

# African American Women Superintendents in Texas: An Exploration of Challenges and Supports

Kanisha Wiley  
Aldine Independent School District

Rebecca Bustamante  
Sam Houston State University

Julia Ballenger  
Texas A&M University

Barbara Polnick  
Sam Houston State University

**ABSTRACT:** School superintendents who are African American women are understudied. In this study, researchers explored the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in the state of Texas. The purpose of the study was to identify the challenges, supports, and personal background characteristics that participants believed influenced their ascension to superintendent positions. A phenomenological research approach was used, and data were collected through individual interviews with superintendent participants. Data were analyzed and interpreted using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological reduction approach. Three major themes emerged in the results: (a) desire to impact others at various levels, (b) sources of personal strength, and (c) external support systems. Subthemes were identified and described for each larger theme. Findings suggest a need to expose aspiring African American women administrators to the challenges and rewards of superintendent positions and increase mentorship opportunities and quality preparation programs.

**Keywords:** superintendency, leadership, Black superintendents, women superintendents

When most students in the state of Texas arrive to their classrooms daily, they are met with the waiting face of their teacher. Regardless of whether they are entering a room serving 30 or more students in a crowded school building in the heart of Dallas or a classroom serving all grade levels in the small town of Gilmer, the face students most often see is that of a woman. Although this has been the case for the past century throughout America, there was a time when this would not have been the norm. Prior to the late eighteenth century, education was a male dominated

field (Alston, 2000; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Sampson & Davenport, 2010). Both in learning and teaching, men—namely White men—were charged with the task of educating students (namely White male students) and preparing them for their future. This trend started changing throughout the nineteenth century, when women began to dominate the field of education. Despite their increasing presence in classrooms, men continued to dominate leadership positions, much as they do today. Unlike their White counterparts, African American women did not become a presence in the field of education until the late nineteenth century (Alston, 2000). The entrance of African American women into education was eventually viewed as a sign of upward social mobility (Irvine, 1988).

By 1950, half of the African American professionals in the United States were teachers. However the critical legal case *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka* significantly impacted the presence of African Americans in the field of education (Alston, 2005; Horsford & McKenzie, 2008; Moody, 1973; Taylor & Tillman, 2009). After this landmark case, which required American schools to desegregate, the number of Black educators began to decline (Irvine, 1988). Many Black teachers and administrators lost their jobs due to the closing of segregated Black schools. Teachers, principals, and even superintendents, who were looked upon as role models, advocates, and spokespersons for the Black community, were demoted or fired once their students were forced to integrate into the predominantly White schools (Alston, 2005; Horsford & McKenzie, 2008; Lyons & Chesley, 2004). As a result of the landmark case, a “whole generation of Black educators was lost” (Lyons & Chesley, 2004, p. 302). School desegregation decreased the availability of teaching jobs for many African American educators

who were then forced to compete with their White counterparts for teaching positions in the newly integrated schools (Horsford & McKenzie, 2008). As a result, many African Americans left the field of education, limiting Black students in their ability to find strong role models in their schools (Irvine, 1988).

### **The Rise of Women and African Americans in the Superintendency**

The position of the superintendent did not emerge in American schools until the late nineteenth century. It was during this time that the structure of schools necessitated a leader that served in a plurality of roles. The superintendent was looked upon as the instructional leader of the school district, responsible for the development of curriculum and the retention of students. Additionally, the superintendent served as the district manager, overseeing budgets, scheduling repairs, and compiling reports for the school board (Urban & Wagoner, 2004). Today, over 80% of superintendents nation-wide are male. Despite the dominance of females in the classroom, few have broken the "glass ceiling" to reach this highest position in K-12 education (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovardia, & Vanneman, 2001; Glass, 2000).

Dillard (2000) stated that the voices of African American women are often excluded from research literature and practice in the social sciences. There is an evident need to examine the experiences of these women to understand how they have been shaped by their racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The challenge of African American women entering the superintendency is confounded by their double minority status as an African American and a woman (Revere, 1987). For many African American women, the challenge of being African American and a woman has forced them into a life saturated with "conflict, confusion, estrangement, isolation, and a plethora of unmarked beginnings and endings, jump starts, and failures" (Fordham, 1993, p. 24). African American women are often required to transform their persona into one that does not appear "too Black" or "too female" (Fordham, 1993).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain a broader understanding of the lived experiences of African American women superintendents in the state of Texas, particularly regarding the challenges, supports, and personal backgrounds that influenced their ascension to and acquisition of superintendent positions. Knowledge regarding these experiences can assist in helping superintendents in these districts understand the unique dynamics of this leadership experience. By

understanding the stories of African American women superintendents in terms of their challenges, supports, and personal backgrounds, aspiring African American women in future generations may benefit and begin to make decisions regarding the achievability of a superintendent position. The governing body for education in Texas, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), identified 1,247 state school districts that were led by school superintendents, but only eight, or less than 1%, identified as an African American women (TEA, 2014). With such a small population, there is a need to examine the experiences these women have had as they serve in both rural and urban school districts. Jean-Marie, Williams, and Sherman (2009) encouraged examination of Black women administrators' experiences as a way to negate "hostility, indifference, and invisibility" (p. 565). Listening to the stories of these woman leaders, stories that have historically been "distorted and silenced" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36), might provide valuable insights to other aspiring women educators, particularly African American women educators. Through the accounts of other women educators, aspiring leaders might reflect upon their own individual journeys and benefit from the experiences of others as they seek leadership positions in public education.

### **Research Questions**

One overarching research question and three sub-questions were used to guide this study: How do African American women superintendents describe their lived experiences in acquiring superintendent positions in the state of Texas?

- What challenges have African American women superintendents in Texas encountered in acquiring superintendent positions?
- What do African American women superintendents believe supported them in acquiring superintendent positions in the state of Texas?
- How have the personal backgrounds of select African American women superintendents contributed to their success in acquiring superintendent positions in Texas?

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Two theoretical constructs were utilized to guide this research: Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought. Critical Race Theory grew out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Black Feminist Thought emerged to address the uniqueness of the feminist movement through the experiences of African American women.

### Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theory that emerged in the late 1970s as an outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movement, asserts the acceptance of race and racism as permanent tenets in American society. CRT scholars developed the theory to address the subtle practices of racism that became prevalent after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). CRT moves the conversation from an ideological one to one that looks at race as an issue that impacts the daily lives of “raced” people (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Because of racial inequities in the U.S. education system, counter-stories are needed of individuals whose lives are embedded in a system of racism that is “endemic, pervasive, widespread, and ingrained in society and thus in education” (Milner, 2007, p. 390). An examination of race must be addressed to fully understand educational achievement differences that occur. The stories of people of color can be utilized to provide a more in-depth analysis of the educational system and serve as a catalyst to address “dysconscious racism” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58).

### Black Feminist Thought

The second conceptual framework that guided this study was Black Feminist Thought. Using this framework, Black women are viewed as agents of knowledge regarding the interconnectedness of sexism, class oppression, and racism. Emphasis is placed on the experiences of African American women as opposed to those based on the experiences of White men and women. According to Collins (2000), the perspectives of Black women should be viewed as accounted for because they possess unique knowledge based on their experiences in a subordinate role in society. Naturally, these perspectives differ from those of individuals who hold dominant roles in society. Collins promoted the existence of two levels of knowledge in her discussion of Black Feminist Thought. The first level is common, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by members of the same group. The second level is the specialized knowledge that is offered by experts or those who are part of a group and express the group’s perspective. Proponents of Black Feminist Thought express the first level of knowledge, but they also “provide us with a unique angle of vision concerning Black womanhood unavailable to other groups” (Collins, 2000, p. 35).

W. E. B. Du Bois, in his explanation of life for African Americans, coined the phrase *double consciousness*—the consciousness of being both African and American (Collins, 2000; Few, 2007; Jackson, 1999;

Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). For African American women, there is an additional level to *double consciousness*—the consciousness of also being female. Through this simultaneous existence, African American women experience the world differently from those who are not Black or female (Collins, 2000; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Through understanding the importance of knowledge as an empowering force for oppressed people, scholars of Black Feminist Thought suggest that this knowledge can feed both political and economic change in institutions that ultimately will promote wider social change.

### Methods

This study included data collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with six of the eight serving African American women superintendents in the state of Texas. Initial contact was made through email and phone calls to the district offices of each of the eight superintendents, and personal contact was made with seven of the eight. Of the seven, one superintendent declined to participate in the study. The eighth was unable to be reached despite numerous phone calls and emails.

In addition to the interview protocol designed to answer the research questions, demographic questions were asked of each participant to obtain general background information. Each interview was audiotaped and the researcher took notes during each interview. Initial analysis of significant statements was performed on each transcript using a color-coded process, and data were input into a spreadsheet to assist in the organization of the emergent themes. Data were analyzed using Moustakas’ (1994) approach to data analysis of transcendental phenomenological research.

### Findings and Discussion

The primary research question for this study asked, *How do African American women superintendents describe their lived experiences in acquiring superintendent positions in the state of Texas?* It was designed to examine the lived experiences of women African American superintendents and to provide these women with the framework to share their expert-level knowledge regarding the unique phenomenon of obtaining this position in a White male dominated field. In addressing the primary research question associated with this research study, three major themes emerged: (a) the participants’ desire to impact others at various levels, (b) the participants’ sources of personal strength, and (c) external support systems. Each of these major themes provided insight into the overall career experi-

ences of these African American women superintendents as they acquired their positions in the state of Texas. Specifically, the themes and subthemes provided knowledge of the challenges they experienced, the supports that they utilized, and the unique personal backgrounds that inspired each of them to pursue superintendent positions. Each of the major themes revealed subthemes that appeared in all of the participant interviews. Table 1 displays the major themes, subthemes, constructed meanings of the subthemes, and significant statements.

**Challenges**

Sub-question 1 asked, *What challenges have African American women superintendents in Texas encountered in acquiring superintendent positions?* Emergent subthemes were *formal preparation* and *reflecting on and learning from experiences*. The superintendents explained the importance of assuring their preparedness for the challenge of securing a high-level leadership position. Further, each participant shared the importance of positional knowledge and experiences that effectively prepared her for the position. In addition, although not a primary theme, many of the participants shared that they knew they were facing a

challenge as an African American woman seeking the position. One participant explained how her use of a search firm forced her to recognize her race and gender as a reality that she would face in seeking a position. Experiences like these are aligned to the concepts shared through Critical Race Theory-- concepts that recognize that racism exists in the world. Although their race and gender were thoughts that emerged in the stories of each participant, no one explicitly stated race or gender as challenges they faced.

The subtheme of *reflecting upon and learning from experiences* also played a role in the superintendents' challenges. Many of the participants shared negative past experiences involving the superintendency in which they were forced to do the work of the superintendent without being given the title. Facing the challenge of performing the job without the credit added to their drive to be prepared when their opportunity to obtain the position arose.

**Support**

Sub-question 2 asked, *What do African American women superintendents believe supported them in acquiring superintendent positions in the state of Texas?* The

Table 1

*Description of Emergent Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subtheme	Constructed Meaning	Example of Significant Statement
Desire to Impact Others at Various Levels	Students	The desire to impact the learning and success of the students within their district.	"You gotta do what you gotta do for children, and not worry about what people say about you, but just do your job."
	Teachers	The desire to impact the performance of teachers, which ultimately impacts student performance and success.	"To impact the lives of teachers that impact the lives of kids. That's the main thing."
	Community	The desire to give back to the community where they grew up and/or started their educational career.	"I worked here, and I took pride, and I was like, 'Somebody from here has to take the responsibility to make things better.' And I was like . . . I can do it."
	Future Leaders	The desire to give back and assist African American female administrators in their preparation for possible superintendent positions.	"Encouraging African American people of color to put themselves out there."
Sources of Personal Strength	Faith	Having a connection to a higher power to assist in day-to-day living and decisions.	"I know the direction God has given me as far as who I am and what I'm supposed to be doing."
	Formal Preparation	Those tasks done to get into a position to be ready for the superintendent position.	"I just wanted a lot and I wanted to be able to stand and in my mind it was stand against anybody: Black, White, male, female, and be just as competitive and just as knowledgeable."
	Humility	Keeping a level head despite serving the position of superintendent.	"I don't want to think too highly of myself."
	Reflecting on and learning from experiences	Framing experiences, both good and bad, in a light that allows for personal growth and learning.	"I've worked with some outstanding superintendents and I've worked with some who were not effective. All of them adding to the fabric of my character."
External Support Systems	Family	Having strong connections with immediate and extended family members.	"I don't have a big circle of friends. I have family."
	Friends	Having strong, supportive friendships that help to stay grounded.	"I have an excellent extended family in my friends."
	Mentors	Having professional colleagues to turn to for advice and support.	"A way that the African American females, and African American males, are interactive with each other and helping and supporting one another."

major theme of *external support systems* tied directly to this research question, including the subthemes of *family, friends, and mentors*. Each of the participants shared specific examples of the importance of family members, friends, and professional and personal mentors. All participants, with the exception of one, shared names of specific individuals whom they called upon to share ideas and gain general encouragement.

### Personal Backgrounds

Sub-question 3 asked, *How have the personal backgrounds of select African American women superintendents contributed to their success in acquiring superintendent positions in Texas?* One consistent theme found in each of the transcripts was the *importance of community ties*. Each participant remains connected to the community or area in which she grew up or started her career. Participants explained the importance that giving back to the community that supported them has had in their daily lives. In addition to supporting their communities, the participants also shared the importance of impacting others. Each of the participants also emphasized their passion for students and teachers and its importance throughout their career path to the superintendency. Having served as teachers and counselors in their school districts prior to becoming superintendents, participants provided evidence of continued commitment to positively impacting students and student achievement.

### Connection to the Conceptual Frameworks

Two conceptual frameworks informed and grounded this study: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Feminist Thought. Both CRT and Black Feminist Thought promote the importance of understanding the unique experiences of African American women who currently serve as public school district superintendents. Hearing their stories and listening to their voices can provide additional knowledge and raise the consciousness of others.

### Critical Race Theory

When analyzing research using a CRT lens, one understands the impact that race has on the societal structures in place in the world. As one of those societal constructs, education is directly impacted by issues surrounding race and racism in the United States. Through the acceptance of race as a permanent tenet in American society, educators can begin critical conversations regarding that impact of racism on the structures in various social atmospheres. By understanding and accepting the concepts expressed by CRT and its scholars, educators might better under-

stand how the experiences of these African American women are unique and need to be heard. Through the telling of their stories, these women superintendents provided further insight into a population that encompasses less than 1% of the total population of superintendents in the state of Texas—African American women superintendents.

**Black Feminist Thought.** Black Feminist Thought places an emphasis on the experiences of African American women as opposed to the frames of knowledge based on the experiences of those in the majority (Collins, 2000). Aligned with Black Feminist Thought, discussion is warranted on the concept of *double consciousness*—the consciousness of being both African American and female. Although the intersection of African American and female identity was not explicitly stated as a challenge by the participants in this study, it emerged as a consciousness shared by each participant. Researchers have previously shared the idea that many African American women view their double minority status as a barrier to their entrance into the superintendency (Revere, 1987; Rowan, 2006; Smith, 2010). However, the participants in this research study did not embrace their double minority status as a barrier. Each of the participants acknowledged that they were African American and a woman and accepted that these traits played a factor in their daily experiences despite their continued striving for excellence and success.

### Implications and Recommendations

There is a crucial need to increase the presence of the African American women in the superintendency in the state of Texas. As demographics of the state change and traditional minorities become the majority, it is necessary for minorities to receive opportunities for top-level school positions commensurate to their demographic composition in Texas public schools. Based on the literature review and results of this study, a number of steps are encouraged to increase the presence of African American women in the superintendency.

Potential job candidates should pursue formal preparation strategies such as seeking superintendent-like job experience and acquiring a doctorate. At the university level, leadership programs must effectively prepare future leaders for the superintendent position (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). By providing aspiring administrators with examples of the daily decisions of superintendents, including examples from African American women superintendents, programs can ensure that their graduates are attuned to the issues and decision-making skills needed to make tough choices.

Student internships can also enhance the experience of the learner in these programs.

Additionally, candidates should pursue informal preparation strategies such as building strong support systems. Mentoring at the university can serve to build the capacity of practicing administrators. Superintendent-level mentoring was noted as crucial both in the literature and in the participant interviews. Mentoring can also enhance networking and relationship building that may pay future dividends as candidates move into superintendent positions. Also, participation in professional associations that promote networking opportunities was strongly suggested by both the results of this study and the literature (Bulls, 1986; Dudek, 2012; McCord, Jordan, & Jordan, 2008; Moore, 2012). Exposing educators to others with superintendent experience can assist aspiring school leaders by providing opportunities for them to develop professional relationships and gain exposure to areas that may be unfamiliar or unknown.

Finally, superintendent preparation programs must do more to recruit minorities, particularly African American women. By increasing the number of individuals who possess superintendent certifications, school districts can increase the presence of those from traditionally marginalized groups, particularly African American women.

### Future Research

Future research is needed to determine if this study's emergent themes are important factors in African American women attaining and sustaining superintendent positions. Consideration of the day-to-day challenges (e.g., board relations, community and parental involvement, and student success initiatives) experienced by these women may provide deeper insights into the experiences of African American women superintendents. A second potential area of research is the examination of other racial minority female superintendent experiences in the state of Texas. With the changing demographics of the state (TEA, 2014a), there is a need to increase the presence of women superintendents who identify as Latino or other minority groups. Similar conceptual frameworks could be applied in these future studies as well.

Another recommendation is to expand the scope of the present study to the Southern United States or the entire country. Due to the small sample size of this study, a larger number of participants might increase generalizability and create additional important findings. A comparative study could also examine the similarities and differences between the experiences of African American men and women superintendents

in their career journeys to superintendent positions. Finally, because many African American superintendents, both male and female, serve districts that are primarily minority, a last recommendation is to examine leadership styles and practices that appear most effective throughout a superintendent's career in minority majority districts. As the demographics of the state of Texas shift and expand, a need exists to assess how leaders, particularly African American superintendents, interact with their school communities in ways that meet the needs of students.

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