factors they faced when ascending to the role. The inhibiting and enabling factors they experienced in the role were also explored. Additionally, by exploring the intersectionality of race and gender for Black women superintendents through their lived experiences, this research expands the understanding of the challenges they face and the support they receive.

The researcher used descriptive findings from participants' experiences and responses and grounded them in the theoretical frameworks of Black feminist theory and the glass ceiling effect. The themes derived from participants' narratives will contribute to the existing body of scholarly work. Additionally, this investigation aimed to inform current practices related to the hiring of superintendents, thereby enhancing more equitable opportunities for Black women education leaders.

This study only examined the perspectives of Black women who were active superintendents in North Carolina. The executive director of the North Carolina School Superintendent's Association distributed the recruitment email on the researcher's behalf. The Association's database provided names, emails, and photographs of potential study participants. After being presented with recruitment information about the study, the five participants completed an electronic demographic questionnaire via *Google Form* before the interview to further indicate consent to participate in the study. Participants varied in age, marital/family status, and work experience. Participants also represented several regions of the state. All were individually interviewed online at various locations.

In compliance with UNC-Charlotte's ethical and professional guidelines, the researcher followed the University's IRB process and protocol. For this research, three ethical principles (respect for persons, beneficence, and justice) were used by the researcher to comply with IRB guidelines (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Several measures were used to enhance dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability.

Discussion of Findings

RQ1: What Do North Carolina Black Women Superintendents Perceive as Inhibiting Factors They Overcame when Ascending to the Role?

Negative views of Black women leaders persist. Using an interview methodology to uncover themes, participants revealed what they perceived as inhibiting factors while seeking the superintendency. These included: participants' belief that others were more accomplished or more proficient leaders; participants thought they would be unable to maintain a healthy work-life balance; there would be an overemphasis on the intersectionality of race, gender, and social status; participants had limited access to mentors, training, and professional organizations; and

participants believed they did not have adequate skills to perform as a superintendent. Ultimately, the respondents viewed these challenges as stepping stones to growth in achieving the superintendent role.

Participants also cited having negative assumptions about the superintendent's role based on their observations of others in the role or their past work experiences. To avoid the superintendent role, each participant continued serving in a supportive administrative role, which seemed natural for Black women based on historic roles. Collins (2009) agrees and considers this type of supportive work as modern mammy jobs. The history of slavery continues to plague present perceptions and assumptions by continuing oppression and struggles Black women leaders face today (Francis, 2021; Stitt, 2018).

A theme from the study was that the participants served in various leadership roles, such as teacher-leader, assistant principal, and principal, before transitioning to the district level. Participants served as district directors, primarily in curriculum and instruction-related areas, and remained satisfied with that role. Though they had obtained their doctorate at various points in their careers, each served as an assistant superintendent or executive director and was content being subordinate to the superintendent. Banks (2019) suggested that Black women disproportionately continue to have modern equivalents of service or domestic work.

A perception the participants faced while ascending to the role is linked to previous literature. Black women leaders place barriers on themselves and feel they are often perceived as valuable assets when serving in a subordinate capacity, usually have limited allies and access to training and job advancement, and are often held more accountable while earning "significantly less than their Black male, White female, and White male counterparts in similar positions" (Branson-Davis, 2018). Another inhibitor is that Black women think "it's a White man's world."

The thought is that males, predominantly White males, have an advantage over women, particularly Black women. Black women leaders have the self-perception that they should be expert "superwomen" to lead and work twice as hard, while their male counterparts and White women do not. Additionally, Black women leaders expect to be culturally attacked because of politics, societal pressures, social media, and stigmas.

Another theme emerging from their responses was that the hiring process was described as a labor-intensive barrier. There was no formula or formal process for completing the lengthy application process for the superintendency. Their views agreed with research by Goines-Harris (2020), which suggested that the hiring process is a structural barrier for women. Although participants did not elaborate, they recognized that racial and gender biases could be present in the screening and selection processes and were a commonly perceived problem for African American women who became superintendents. As a result, participants were deliberate in developing a leadership profile to match a district that would allow them to serve as their authentic selves.

Although shunned or viewed as a racial negative by some Whites, diversity is inevitable in all aspects of education. Diversity, when embraced, encourages social cohesion, inclusion, innovation, and decreased conflict. Most Black women are cognizant of the need to promote educational equity in order to 'teach and reach,' particularly in low-income communities. Black women's struggles, their ability to lead by example, and help others access and unlock their potential are all competencies that produce leaders who qualify as advocates for disadvantaged students. A discussion of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and affirmative action is given later in the chapter.

The lack of a formal process or training for the superintendency was noted by participants. This finding supported Angel et al.'s (2013) finding that there is often a lack of supportive social systems or formal networks accessible to Black women leaders. Participants had to overcome this barrier by tapping into local, state, and national education organizations and networking systems which helped them prepare for the superintendency and being able to serve in the role. This inevitably led to participants feeling somewhat excluded or isolated in the role. Participants mentioned that having a retired or veteran superintendent was beneficial in helping them navigate this challenging role.

RQ2: What Do North Carolina Black Women Superintendents Perceive as Enabling Factors They Experienced when Ascending to the Role?

The literature addressed several themes that also emerged from the study. First and foremost, all participants were forthright yet reserved in speaking about inhibiting factors they faced before and while in the role. This reserve may indicate that there may have been some stronger, underlying thoughts and feelings regarding negative barriers they encountered. Though some participants mentioned being comfortable in the skin they were in during the interview, they did not go into detail about the effects of race or gender on their experiences. In their own way, they all alluded that leading authentically and unapologetically as a woman of color, particularly a Black woman, is an essential skill for a successful superintendency.

Reflection is rooted deeply in Black feminist theory. According to Black feminism, when consciousness is triggered to create knowledge about intersections of maltreatment and actionable political steps, they become informed agents sanctioned to make a social change (Mosley et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2011). As stated earlier, Black women leaders commented that

they had to find the strength to press past self-doubt about who they are and remove doubt to perform as skillfully as their White counterparts and Black male leaders.

Although each participant had her own style of reflection to improve performance, one of the participants took up journaling to know herself better and rise above her deepest pains and doubts. Journaling is a reflective strategy used to help achieve victories going into and during her leadership journey. To make sustainable change, leaders must self-reflect by exploring their core values and beliefs, be comfortable with who they are, and be confident in their ability to perform the job.

Participants agreed that the role was a divine calling for them. Each participant echoed in her own way the significance of creating a long-lasting legacy by ascending to this role to inspire others to come. Despite the barriers they encountered, participants indicated that future Black women with the same aspirations could find voice, hope, and strategies from these superintendents, thereby improving and changing the social condition. There was a sense of purpose and personal significance in the participants. Their voices have been amplified; they gave strength to suppressed voices and contributed to the stories of Black women. Strong religious beliefs, more specifically their faith in God, gave them purpose and connected them to their work and personal lives.

Having formal and informal mentors was a great asset for the participants. Participants strongly suggested that in their rise to the superintendency and in the role, they needed strong networks composed of organizations and mentors to strengthen their leadership. There has been less representation of Black women superintendents in North Carolina, yet an important goal of networking is to help school systems identify and recruit qualified Black women leaders and intentionally put them forward by providing personalized learning and coaching. The literature

supports using modeling that includes relying on and learning from previous experiences, participating in professional development, joining professional organizations and networks, and training or apprenticeship by mentors. These activities serve as significant ways to create successful leadership and ultimately improve student impact.

A strong, supportive family also greatly benefited participants. They agreed that from a leadership perspective, the home must be able to withstand the pressures of the superintendency. The superintendent is a high-ranking official who must govern all operations of a school district. The job is very stressful and requires strong family support, both while the participant moved up the ranks and as the school district's leader. Walker (2014) acknowledged that superintendents have the challenge of working long hours yet balancing that with the needs of a spouse or family. With a strong, supportive family, the superintendency can be made easier.

RQ3: What Do North Carolina Black Women Superintendents Perceive as Inhibiting Factors They Face while Serving in the Role?

Difficulty maintaining work-life balance was a common theme from participants' responses concerning inhibiting factors they faced while working in the role. Historically, women, and especially Black women, were caregivers in the home, taking care of children, including those of White mothers. This reflected the notion that women, specifically Black women, should work in a domestic, subservient setting or in the home taking care of their children. So, achieving a position in the superintendency is a feat for Black women leaders and, if married, quite a sacrifice for their spouses. Although not generally a concern for male superintendents, four participants shared feelings of guilt experienced from considering themselves an inadequate wife and mother while in the role.

Based on findings from the study and supported by the literature, an elected board brings challenges to the superintendency (sometimes related to race and gender). School board relations have a substantial impact on the leadership outcomes of superintendents. Both the superintendent and the board need to work as close collaborators in the governing process to make informed decisions that promote student success, growth, and achievement (Mortensen, 2019). Additionally, school boards and states must find innovative ways to attract women to the superintendent position (Glass, 2001).

According to participants, feelings of exclusion and isolation in their role are real for them. They realize there are not many Black women superintendents in North Carolina, and support is nearly non-existent, making it a lonely endeavor. As a result, the participants had to remind themselves to be resilient and seek out veteran superintendents from in- and out-of-state for support, particularly 'sisterhood' groups.

Several of the women grappled with feelings of discontentment when they were discounted as inferior, not heard, or considered unworthy by male peers at school board association meetings. The participants reminded themselves that they were competent and resilient despite encountering biases. Reflecting on Davis's (2015) work, though the enslaved mother was knocked down and viewed as having no value, she remained a poised, strong Black woman. For some Black women, this literature is embedded in their soul. Consequently, the strong Black woman has a long-established image of strength, resilience, and an indestructible essence (Davis, 2015; Romero, 2000; Stewart, 2017).

RQ4: What Do North Carolina Black Women Superintendents Perceive as Enabling Factors They Experience while Serving in the Role?

By undermining Black women in society, each becomes the victim of discrimination, covert and overt racism, microaggressions, and other inequities. Despite this biased portrayal of a Black woman, most then discover the need to exercise faith and humility. Through faith-based means, diminishing self-hatred and promoting self-worth are embedded at the core of such strong black women. This can be attributed to Black societies' spirituality that was founded upon historical struggles and stereotypes.

Though a challenge to do so, Black families facilitate support systems, sisterhoods, and strong female networks that foster determination. These support groups, particularly sisterhoods, empower the Black woman leader to recognize her blackness as beautiful and her being as intelligent, confident, and bold. Black women superintendents can share disenfranchisement and marginalization experiences involving race, gender, and social status. To reduce feelings of isolation, exclusion, and inferiority, these organizations provide opportunities to participate in conversations with other Black women superintendents to build lasting friendships and connections. In agreement with Black Feminist Thought, a Black woman should be conscious of who she is in this world, become empowered by viewing herself as having expert knowledge who impacts social change, and reestablish her rightful place in leadership and in corporate society. Black women expect to work hard and rise above adversity. The way study participants overcame negativity associated with the role was continued focus on their commitment to students.

Implications

According to Kingsberry (2015), despite inequities, negative labels, and assumptions about their superintendency, Black women leaders must learn how to maximize the use of information to execute as skillfully as their counterparts (Kingsberry, 2015). Though rising

challenges plague the role of superintendent, the participants believed they possess a strong moral compass, which enables them to be genuine and lead with integrity. Black women leaders drive social change and manage to navigate past generational, negative labels daily.

The way to make the ascension to the superintendency a positive experience is for Black women administrators to realize that they have the potential to establish their place as top-ranking leaders in society. But rather than fighting to make that happen, too much weight may be placed on the intersection of race and gender. This may exacerbate the perceptions and experience of attaining the superintendency. While it is apparent that inequities and injustices are real barriers, participants realized the importance of leading intentionally and unapologetically and finding strategic ways to lean in on their leadership experiences that impacted their career advancement to their present role.

The findings from this study, particularly the response to RQ2, indicate that formal and informal networking and mentorship are paramount to successful leadership. There has been less representation of Black women superintendents in North Carolina. The main goal of networking, however, is to help school systems identify and recruit qualified Black women leaders and intentionally bring them forward through personalized learning and coaching models. The literature supports modeling behaviors that rely on learning from previous educational experiences, participating in professional development, joining professional organizations and networks, and training or apprenticeship by mentors. These serve as significant driving forces for successful leadership and, ultimately, positive impacts for students.

The theoretical framework of this study relied in part on Collins's (2020) Black Feminist Thought, which helped the researcher frame interview questions and interpret themes from responses to develop an understanding of the participants' perspectives about inhibitors and

enablers. Black Feminist Thought supports the thought that participants must continue to cultivate the idea that Black women must become informed, independent, educated leaders regardless of society's negative gaze, denying insinuations of inadequacies and leveling the playing field established by non-Black female and male peers (Collins, 2020).

Unfortunately, participants did not believe that Black women could be superintendents anywhere. Black women have to be strategically located based on district demographics, perceptions about race, gender, and social class, and the district's political stance. To be successful, the participants were selective about their work locations. Ironically, the same is true for their counterparts. White men also have to be strategically placed based on a community's beliefs about their needs. When equity work has to be done or if the community is a high-needs, impoverished district, Black leaders are usually selected to fill the role.

To bypass problems within a district, four of the five participants did not follow a typical progression to the superintendency. To build their leadership profiles for the application process, the participants deliberately looked for key terms in the job description that equated with equity work. These words included "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI). To Black women aspiring to the superintendency, DEI work symbolizes the reality that a person of color, particularly a Black person, was needed or most competent for the superintendent position in that district.

Based on participant responses and previous literature, school boards and states must find innovative ways to attract women to the superintendent position (Glass, 2001). Other answers supported by the literature suggest that boards must address the "glass ceiling" in order to recruit and retain women or minority superintendents through policy, research, and practice (Hart et al., 2022). Examples of enabling factors include incentives, mentorships and internships, hiring search firms, and professional development to change limiting viewpoints regarding women as

superintendents (Glass, 2000). As Black women superintendents move through the ranks, districts and universities could provide training opportunities or programs for the educational advancement of female teachers and administrators of color (Hart et al., 2022).

Reviewing the data, Tamara's school board supports the superintendent making positive gains and impacting the district with all Black board members in office. School boards tend to be reasonable and caring when they see the big picture and are not prejudiced by race, gender, or social class. In this case, the participant and her board know that strong relationships and cohesion are vital to successful leadership. Mutual trust, equitable and inclusionary practices, diversity, and respect must be at the center of the district's culture for good leadership to thrive. Trust and the ability to connect with others is a characteristic that all leaders and boards should possess.

With growing concern about the ongoing and deepening underrepresentation of Black women in the superintendency in North Carolina, this study will inform aspiring Black women superintendents, legislators, and policymakers about interventions and practices needed to create positive change. Future studies could provide further insight into how to improve the inadequate number of Black women (and by extension, women of color) who are district leaders by increasing the number of Black women superintendents studied and expanding such research regionally. Potential future Black women superintendents would be better prepared for the role.

For aspiring Black women superintendents to combat or overcome feelings of inadequacy concerning having the skills needed to perform that job, as well as addressing feelings of exclusion and isolation while in the role, networking and participation in sisterhoods are not optional. Black women must develop social 'safety nets' well before becoming district-level employees. Waiting until the superintendency could be another

detrimental source of stress. Joining professional organizations and other supportive groups should be done several years in advance.

Isolation and loneliness may likely be the rule for Black women executive leaders. It is probably not a good idea to be too close to colleagues on the job; this could lead to problems at some point. Also, it may not be wise for most to have confidants. However, treating immediate staff and all employees courteously and fairly, but not becoming too close to them, is essential. Being forthright yet reserved in speaking about inhibiting factors means that the Black women participants answered the questions honestly and gave some examples but didn't "spill the beans" about everything. They gave enough details but did not say all they could. There should be a level of circumspection. That is, a balance between not being helpful and giving too many personal details.

Recent legislation has greatly hindered progress in abolishing or minimizing the negative and oppressive effects of the intersectionality of race, gender, and social status in higher education institutions. This leads to more underrepresentation of people of color, particularly Black women, and an inability to promote progressive social change.

When the United States Supreme Court (SCOTUS) ended affirmative action in higher education on June 29, 2023, admissions programs based on race became unconstitutional (see *Students for Fair Admissions* [SFFA] v. *President & Fellows of Harvard College*; *SFFA v. University of North Carolina*). In the first case of its kind, from 1978 (*Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*), SCOTUS found that the University did not provide equal educational opportunities, specifically for White students in this instance. The Court found that their program violated the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. The plaintiff claimed he was racially

discriminated against and denied admission to the medical school due to unfair admission practices embedded in an affirmative action policy.

Ironically, in *Bakke*, the Court said that the nation had a "compelling interest" in affirmative action and it was *supported* by the Equal Protection Clause. In the newest decisions, the Court said that DEI *violated* the same clause. Also, Florida was already in the process of dismantling DEI in state colleges and universities, and Texas has begun a similar process as Senate Bill 17 (which ends DEI in public institutions of higher education), which took effect on January 1, 2024. It is evident that ideas around affirmative action, equity, or diversity work are a matter of perspective and greatly influenced by context and political views.

Brown v. Board of Education, decided almost 70 years earlier, prohibited public school segregation solely on the basis of race. This was a failure to provide equal protection for all, which implied that benefits given to White students were denied to Black students. To address racial inequities, higher education institutions developed admissions processes to rectify the problems caused by historic oppression due to race and deliberately promoted diversity. With their recent rulings to end affirmative action, though, SCOTUS has opened a door to the unintended consequences of *not* considering race in hiring and higher education admissions.

Conclusions

Despite efforts to increase the number of women superintendents, the racial and gender gap in the superintendency remains a social justice concern and continues nationwide (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). Further, the underrepresentation of women, particularly Black women administrators in the superintendency, also remains pervasive (Campbell & Campbell-Whatley, 2020; Hart et al., 2022; Tienken, 2021). This research has practical significance because by giving voice to the experiences of Black women superintendents, more career advancement

opportunities may be created for women, specifically women of color, and hiring practices may become more equitable (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). The participants were able to share rich experiences about their professional and personal lives through an in-depth interview process.

Today's viewpoints and assertions about the roles of higher-ranking Black women are not only media influenced but increasingly exaggerated and negatively impact a Black woman's marketability. Still, Black women leaders are lauded for their tenacity and ability to consistently defy the odds. Unfortunately, many individuals and groups fear a culture shift they perceive as radical that would lead to a loss of clientele or promotion if women of color represented organizations. This results in the need for expanding training that proclaims and solidifies the need for diversity-informed conferences that focus on recruiting aspiring Black women superintendents.

A recommendation to improve the transferability of this study is to include multi-state representation. This larger sample could participate by questionnaire through in-state, regional, or outside different regions of the country for comparative purposes. The study analysis would inform school boards, policymakers, and legislators on how to improve the social condition of women, specifically Black women, in the superintendency.

The participants were women who had to accomplish things on their own to navigate the superintendent role. A solution to this present problem would be to support them. In finding ways to recruit and retain Black women leaders as superintendents, interventions could be statewide, regional, or national. Legislation to develop a more formalized process for Black women leaders to ascend to and serve in this role could also be considered.

There are implications for the future of Black women serving in the superintendency. The future of equity is uncertain now that our nation is doing away with DEI. School systems have

become wary of pursuing it and are moving away from DEI recruitment efforts because of the rulings described above. The demographics of this country reflect that Blacks, by percentage, are now in the third spot. With the recent SCOTUS rulings that appear even more severe than *Bakke*, Black women's participation as education leaders and, ultimately, as superintendents appears bleak and may be greatly reduced and the needle on the dial of social condition will continue to be unchanged and unfavorable. There could be a major negative impact on various groups of color, from high school graduates seeking scholarships to study education (e.g., the attorney general of Missouri recently directed state schools to end minority scholarships (Jaschik, 2023)) to promotions into school leadership and on up to the top.

With the lack of Black women in the superintendency being ongoing and widespread, the negative effect of these rulings on the pipeline of students of color beginning college and finishing as teachers is chilling. School districts would have less opportunities to hire teachers and administrators of color, causing a further decline in Black women education leaders. More local, state, and national solutions need to come. There still has to be a considerable social shift to end the perpetuation of gendered, racial, and social oppressions.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of the study: *A Qualitative Study of Black Women Superintendents: Inhibiting Factors, Enabling Factors, and Perceptions*
Principal Investigator: Melissa D. Smith, UNC Charlotte
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Walter Hart, UNC Charlotte

You are invited to participate in a qualitative research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary; the information provided will help you decide whether or not to participate. You are welcome to contact me with any questions.

Important Information You Need to Know

- The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions about inhibiting and enabling factors Black women faced when ascending to the superintendent role and the inhibiting factors and enabling factors they face while serving in the superintendent role. I am interested in understanding the lived experiences of Black women school district superintendents in North Carolina. Further, I'm interested in how your perceptions and understandings impacted your career path leading to the superintendency and affected hiring and recruitment practices for Black women superintendents in North Carolina.

- I am asking credentialed Black women public school superintendents employed in North Carolina to complete a simple demographic questionnaire, a 1-on-1 interview about the research topic, and a brief follow-up transcript confirmation by email.

- The interview questions are personal, and you might experience mild emotional discomfort, although I do not anticipate this risk to be common. Given the small sample size for Black women superintendents in NC, the risk of deductive disclosure may be likely. The researcher does not want the individual participant's identity or responses to be discerned by others. To mitigate the risk of deductive disclosure of participants' identities, publication of the data will only use very broad statements about participants' areas of service, such as stating they are "superintendents from the Southeast region of the United States." Additionally, you may find some demographic or interview questions personal as they pertain to your understanding of your experiences as a public school superintendent. Given your work as a superintendent, some of my questions may be considered sensitive. For example, I will ask you about topics related to your personal and professional knowledge about your career path to becoming a superintendent. Your responses will inform the study about hiring and recruiting practices regarding Black women superintendents in North Carolina. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer. You may withdraw from participation in the interview or study at any time.

- You may not personally benefit from participating in this research. Still, the results may help better understand Black women superintendents' perceptions of what they faced when ascending to the superintendent role and continue to face while serving in this role.

- Your participation in the project will take approximately 2 hours: 1 hour for the interview, 20 minutes to complete the demographic survey, and 20 minutes to review transcription for accuracy. Following transcription, the remaining time (20 minutes) will be used for participant questions and debriefing.

- Please read these questions and answers related to the project and ask any questions you may have before you choose to participate.

Why are we doing this study?

The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions about inhibiting and enabling factors Black women faced when ascending to the superintendent role and the inhibiting factors and enabling factors they faced while serving in the superintendent role.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a Black woman superintendent in a North Carolina public school district.

What will happen if I take part in this study?

If you choose to participate, you will complete a simple demographic questionnaire and a 1-on-1 interview about the study topic. The demographic questionnaire will ask you demographic questions (leadership experience related to the superintendency, education level, age, service years, preparatory programs, and parents' education level). The 1-on-1 interview will ask you questions about your knowledge base regarding the role of superintendent and how this construct relates to professional practice. The interviews will be held on *Zoom* and will be audio-recorded. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question at any time during our interviews, please let me know, and you are free to skip the question. You also can choose to answer a question and elect not to have your answer recorded. I would simply turn off the recorder. If at any time you want to withdraw from the study, you can let me know, and I will erase the recordings of our conversations. If you participate in this study, your total time commitment will be approximately two hours: 1 hour for the interview, 20 minutes to complete the demographic survey, and 20 minutes to review transcription for accuracy. Following transcription, the remaining time (20 minutes) will be used for participant questions and debriefing.

What benefits might I experience?

You will not benefit directly from being in this study beyond contributing to the field of research related to analyzing perceptions about the inhibiting and enabling factors Black women faced when ascending to the superintendent role and the inhibiting factors and enabling factors they

faced while serving in the superintendent role. Participants would participate in the emerging field of research in educational administration. Individual participants will become trailblazers or forerunners for providing impressions or suggestions to Black women serving in the superintendent role or aspiring to the superintendency. Participants can share their experiences, thoughts, or inspiration with those who come after. There may be an emotional benefit to those sharing their lived stories in a sympathetic space without concerns about adverse outcomes or consequences.

What risks might I experience?

Given the small sample size for Black women superintendents in NC, the risk of deductive disclosure may be likely. The researcher will try to mitigate the risks by informing potential participants of these risks. You may find some demographic or interview questions personal or sensitive as they pertain to your understanding of your experiences as a public school superintendent. For example, I will ask you about your current knowledge base about the superintendency. These questions are personal, and you might experience some mild emotional discomfort, although I do not anticipate this risk to be expected. Your responses will inform the study about hiring and recruiting practices regarding Black women superintendents in North Carolina. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer. You may withdraw from participation in the interview or study at any time.

How will my information be protected?

I will use Zoom to record our interview. Following each interview, I will delete the video file from Zoom and securely store the audio responses in the university's password-protected *Google* Cloud data storage. After completing the study, I will delete the audio files and other identifiable data. "Each interview will be transcribed and analyzed. The *NVivo* software program (or similar program) will be used for transcribing the data. The transcripts will also be stored in password-protected data after the study. While the study is active, all data will remain in the university's cloud storage and accessible only by me and my faculty advisor as needed. With my approval, others may need to view the information I collect about you. This includes employees of UNC Charlotte. After the study's conclusion, all identifiable data, including the master list and audio files, will be deleted.

How will my information be used after the study is over?

Following the study, data may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies. Dr. Walter Hart, my faculty advisor, will continue to have access to all research data. The dissertation will be published in *ProQuest*. Your study data may be shared with other researchers for use in future studies The data shared will not include any information that can identify you. As a result, your contact information will be stored in the university's password-protected *Google* Drive.

Will I receive an incentive for taking part in this study?
You will not receive a financial incentive for taking part in this study.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

Participating in this research study is your choice, as participating is voluntary. You have the right to cease participation at any time during the study. You also are not required to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?

For questions about this research, please contact:

Melissa D. Smith, Principal Investigator
msmit591@uncc.edu or (704) 550-1563

Dr. Walter Hart, Faculty Advisor
walter.hart@uncc.edu or (704) 687-8539

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher or advisor, please contact the Office of Research Protections and Integrity at (704) 687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Consent to Participate

Before the interview, you will receive a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study, you can contact the study team at the information provided above.

Completing the demographic survey and returning it to the Principal Investigator indicates my consent to participate in the study: *A Qualitative Study of Black Women Superintendents: Inhibiting Factors, Enabling Factors, and Perceptions.*

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT PROTOCOL

"A Qualitative Study of Black Women Superintendents: Inhibiting Factors, Enabling Factors, and Perceptions"

Melissa D. Smith / UNC Charlotte /Department of Educational Leadership

Hello, _____, I am Melissa Smith, a UNC Charlotte doctoral student. I am seeking participants for a research study entitled *A Qualitative Study of Black Women Superintendents: Inhibiting Factors, Enabling Factors, and Perceptions.* The purpose of this research is to understand the perceptions about the inhibiting and enabling factors Black women faced when ascending to the superintendent role and the inhibiting factors and enabling factors they face while serving in that role. As a public school superintendent, I would like to ask you to participate in a Zoom video or an audio-recorded interview on this subject. You have been selected because of being a Black woman North Carolina public school superintendent.

Your participation in the project will take approximately 2 hours: 1 hour for the interview, 20 minutes to complete the demographic survey, and 20 minutes to review transcription for accuracy. Following transcription, the remaining time (20 minutes) will be used for participant questions and debriefing. Your responses will be transcribed following the interview, and an interview transcript will be created and shared with you via email. The *NVivo* software program (or similar program) will be used for transcribing the data. The transcripts will also be stored in password-protected data after the study.

You can also verify your comments as they appear in the transcript or follow up on any details. I may also take a few field notes during the interview to ensure clarity and understanding. If you choose to participate, you will be one of approximately five participants in this study. I am happy to arrange the interview at a time that is convenient for you.

Information about your participation and identity will not be shared to ensure confidentiality. Data collected through surveys and interviews will only be used by the Principal Investigator (PI) and the UNC Charlotte faculty advisor for this study. Also, I request that you not use identifying information of school district colleagues, co-workers, students, parents, or others during the interview to ensure anonymity. Please let me know if you have any questions.

At this time, you have three options: if you are interested in participating in the study, please confirm this with me now, and I will send you the informed consent form to review and complete; if you would prefer not to participate, please let me know this as well; and if you have questions or need additional time to consider participating in the study, please let me know that as well. For the third option, I can email you a study description that provides more details so you can make an informed decision. Please follow up with me via phone and/or e-mail to

indicate your choice.

For questions or information about this research, you may contact:

Melissa D. Smith, Principal Investigator
msmit591@uncc.edu or (704) 550-1563

Dr. Walter Hart, Faculty Advisor
walter.hart@uncc.edu or (704) 687-8539

Thank you for considering this request!

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

This survey was designed to collect demographic information pertaining to current Black women public school superintendents in North Carolina. Data collected from this survey will be used for research purposes only.

1) How many years have you served as a superintendent?
   A. 1-3 years
   B. 4-5 years
   C. 6-10 years
   D. 11-15 years
   E. 16-20 years
   F. 21-25 years
   G. 26-30 year
   H. Over 30 years

2) How many years have you served as a superintendent in North Carolina?
   A. 1-3 years
   B. 4-5 years
   C. 6-10 years
   D. 11-15 years
   E. 16-20 years
   F. 21-25 years
   G. 26-30 year
   H. Over 30 years

3) How many years have you served as a superintendent in your current district?
   A. 1-3 years
   B. 4-5 years
   C. 6-10 years
   D. 11-15 years
   E. 16-20 years
   F. 21-25 years
   G. 26-30 year

4) How many years did you serve as a public school superintendent in a district similar to your current district?
   A. 1-3 years
   B. 4-5 years
   C. 6-10 years
   D. 11-15 years
   E. 16-20 years
   F. 21-25 years
   G. 26-30 year
   H. Over 30 years
   I. Not Applicable

5)   Indicate your highest level of education achieved:
        A. Bachelor's
        B. Graduate Teaching Certificate
        C. Master's
        D. Doctorate

6)   How many of your undergraduate teaching preparation program courses included topics related to the superintendency?
        A. 0
        B. 1
        C. 2
        D. 3
        E. 4 or more

7)   How many of your graduate courses included topics related to the superintendency?
        A. 0
        B. 1
        C. 2
        D. 3
        E. 4 or more
        F. I did not participate in a graduate program

8)   Indicate your age range:
        A. 20–24
        B. 25–29
        C. 30–34
        D. 35–39
        E. 40–44
        F. 45–49
        G. 50–54
        H. 55–59
        I.   60–64
        J.   65+

9) Please indicate the highest level of education achieved by your parent(s) **or** legal guardian(s):

Mother	Father	Legal Guardian
A. HS Diploma	A. HS Diploma	A. HS Diploma
B. Associate's	B. Associate's	B. Associate's
C. Bachelor's	C. Bachelor's	C. Bachelor's
D. Master's	D. Master's	D. Master's
E. Doctorate	E. Doctorate	E. Doctorate

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Project Title

A Qualitative Study of Black Women Superintendents: Inhibiting Factors, Enabling Factors, and Perceptions

Structure

This is a semi-structured, one-on-one interview with five open-ended warm-up questions, nine open-ended interview questions aligned directly with the research questions, and nine open-ended supplemental questions. The interviewer may ask probing questions for clarification or to gain additional information from the interviewee.

Procedure

1. The researcher will find a secure, comfortable, and appropriate space and meet the interviewee at the time chosen by the interviewee to conduct the interview.

2. The researcher will inform the participant that given the small sample size for Black women superintendents in NC, the risk of deductive disclosure may be likely. The researcher will try to mitigate the risks by informing potential participants of these risks.

3. The researcher will ask the interviewee to complete the 11-question demographic survey (see Appendix C).

4. The researcher will ask if the interview may be audio-recorded on Zoom.

5. If the participant verbally gives consent, the recording will begin.

6. The researcher will ask the interviewee questions found in the protocol as well as additional probing questions if needed.

Interview Guidelines

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview as part of this research study, which aims to analyze the perceptions about inhibiting and enabling factors Black women faced when ascending to the superintendent role and the inhibiting factors and enabling factors they face as superintendents. I will ask you a series of questions. Your name will not be reported to ensure confidentiality. You are not required to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable with and are encouraged to answer freely. You may decline to participate in the study at any time before, during, or after the interview. Following the interview, I will transcribe the interview, my and your responses. The researcher, a transcription service, or word processing software will transcribe each interview. Do you have any questions? Please confirm that you understand the interview guidelines and are ready to proceed.
- If the interviewee states "No," the researcher will stop the interview and ask whether the participant is willing to be interviewed at another time.
- If "Yes," the researcher will continue the interview according to the protocol.

Interview Questions

Background Information, Warm-Up Questions

    1. Please share your career path leading to the superintendency.
    2. Have you always held aspirations for the position of superintendent?
- If yes, what steps did you take to ensure you achieved the position?
- If no, how did you wind up in the position?

    3. How were you prepared for the position of superintendent? Please share both formal and informal preparation experiences.
    4. What aspects of the position do you enjoy most or provide the greatest satisfaction?
    5. Why did you agree to be in this study?

Challenges Faced When Becoming Superintendent

RQ1. What challenges did you experience as you were looking for your first superintendency?
    1. How did you overcome these challenges?
    2. What was the hiring process like for you?

Challenges Faced While Serving in the Role of Superintendent

RQ2. What are the greatest professional challenges you face now that you are in the role of superintendent?
    1. How do you overcome these challenges?
    2. What are the greatest *personal* challenges you face now that you are in the role of superintendent?
    3. How do you overcome these challenges?

Supports or Enabling Factors

RQ3. What supports or enabling factors did you experience as you were looking for your first superintendency (e.g., people, programs, other)?
RQ4. What supports or enabling factors do you experience now that you are in the role of superintendent (e.g., people, programs, other)?

Supplemental Questions

Gender, Race, Family, Age

    1. What role did gender play in your search for a superintendency?
    2. What role does gender play now that you are a superintendent?
    3. What role did race play in your search for a superintendency?
    4. What role does race play now that you are a superintendent?
    5. What role did family play in your search for a superintendency?
    6. What role does family play now that you are a superintendent?

7. What role did age play in your search for a superintendency?
8. What role does age play now that you are a superintendent?

Other Superintendents

1. How do you perceive the challenges and supports experienced by other superintendents compared to those that you have experienced?

APPENDIX E: POST-RECRUITMENT, PRE-INTERVIEW EMAIL SCRIPT

Department of Educational Leadership
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

"A Qualitative Study of Black Women Superintendents: Inhibiting Factors, Enabling Factors, and Perceptions"

Melissa D. Smith / UNC Charlotte / Educational Leadership Department

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study, "*A Qualitative Study of Black Women Superintendents: Inhibiting Factors, Enabling Factors, and Perceptions.*"

This study is designed to understand the perceptions about inhibiting and enabling factors Black women faced when ascending to the superintendent role and the inhibiting factors and enabling factors they faced while serving in the superintendent role. I am interested in understanding the lived experiences of Black women school district superintendents in North Carolina. Furthermore, I'm interested in knowing how these perceptions and understandings impact career paths leading to the superintendency and hiring and recruitment practices for Black women superintendents in North Carolina.

I will provide you with potential interview dates and times to choose from via email. After your response, I will send an electronic confirmation about the date and time of the interview. Please contact me directly with any questions you may have via email or phone. I will also provide a copy of the signed Informed Consent Form at the beginning of our interview session.

Researcher:
Melissa D. Smith
msmit591@uncc.edu or (704) 550-1563

If you have any concerns regarding this study, please contact the faculty advisor of the researcher.

Faculty Advisor:
Dr. Walter Hart
walter.hart@uncc.edu or (704) 687-8539