

BREAKING THROUGH THE INVISIBLE CEILING  
TO THE SUPERINTENDENCY  
FOR BLACK WOMEN IN GEORGIA

by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this general qualitative study was to attempt to understand the lived experiences of black female superintendents, an underrepresented group in the school superintendency. I sought to identify the supportive constructs leading to the superintendency, the barriers to overcome in pursuit of the superintendency, and how the black female superintendent experience has changed over time. We employed a purposive sample in the recruitment of study participants. The six participants of this study are retired and practicing black female superintendents in the state of Georgia. Three are retired and served 1984-1999, the period closest to the year of appointment of the first black female; the other three currently practice in GA, and they accepted their appointments during or after 2000.

The primary means of data collection for this study was the use of semi-structured interviews. Through the utilization of coding, I was able to categorize then reduce chunks of data into meaningful units as I looked to connect the codes to provide insight or explain the phenomenon of the black female superintendency in GA. Thematic analysis was conducted to generate a set of themes surrounding the superintendents' experiences collected from the in-depth interviews to attempt to answer the research questions of the study. These themes were:

- (1) What are the lived experiences of black female superintendents in Georgia?
- (2) What obstacles or barriers do black female superintendents have to overcome?
- (3) What are the commonalities among experiences of black female superintendents?
- (4) How have the experiences of black female superintendents changed over time?

The six themes identified in the data analysis include chartering new territory, the inner circle, race and gender matters, getting there, evolution of the black female superintendency, and second set of rules.

Filtering boundaries and black feminist thought are the lenses, through which, I analyzed and interpreted the vulnerabilities of black women to screening-out processes in pursuit of executive school leadership and to determine if gender, racism, or race-related influences are barriers to the superintendency. Evidence from the study suggested that there are particular barriers that thwart the career advancement of black female educators in Georgia.

## DEDICATION

Though long drives and late nights became my constant companions throughout this dissertation process, I had no better friends or bigger supporters than my God and my mother. This paper is dedicated to the spirit of my father, Clarence Thomas and to my mother, Margaret Thomas, who believes in me more than I believe in myself. I am grateful for Godly parents who helped me develop good work ethic and holding on to the totality of their teachings, I find myself inspired to always be better and to do better. From that mission of continuous growth and development came the long, but rewarding work of this study. Obtaining a Doctorate Degree was a goal I set for myself in high school and it is amazing to see it finally come to fruition. I am thankful for the Blessings of faith, determination, and perseverance.

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I start by expressing my gratitude to the six extraordinary women who participated in this study. The lessons from your stories are truly inspirational and what I have learned from your life's work is immeasurable. Thank you for helping me to do good work that may help other educational professionals. To my chair, Dr. Roxanne Mitchell, you are the person whose interest in my study gave me confidence to write and keep writing. I cannot thank you enough for helping me to conceptualize the possibilities of this work. Your relentless support and high standard of excellence confirms for me the importance of a good and respectful working relationship between teacher and pupil. I give special thanks for your expertise and sage advice from my committee members, Dr. Natalie Adams, Dr. Becky Atkinson, Dr. John Dantzler, and Dr. Joyce Levey. I thank you all for agreeing to serve on my committee and for sharing your vast knowledge with me.

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## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	xi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	7
Significance of the Study.....	8
Assumptions.....	8
Self as Researcher.....	9
Research Questions.....	11
Definition of Terms.....	11
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	13
Introduction.....	13
Education of Blacks in the Deep South .....	14
From Whence We Came.....	19

Georgia on My Mind .....	22
Georgia Certification .....	25
The Invisible Ceiling.....	27
Individual Level Barriers .....	29
Group Level Barriers .....	30
Organizational Level Barriers.....	31
Theoretical Framework.....	34
Schein’s Model of Organizational Career Mobility.....	35
Filtering Boundaries.....	35
Black Feminist Thought.....	40
Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory .....	44
Black Feminist Thought and Filtering Boundaries .....	48
Chapter Summary .....	50
CHAPTER III- METHODOLOGY .....	51
Introduction.....	51
Research Questions .....	51
Research Design.....	52
Sampling Strategy.....	53

Participant Selection .....	53
Setting of the Study.....	55
Data Collection .....	56
Analysis.....	57
Limitations of the Study.....	59
Trustworthiness of the Data .....	59
Ethical Considerations .....	60
Chapter Summary .....	61
CHAPTER IV- FINDINGS .....	62
Introduction.....	62
Study Participants .....	63
Themes .....	72
<i>Theme one: Chartering New Territory</i> .....	73
<i>Theme two: The inner circle</i> .....	76
<i>Theme three: Race and Gender Matters</i> .....	80
<i>Theme four: Getting There</i> .....	86
<i>Theme five: Evolution of the Black Female Superintendency</i> .....	92
<i>Theme six: Second Set of Rules</i> .....	93

Chapter Summary .....	98
CHAPTER V- DISCUSSION .....	99
Lived Experiences.....	100
Supports and Barriers.....	103
Commonalities .....	107
The Black Female Superintendency Over Time.....	109
Advice.....	109
Differences and Similarities Between the Retired and Practicing Superintendents .....	110
Conclusion and Recommendations.....	111
REFERENCES .....	123
APPENDICES .....	130

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Career Pathways to the Superintendency Overview .....88

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Three-Dimensional Model of an Organization enhanced by Kim and Brunner, 2009 .....	39
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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In public school systems, women dominate in teaching roles while men overwhelmingly dominate in executive leadership positions namely, the superintendency (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2010). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2013) estimates approximately 14, 200 school districts across the nation; however, using this data can be deceptive when attempting to equate that figure to the number of public school superintendents across the nation. This is so because the superintendency is applied differently across the country and because some smaller districts might employ one superintendent to manage multiple small districts at once.

According to the Arizona Department of Education (2013), for example, Maricopa County is one of the largest counties in the state and is one of 15 county school districts in the state. It comprises 58 public school districts with each district having what the state calls a district superintendent and a school board. The makeup of the districts differ in that a single school will constitute some districts while other districts may be made up of as many as 10 or perhaps 30+ schools. Each school has a principal, but in the smaller districts he or she may also serve as the district superintendent. In the example of Maricopa County, district superintendents have many of the same duties and privileges as do county superintendents. District superintendents report to the county superintendent who report to the state school superintendent (Arizona Department of Education, 2013). District superintendents are not used in the state of Georgia so, for the purpose of this study, the term superintendent will refer to the top executive

county level position in a public school system. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) released its most recent national study focusing on public school superintendents in 2010 entitled, *The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study*. This once every ten years survey yielded significant findings regarding women and the superintendency. Surveys were sent to approximately 12,600 superintendents across the nation and 1,876 participated in the study (Kowalski et al., 2010, p. 11). Results are based on the number of participants who responded to each survey item, noting that not all participants responded to all survey items.

The survey item used to determine gender was answered by 95% (or 1,782) of the study participants. Results show that women represented 24.1% (or 429) of the superintendents across the nation who participated in this study, which is a substantial increase from the 2000 AASA study when women comprised 13.2% of the school superintendencies across the nation who participated in the study (Kowalski et al., 2010). The survey item used to determine race was answered by 96% (or 1,801) of the study participants. Results show that 2% (or 36) of the participants identified in the black or African-American category (Kowalski et al., 2010). Data regarding the representation of women amongst the 2% of black superintendents who responded to the survey item regarding race is missing from the study. If black superintendents, both men and women, represent a mere 2% of the 1,801 superintendents responding to the question about race, this statistic shines the research spotlight on the underrepresentation of blacks and women at the executive school leadership level.

From another source, The National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) compiled the 2012-13 African-American School Superintendents Directory indicating that there are 144 black female superintendents across the nation. The directory does not provide data

about white or other race female superintendents; therefore, it is not possible to compare the number of black versus other race female school superintendents across the nation based on NABSE data. The NABSE data, disaggregated by states, indicate that the 16 states where there is no black superintendent representation of either gender are Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, and Wyoming.

Statistics from the 2010 AASA study and the 2012-13 NASBE Directory are not intended to be used in an “apples-to-apples” comparison. The purpose of discussing both figures is to highlight the varying reports regarding sex and race of superintendents across the nation.

Shakeshaft (1994) contends that:

In articles, readers will note that the numbers of women reported in school administration differ by the sources the authors cite. Further, nowhere are we able to determine nationwide the number of women of color in school administration by position. This is not sloppy scholarship, but rather the lack of a reliable, uniform nationwide database that lets us know just how many women are school administrators and at what levels. (p. 357)

Further, Jackson and Shakeshaft (2003) pinpoint the reasons for why it is difficult to understand changes in the representation of sex or race in education. The barriers they outline are that annual studies/statistics are not available and that the intersection of race/ethnicity and sex is rarely reported (Jackson & Shakeshaft, 2003, p. 3).

In 2003, the AASA commissioned the first national study that examined women who lead education systems (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). While the study targeted both female superintendents and females holding central office level positions, the highlighted results here are focused only on the female superintendents. According to Grogan and Brunner (2005), they

used the AASA membership database and data from Market Data Retrieval to identify and mail 2,500 surveys to women superintendents across the nation and 723 (29%) agreed to participate in the study. This shows an increase in the percentage of female respondents from the 2000 AASA 10-year superintendents study when females represented 13.2% of superintendents across the nation. Kim and Brunner (2009) cite Market Data Retrieval as “a leading US provider of education mailing lists and databases” (p. 86). Results of this study are based on responses from the 29% representative sample of the total population of female superintendents across the nation. Data analysis extracted from Grogan and Brunner (2005) reveals the following:

1. Of the 13,728 school districts nationwide, 18% are led by female superintendents.
2. Education preparation for superintendents indicates that women hold undergraduate degrees in education at a rate of 58% as compared to men at 24%.
3. Females have a better chance of being hired as superintendent through a search firm at a rate of 23% as compared to men at 17%.
4. Female superintendents spend more years than men do in the classroom-teaching environment before advancing to administration.
5. Of the 723 respondents, 5.2% are black females. Grogan and Brunner (2005) declare that there are “sharp contrasts between the general picture of the superintendents’ survey and the picture of black women superintendents” (para. 16).
6. Black females are slower to be hired in the first year of prospecting for a superintendency at a rate of 56% as compared to white women at a rate of 70%.  
Expanding the wait period to 5+ years, black females are slower to be hired at a rate of 25% as compared to white women at a rate of 8%.

7. Black females report the belief that they must consistently work harder to prove themselves capable of doing the job repeatedly.

### **Problem Statement**

There can be no continuation of viewing the school superintendency as a role defined solely from the white male perspective. While there is ample and yet growing literature about women in school leadership, the research focusing on black women in the executive school leadership role seems to have been largely overlooked. Though it is encouraging to realize a slow growth in the direction of research designed to examine educational leadership from the perspective of the black female, much work remains to be done in this area. Dana and Bourisaw (2006) give an account of women's experiences in school leadership; however, they tend to group black women into the larger mixed group of ethnic women. Instead of focusing on black women, they use the terminology "women and minorities" (p. 5) to tell the story of workplace inequality. Yeakey, Johnson, and Adkinson (1986) submit that because blacks, Hispanics, and women represent commonly discriminated against groups, there is an assumption that they can be analyzed as a group (p. 111). Succinctly, Yeakey et al. (1986) argue that:

What is true for blacks is not necessarily true for members of other races/ethnic minority groups and may have nothing to do with the experiences of white women. The converse is also true. For this reason, the experiences of blacks, Hispanics, and women in public school administration are unique to warrant separate consideration. (p. 111)

Even in the 2003 seminal work of Grogan and Brunner (2005) focused on women leaders in education, the authors tend to use the phrase, women or superintendent of color; although, they did disaggregate selected data to specifically target issues faced by black women. Many studies

about educational leadership and the superintendency yield one common and slow changing fact... the dominant group of executive leaders in public schools are white.

While balance and diversity is an importance feature in the literature, it is equally important that balance and diversity is a common practice at the executive leadership level. In urban and rural school districts is where most black superintendents practice (Kowalski et al., 2010; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). “The underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities is even more disconcerting, especially when one considers the rapid changes in student populations” (Kowalski et al., 2010, p. 85). The population of the nation is changing and according to the US Census Bureau (2011), the total population of blacks and Hispanics is increasing at a more rapid pace than for whites. From 2000 to 2012, the total white population increased by 5.7%, the total black population increased by 12.3%, and the total Hispanic population increased by 43% (US Census Bureau, 2011). It is reasonable to surmise that as the US population changes, so does the demographics of students in schools. It is further reasonable to surmise that the population of executive leaders in public schools across the country should be reflective of the diversity and changing demographics in classrooms across the country.

Shakeshaft’s (1999) examination of the 1990 US Census alongside a 1996 US Department of Education report yielded poignant outcomes regarding the state of educational leadership in public schools that are yet relevant today. She examined “inclusion and equality” (p. 99) regarding the representation of women and minorities in educational administration and looked specifically at the proportions of women in the U.S. population and in relationship to men as well as the proportion of women in the education profession. Results show the proportion of women to men in administrative roles does not reflect the same proportions of representation in the population. Women represented 51% of the US population and 51% of schoolchildren but

represented 65% of teachers, 43% of principals, and 7% of superintendents (Shakeshaft, 1999, p. 99). It was found that women were overrepresented in the teacher population, likely overrepresented in the elementary principal role and underrepresented in the secondary principal and superintendent roles (Shakeshaft, 1999, p. 100).

Although 15.9% of the U.S. population is Hispanic, non-white, or of African descent, 28% of students, 10.96% of public school teachers, 12.3% of public school principals, and 2.9% of superintendents are of African descent, non-Hispanic, or Hispanic (1990 U.S. Census Data; U.S. Department of Education, July, 1996)----- None of these figures are available by both race and sex. (Shakeshaft, 1999, p. 100)

The consequence of failing to report demographic data such as race and sex is there is no reliable way to determine how conditions might be changing. This constitutes a solid rationale regarding the importance of studying groups separately and in this study, to examine the experiences of blacks and women in executive school leadership so as not to marginalize their presence and significance in the body of research on superintendents.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this general qualitative study is to add to the existing body of literature and attempt to understand the lived experiences of black female superintendents, an underrepresented group in the school superintendency. It seeks to identify the supportive constructs leading to the superintendency, the obstacles or barriers to overcome in pursuit of the superintendency in Georgia, and how the black female school superintendent experience has changed over time.

## **Significance of the Study**

That which stands out most prevalently in the literature is the disparity of research focused on female versus male superintendents. Perhaps, this should not be surprising given the historical “maleness” associated with that position and the volume of research in school leadership focused on males. Even as the scope of the research narrows to female superintendents, information specific to black females in the superintendency is noticeably absent from the literature. Allen (1995) posits that:

Because they have been so few in number, there is precious little research about African-American women in educational administration, their professional aspirations, the obstacles they confront as they pursue their goals, and the roles of mentors and sponsors in advancing their careers. (p.409)

An examination of the lived experiences of school superintendents who lead from the double minority perspective, black and female, is significant to add to the existing body of research regarding the school superintendency. Because black females represent an oppressed group, intellectual discourse about black feminist activism in the face of oppression related to race and gender is necessary. Studying black women in the superintendency will have positive implications for women already serving in the position but most especially for those who aspire to executive level educational leadership.

## **Assumptions**

Three assumptions of this study have been identified. These are

(a) The experiences of black female superintendents as they pursue the executive position, the challenges they had to overcome, and their lived experiences, all can be understood through the use of interviews;

(b) changes in the experiences of black female superintendents from the first black female superintendents in the state of Georgia until the current female superintendents can be understood through the use of interviews; and

(c) Schein's Boundary Theory and Black Feminist Thought will provide appropriate lenses through which to analyze the superintendents' responses.

### **Self as Researcher**

Creswell (2007) states that the researcher is a key instrument in the collection of data through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants (p. 38). As I contemplate my own role in planning and conducting this qualitative research, I remain cognizant of the varying levels of participation and potential bias that may develop as I carry out this study. In line with the subjects of this study, I too, am a black female working in public education with aspirations of moving to the executive level of leadership.

My current role as a school-based social worker is paradoxical in that my duties and responsibilities include advocating in the best interest of students and ensuring that the policies and procedures of the organization are carried out when working with students and families. This can be challenging because, in many cases, that which is best for students is in direct conflict with the policies and procedures of the organization. School social workers (SSW) are professionally trained service providers who act as the link between the home, school and community with extensive training in human development and behavior, mental health theory and practice, systems theory, organizational development, policy development and social science research methods. SSWs are skilled in providing individual, family and group counseling, accessing concrete services, developing and implementing prevention and intervention strategies, and influencing and participating in legislative processes. As a SSW, I serve on

multidisciplinary teams and collaborate with various school personnel and community stakeholders to meet the academic, social, emotional and behavioral needs of students.

In my state, SSWs are required to hold a Master's Degree in the social sciences and are certified as SSWs through the state's Professional Standards Commission. In addition to meeting those requirements, I also hold the Specialist in Education Degree (Ed.S.) and the Educational Leadership Certification (L5). The L5 is the GA certification required to be considered for leadership positions in the educational system. In some school systems, the SSW position is an administrative one given the independent and autonomous nature of assessment, intervention, and outcomes evaluation involved in the decision-making.

I came to be interested in the topic of black female superintendents when the only black female executive leadership team member in my school system left for the same position but in a larger school system. Her transition meant greater responsibility, greater visibility, and of course, greater pay. Many believed her to be the next superintendent of our district and, though, proud of her accomplishments, her departure left my school district with no one who represented me as either black or female. The executive team looked exactly as it did when I started in the system 13 years ago. I consciously began to contemplate how it was that the world has come so far with race and gender relations, yet, so much seems to remain the same.

The work of this research has special meaning for me because I have experienced what I perceive to be support along racial lines for promotion in my school district. It is my belief that understanding the lived experiences of these study participants, accounting for how they achieved success at the highest level in public education will be encouragement for me and others who desire to do the same. In SSW, as is true in educational leadership, there is much to be learned from watching and listening. My hope is that this consciousness will aid my ability to

tell the stories of these black female former and practicing superintendents in such a way as to understand the obstacles they overcame to become superintendents, understand the commonalities of their experiences, and understand how their experiences may have changed from the time of the first black female Georgia superintendent to the present time. Given my own experiences as a black female aspiring to leadership in education, I recognize the potential for bias; therefore, I will be more self-conscious of my own thoughts and opinions, and will guard against imposing them on my subjects.

### **Research Questions**

This study looks to understand the lived experiences of black female superintendents in the state of Georgia. The following research questions will guide the inquiry:

1. What are the lived experiences of black female superintendents in GA?
2. What obstacles or barriers do black female superintendents have to overcome?
3. What are the commonalities among experiences of black female superintendents?
4. How have the experiences of black female superintendents changed over time?

### **Definition of Terms**

Some of the following terms have been specifically defined by the researcher for the purposes of this study; others are defined as they appear in the literature, and those sources cited.

**Black-** Dark or light skinned person of African or African-American descent and classified as such based on a socially accepted system of racial and ethnic affiliation.

**Invisible ceiling-** For the purposes of this study invisible ceiling may be used interchangeably with glass ceiling, which according to Dana and Bourisaw (2006), is a metaphor for the levels of leadership beyond which women have not been admitted (p. 8). Kim and

Brunner (2009) defines glass ceiling as boundaries that speak to the analysis of gender differences in career mobility.

**Jim Crow-** A government sanctioned system of racial oppression and segregation that spanned the period of 1870-1960 in the United States.

**Play the political game-** A “go along” to “get along” political structure in organizations.

**Reconstruction-** The period (1865-77) in US history that followed the American Civil War and during which attempts were made to redress the inequities of slavery and its political, social, and economic legacy and to solve the problems arising from the readmission to the Union of the 11 states that had seceded at or before the outbreak of war (*Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.*).

**White-** White skinned people of European descent; also referred to as Caucasian.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction**

The disparity between men and women who hold the school superintendency in the state of Georgia is but a microcosm of the historic and still present condition of public education across this nation. Blount (1998) asserts that in 1910, women comprised 8.9% of the superintendency but with so many changes in education throughout the 1900s, the number of women represented in that role fluctuated greatly. Dramatic swings in that statistic showed the representation of women in the superintendency dropping to as low as 1.2% in 1982 and rising as high as 13.2% in 2000 (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000).

Though historical analysis reveals that men were the archetype of the executive school leader, the contributions of women to the profession should not be discounted as they have played a significant role in the field of education. Founding mothers of educational institutions include Charlotte Hawkins Brown, The Palmer Institute, 1902; Marietta Johnson, The Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education, 1904; Margaret Naumburg, The Waldon School, 1914; Caroline Pratt, The City and Country School, 1914; Helen Parkhurst, The Dalton School, 1919; Elsie Ripley Clapp, The Arthurdale Schools, 1934; Carmelita Chase Hinton, The Putney School, 1935; Flora J. Cooke, The Francis W. Parker School, 1901 (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002), and Helena Maud Brown Cobb, The Helena B. Cobb Institute, 1909 (Georgia Women of Achievement, 2013). These women, mostly, lived in northern territories with the exception of Charlotte Brown, Marietta Johnson, and Helena Cobb who lived in the Deep South states of North Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia respectively.

## **Education of Blacks in the Deep South**

American culture endured major changes that profoundly affected black society and most significant was the oppressive bondage and labor system of slavery. “In the south, slavery spawned a distinctive regional ruling class and powerfully shaped the economy, race relations, politics, religion, and the law” (Foner, 1988, p. 2). Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery in select regions across the US (The Emancipation Proclamation, 2013):

And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforth shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons. (p. 8)

Though black people were liberated from slavery in some US territories, its austere legacy lived on, as evident in the adoption of Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws of the south that exacted devastating consequences upon millions of black men and women. After the American Civil War, according to Webster and Quinton (2010, p. 370), southern state governments examined the roles that newly freed slaves would play in society, which bore a system of Black Codes. Mississippi and South Carolina are thought to be the first states to implement Black Codes described as, “a body of laws, statutes, and rules enacted by southern states immediately after the Civil War to regain control over the freed slaves, maintain white supremacy, and ensure the continued supply of cheap labor” (West’s Encyclopedia of American Law, 2005). They were but a government sanctioned form of slavery by another name and soon after Mississippi and South Carolina passed such laws, the states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Florida, Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina followed (Daily, Gilmore, & Simon 2000; Foner, 1988; West’s

Encyclopedia of American Law, 2005). Circa 1868, Congressional intercession led to the legal elimination of Black Codes, secondary to the adoption of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which “prohibited racial discrimination in the construction and exercise of the law and granted full political rights to African American men” (Daily, Gilmore, & Simon 2000, p. 19).

Jim Crow Laws took the place of Black Codes in the south where white dominance and supremacy reigned. The irony of Jim Crow is that those laws were constructed to buttress racial discrimination as it, too, was a system of government sanctioned racial oppression and segregation. According to Webster and Quinton (2010), “Jim Crow provisions were included in state constitutions and state legal codes, codified racial segregation, and otherwise defined virtually all social, economic, and political relationships between black and white citizens” (p. 370). The Jim Crow south (1870-1960) was a hostile environment for blacks given the power of supremacist ideas and methods of violence, economic oppression, electoral fraud, and construction of the social structure used to control and disenfranchise black citizens (Daily, Gilmore, & Simon 2000, p. 4).

According to Daily, Gilmore, and Simon (2000), supremacy crossed multiple boundaries including class, gender, and race, which left black women particularly vulnerable because the laws passed to protect the rights of blacks, to whatever cursory degree, were granted, specifically, to black men. The role of the black woman was absent from the discourse, though, her role in the black family was and is significant. Women, of any race, were disregarded and powerless. It was not until 1920, after much activism and lobbying, that women were recognized in the political sphere and won the right to vote with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment (National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.). Despite this constitutional mandate, black

female voters faced opposition to their participation at the polls and were subjected to poll tests, poll taxes, and threats of bodily harm (Daily, Gilmore, & Simon 2000; Woodson, 1993). “Black women have had to divide their loyalties between the causes of women and that of their race, the latter often taking precedence,” contends Robnett (1997, p. 36). When talking about the black struggle from slavery to Emancipation to Black Codes to Jim Crow to Civil Rights, gender issues cannot be divorced from issues of racism and racial oppression (Robnett, 1997).

The dissolute sociopolitical climate of the south spun racism, segregation, discrimination, and unimaginable violence that spilled over and defined the landscape of the Machiavellian education system when “provisions for the education of southern black citizens were nearly nonexistent” (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002, p. 7). As noted by Scott (1980), “education is a form of social policy- a means by which the society distributes power and privilege” (p.12). During the nineteenth (1800s) and early twentieth (1900s) centuries, blacks were the exception to that privilege and had to overcome a system that made it illegal for blacks to be educated. This oppressive stance against a people, overtly during slavery and covertly thereafter, led black communities to create educational opportunities for themselves. Of course, the maladroit system effectively abridged their access to quality and equal education (Scott, 1980).

Even during slavery blacks understood the value of education, though, legally denied to them. Foner and Mahoney (2003) submit that following the eradication of slavery, newly freed blacks attended schools established after the Civil War in great numbers. “Although black southerners were formally free during the time when American popular education was transformed into a highly formal and critical social institution, their schooling took a different path” (Anderson, 1988, p. 2).

A group of black and white educators from the north, known as Gideon's Band, traveled south to the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina in 1862 to educate blacks and to ease their transition from slavery to freedmen and Reconstruction ushered public schooling to the South. Woodson (1993) articulates that the earnest working missionaries who traveled south to educate the Negroes “had more enthusiasm than knowledge. They did not understand the task before them. This undertaking, too, was more of an effort toward social uplift than actual education. Their aim was to transform the Negroes, not to develop them” (p. 17). It was not until several years later, after 1868, that state governments began to provide funding for black education. Up until that time, it was through the efforts of black people that land was purchased, buildings were erected and money was raised money to hire teachers (Foner & Mahoney, 2003).

According to Sadovnik and Semel (2002), for example, in 1902 when Charlotte Brown Hawkins established her school for African Americans in the rural province of Sedalia, North Carolina, black schools were open for but a few months in a year and could accommodate students only through elementary school. The literacy rate of blacks versus whites in that region was 12% to 48%. Growing up in the poverty stricken south, after the Civil War and Reconstruction years, women had few choices and little access to money to pay for formal education but understood that without it their futures would be dependent upon wages from farm labor. This was especially true for black women, although domestic work was the other source of income for uneducated black women (Sadovnik & Semel, 2002).

It was not until 1954 that the law provided for equal educational opportunities for all US citizens (*Brown v. Board of Education, 1954*). In *Brown*, the High Court ruled that state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students were unconstitutional. That decision overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)* decision that declared no violation of the 14<sup>th</sup>

Amendment if states established separate public school facilities for black and white students so long as they were equal. Separate but equal standards “created and perpetuated gross inequalities in African American access to education, especially in the Jim Crow South” (Marable, 2006, p. 184). The ruling in *Brown* set the legal framework for public school integration; although, it failed to sprout wings as rapidly throughout the south as it did in other parts of the country as required by law.

Essential reading, as a prelude to fully comprehending the nation’s progression to public school integration, is *Roberts v. Boston (1849)*. Though it was a state rather than Supreme Court decision, it influenced the arguments before the Supreme Court that, at different times, both upheld and struck down lawful public school segregation. According to Ruffin Society (n.d.), in 1848, the case of *Roberts v. Boston* was filed on behalf of a five-year-old black girl attending a neglected all-black school but whose father wanted her to attend an all-white school closer to their home. In addition to the convenience of the all-white school, the father argued that it would provide a better education for his daughter, but based on race, she was denied enrollment.

It is important to acknowledge that, even though prejudice and discrimination were deeply engrained in the fabric of southern culture, it was not confined to that region. Prior to the 1848 case filing, in Boston, MA, the public school system had been segregated since the late 1700s in response to a call from the black community with claims that black students were maltreated in the integrated schools (Brown Foundation, n.d.). After an initial denial, the city acquiesced and “special” schools for black students were established. Over time, however, the black community found that the “special” schools were underfunded and neglected so, in 1846, they petitioned to end segregated schools. The General School Committee initially denied the petition and it was appealed to the Massachusetts Supreme Court. The Massachusetts Supreme

Court ultimately upheld the Committee's decision, making it a lawful act to separate children in public schools based on race so long as all children were provided an equal education. This case is significant because it established the separate but equal doctrine used to justify and uphold public school segregation, which was cited as the basis and rationale for *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) (Ruffin Society, n.d.).

Once afforded formal education, black female teachers began to emerge; even though, they worked under the most oppressive conditions. According to Scott (1980), black women were predominately relegated to work in the poor, segregated, and rural territories and paid a fraction of the salaries earned by their white counterparts. Though not black females, Blount's (1998) research shows that from 1910-1990, western states started to hire more females as superintendents than any other region although, from 1910-1970, all four regions presented generally similar patterns. While there was fluctuation over the span of time, 1970 marked the lowest levels recorded. "In each of these years, the order of the regions is the same: western states with the highest percentage of women superintendents followed by the mid-western states, southern states, and finally northern states" (p. 184). Reportedly, however, that trend changed and the Midwest started to hire fewer female superintendents followed by the south then the north and west (Blount, 1998, p. 184). This shift left the southern region of the country in the same position on the continuum from 1910-1990 with the second lowest percentage of females hired into the superintendency.

### **From Whence We Came**

Entangled is the history of female teachers and female administrators. According to Blount (1998), though teaching had traditionally been the work of men, the demand for more teachers throughout the states and territories in the 1800s caused the number of female teachers

to swell. Even still, men dominated in the classroom until it became necessary for teachers to move to where the work was in demand. This instigated a trend shift as men started to opt out of the classroom because meager teacher pay was not commensurate with the trouble and costs associated with relocation. Blount (1998) further cites tighter controls limiting mens' independence and authority "therefore part of their masculine prerogative" (p. 7) as another reason for the shift.

During the 1800s, hiring authorities were reluctant to hire women because women were considered weak, however society was beginning to shift in its relationship with women. Women began mobilizing and speaking up about equality and the right to participate in a democratic society. The mid-1800s witnessed the formation of women's organizations that eventually became the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1890 (Noraian, 2009). The movement sprouted wings and women began to win victories because of their efforts. Their efforts ultimately secured women the rights to vote and run for public office with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1920.

It was the work of Catherine Beecher, among others, that made the case that women belong in the workforce and that teaching "is womans' natural profession... It is ordained by infinite wisdom, that, as in the family, so in the social state, the interests of young children and of women are one and the same" (Sewall, 1884 as cited in Blount, 1998). Along with her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Horace Mann, and others, the movement to encourage the hiring of women as teachers flourished. The campaign rendered a large number of school districts acquiescing, mostly in direct correlation to growing demands. According to Blount (1998), Mann referred to the hiring of women as an "experiment" that proved successful (p. 20). As the

presence of women in classrooms continued to grow and educational practices began to look and feel more feminine, men took flight from the profession at an even swifter pace.

Blount (1998) notes that the mid-1800s brought about yet another trend in education employment that seemed to be in direct relation to the proliferation of women in the classroom. She wrote, “Local and state officials created the domain of school administration, a realm reserved from the beginning for men” (p. 26). Nonetheless, women had begun to work as principals and held other leadership roles, including superintendent. According to the AASA study (2010), there were two reasons for why the 1800s experienced an increase in the number of female superintendents. One, there were a substantial number of small rural school districts making it easy for women to transition into the executive role. The second was the Suffrage movement, which facilitated women’s access to public administrative roles. Blount (1998), however, sheds light on the assumption about the number of school districts during that time. She reveals that women predominately held the elected county or intermediate superintendent positions opposed to the more prominent, appointed local school superintendent position. Indeed, the county position yielded less compensation, prestige, and influence over school related matters.

The first female superintendent of schools was Sarah Raymond Fitzwilliam of Chicago, Illinois. Although she was seated in 1874, it was not until the turn of the century from 1900-1930 that hundreds of women started to secure jobs as school superintendents. Fitzwilliam was the executive leader of the Bloomington School system from 1874-1892 and according to Noraian (2009); her legacy represents “monumental first steps toward equality and opportunity for all” (p. 11).

## **Georgia on My Mind**

In much the same way that one cannot tell the story of women in education without first recognizing that of men, the story of the black female superintendency in the state of Georgia cannot be told without first recognizing that of the white female superintendency. An extensive review of the literature did not reveal the first female superintendent in Georgia but did identify Julia L. Coleman as one of the first females to serve as a superintendent in 1928. Rather than a system of schools, however, she governed over a single high school in Sumter County, home of President Jimmy Carter. Merle Purcell was the first female school superintendent in Georgia to govern over a system of schools. Her husband, Claude Purcell preceded her as superintendent of Habersham County Schools 1933-1942 and she served for a short time 1943-1944 (Church, 1988).

Helen Ira Jarrell was elected superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools in 1944, making her the first female in Georgia to preside over a major school system. At that time, Atlanta was the only major school system in the state; nevertheless, this accomplishment distinguished her as one of the first females in the nation to manage a major school system (Sicherman, Green, Kantrov, & Walker, 1980). Prior to the superintendency, Jarrell had established herself as a hard worker with a proven record of accomplishment. The trajectory of her career commenced in Atlanta Public Schools in 1916 as teacher of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades after completing a two-year teacher preparation program at the Atlanta Normal School. She enrolled at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta and while in college, in 1929, got involved with the Atlanta Public Schools Teacher's Association (APSTA) and became the recording secretary. Likewise, while in college, in 1930, she was promoted to senior teacher. She earned her degree in 1931 and became principal in 1934.

Sicherman et al. (1980), notes that Jarrell's participation in the teacher's union advanced from recording secretary to member of the executive board, to three terms as first vice president, to delegate to the Atlanta Federation of Trades. In 1936, she was elected president of the 1,000-member organization, lauded the largest union across the nation at that time. Jarrell, a dynamic political figure, was well connected and faced little trouble on her path to the school superintendency. However, her tenure as superintendent was fraught with controversy, perhaps, starting with the decision to hire men as elementary schools principals. In 1944, she and her board members were condemned for ignoring "petitions from black citizens' groups to secure equal facilities for black children" (Sicherman et al., 1980, p. 376). In 1954, she was accused of conspiring with board members to delay implementation measures to integrate Atlanta Public Schools fully after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that made separate but equal education laws unconstitutional (Sicherman et al., 1980). Jarrell retired from her post in 1960, before Atlanta Public Schools complied with the law and fully integrated the school system. While in retirement, she took a position with the Georgia State Department of Education as Director of Curriculum Development until 1967 and died of breast cancer in 1973.

It would be 41 years after Purcell's superintendency before Georgia would claim the first black female superintendent. A native of Baldwin County, GA, Beauty Poole Baldwin was appointed superintendent of the Buford City Schools in Gwinnett County in 1984. She is a graduate of Savannah State University where she earned the Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics. Her other credentials include the Master's Degree in Vocational Education, Administration, and Supervision from The University of Georgia (UGA) and the Specialist Degree in Administration and Supervision from UGA (Hopewell Christian Academy, n.d.).

Baldwin spent her entire career in Georgia as an educator. Her rise through the ranks started with teaching mathematics for 10 years in Schley, Muscogee, and Gwinnett Counties. She went on first to teach vocational instruction for four years, then to serve as high school assistant principal for two years in Gwinnett County. After that, she served as middle school principal for four years in Gwinnett County, finally serving as superintendent of schools for nearly 10 years for Buford City Schools (Hopewell Christian Academy, n.d.). Though retired from public school education since June 1994, Baldwin continues to serve the needs of students, as administrator of a private Christian school in Norcross, Georgia, that she established in 1997. She remains very active in her community and is affiliated with at least 14 local and state boards and organizations, including the Human Relations Advisory Council for Gwinnett Public Schools. Throughout her career, she has been awarded many awards including the Trail Blazer in Education Award and the Congressional Black Caucus Education Brain Trust Award.

Neither the Georgia Department of Education (DOE), the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GaPSC), nor the Georgia School Superintendents Association (GSSA) maintains data enumerating the year school superintendents take office. Neither do they maintain data regarding sex and race. Shakeshaft (1999) acknowledges “national, state, and organization data rarely provide break-downs for sex and race together” (p. 99). Given this limitation, and as best as research has been able to provide, the second black female superintendent in Georgia was not hired for a staggering additional 14 years.

Currently, in Georgia, and according to the GSSA, women hold 49 of the 180 top interim and permanent executive level positions in public schools at a rate of 27%. If interim appointments are not factored in, that rate decreases to 26%. Black women hold 6% of the total

superintendencies in the state. Further disaggregation of the data show that black women occupy 11 of 49 superintendent positions held only by women at a rate of 22% (GSSA, 2013).

### **Georgia Certification**

Although, relevant to this study, neither the GaPSC nor the DOE gather data related to the race or gender of certificate holders. Until recently, the GaPSC did not issue a dedicated certificate for just superintendents, which meant that the certification requirement for an aspiring superintendent was the same as it was for all leadership positions. Those requirements were to hold a Master's Degree or higher in Administration and Supervision and to obtain the Leadership Certification (L5) from the GaPSC.

Under the new leadership program, which the GaPSC began to overhaul in 2008, the local school system is required to collaborate with colleges and universities in their leadership preparation programs. The purpose of this new process is to create a program design that meets the needs of both the higher education institution and the local school system and it replaces the old Leadership (L) certificate with a new Performance-Based (PL) certificate. The PL Certificate is issued at the building or system level where the building level certificated programs emphasizes instructional leadership skills with a focus on student achievement and the System level certificated programs emphasizes the management of resources to facilitate student learning (Hartley, n.d.). The three levels of leadership certification are level 5 (Masters), level 6 (Specialist), and level 7 (Doctorate). Level 5 certification requires completion of a Master's degree (in any field) from an accredited institution and the passing of the Georgia Assessment for the Certification of Educators (GACE) Leadership Assessment. This exam replaces the state-approved exam that accompanied the old L5 Certificate. Once the GACE is passed, the candidate is considered a Pre-Service Leadership Candidate and is eligible to apply for a five-

year Non-Renewable Leadership (NL-5) certificate. This makes the individual eligible to work in a leadership position (Hartley, n.d.).

Eligibility for application to and admission into a PL6 or PL7 leadership program requires that PSC-approved colleges and universities must confer with local school systems. If a candidate is employed in a leadership position prior to the completion of the certification, they are granted a NPL-5 certificate and will, subsequently, have five years to complete a PSC-approved, performance based PL-6 or PL-7 program with a building or system level emphasis of study, depending on the candidate's specific job function. Superintendents must hold both, the building and the system certificates. Those who earned the L Certifications prior to September 30, 2009, are grandfathered into this new leadership program and can be hired in any leadership position (Hartley, n.d.). According to the GaPSC (2013), superintendents may also work under permit status, which provides that:

Permitted personnel are defined as those persons who may not qualify for professional certification, including retired teachers, but who function in the same manner as certified personnel. These individuals qualify for their positions based on their experience instead of formal education. They may be retired educators; military or government personnel; business or professional persons (banker, lawyer, doctor, etc.); foreign language native speakers used to teach the less-commonly taught languages such as Chinese, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Russian, etc.; college teachers, performing artists; or others.

Permits are issued in the teaching fields and the field of superintendent. (para. 1)

Since there is no explicit licensing requirement to be superintendent and the DOE and GaPSC do not maintain data regarding race and gender of certificate holders, it is impossible to

make assumptions about the number of black females who may be aspiring to the superintendency.

### **The Invisible Ceiling**

For the purpose of this study, invisible ceiling and glass ceiling may be used interchangeably. According to Dana and Bourisaw (2006), glass ceiling is a metaphor for the levels of leadership beyond which women have not been admitted (p. 8). It represents the barriers that obstruct the career path to promotion and advancement within an organization. Dana and Bourisaw (2006) aptly remarked, “gender is the inherent and ever-present barrier” (p. 14). The glass ceiling phenomenon so permeates society with social injustice and inequality for women and minorities that the US Department of Labor intervened to explore methods to diminish such discrimination. A measure of the 1991 Civil Rights Acts provided for a Federal Glass Ceiling Commission charged with conducting a study of the intangible constructs that function as barriers to the career advancement of women and minorities. As cited in Dana and Bourisaw (2006), the commission sought to formulate a list of recommendations aimed at (a) “identifying artificial barriers blocking the advancement of minorities and women and (b) increasing the opportunities and development experiences of women and minorities to foster advancement of women and minorities to management and decision making positions in business” (p. 6). According to Dana and Bourisaw (2006), select findings were as following:

- Prejudice against minorities and white women is the single greatest barrier to their advancement into the executive ranks.
- Glass ceilings exclude able people of diverse backgrounds that businesses need to compete successfully from top leadership of corporations.

- Three levels of barriers do exist: societal barriers, which may be outside the direct control of business, internal structural barriers, and governmental barriers. (p. 6-7)

Surmising that prejudice against minorities, in general and white women, in particular is the single greatest barrier to advancing to the executive ranks of leadership seems an inadequate conclusion that excludes black women, who exists in a double minority category. A deficit in the construction of gender in the Glass Ceiling Study is the lack of a line of demarcation between black and white women. This holds true for much of the literature that advances the plight of women; it can be assumed that the women of concern are white women as demonstrated by Blount (1998) who writes, “women have not enjoyed easy access to the local district superintendency” (p. 183). Dana and Bourisaw (2006) bring attention to the fact that despite the efforts of sympathetic groups, governmental acts, affirmative action, and legislative mandates to eradicate racial and gender discrimination in the workplace, black women still encounter unequal barriers that impede their ascension to the executive level of school leadership.

Edmonson-Bell, Nkomo, and Hammond (1994) authored a critique of the Glass Ceiling Report that examined the findings from the study except they did so by taking an “intergroup and intragroup approach to analyze the barriers” (p. 1). Their work reflected the effects of workplace discrimination on both, racial and gendered groups, i.e. black men, white men, black women, and white women. Despite efforts to eliminate racial discrimination in the workplace, blacks struggle against a myriad of barriers that can be categorized at three major levels that Edmondson- Bell et al. (1994) labels as: (a) individual level barriers, (b) group level barriers, and (c) organizational level barriers.

### **Individual Level Barriers**

- Subtle racism and prejudice- This barrier is touted to be the “most insidious and tenacious of the barriers and carry the strongest implications for both the group and organizational barriers” (Edmonson- Bell et al., 1994, p. 28). The reference is not directed at overt, in your face racism, but instead, refers to deeply held negative racist views and veiled acts that have lasting and damaging effects on the victims.
- Bicultural stress and managing duality - This barrier refers to how black managers negotiate the dual cultures they occupy in the workplace. Being black but immersed in white corporate culture where cultural differences are not tolerated creates a duality that requires an acquired skill set, of which, black managers must always be cognizant. This is not a stressor for the white counterparts because corporate America was designed with them in mind.
- Tokenism and presumed incompetence- This barrier sets the stage for the presumption of incompetence. It denotes a belief that the black manager was given a job amid a predominantly white workforce based on criteria other than his or her ability and preparedness to perform the duties of the job. The black manager is usually the only one or maybe one of a few in the workplace with whom he or she can identify culturally. It is commonly an isolated position.

## **Group Level Barriers**

- Perceptions of cultural differences and ethnocentrism- This barrier is rooted in the perceptions of the dominant cultural group of an organization regarding acceptable behavior. Ethnocentrism, according to Edmonson-Bell et al. (1994), is:

A form of intergroup bias is defined as the tendency to view one's own group (in-group) as the center of the universe for interpreting other social groups (out-groups). The latter are judged less positively from the perspective of one's own group in terms of beliefs, behaviors, and values. (p. 40)

The corporate image is shaped such that strong emotion, animated nonverbal gestures, aggressiveness, etc. are considered inappropriate conduct in the workplace. Here, when black managers are labeled too aggressive, as compared to white managers, their fit with the corporate image is questioned and they risk termination. This is a barrier because blacks, black men in particular, are viewed as perilous. With whites in the position of authority in corporate America, it becomes easy to make the determination that the black manager does not belong.

- Minority group density- This barrier “refers to the relative percentage of minorities in a work group” (Edmonson-Bell et al., 1994, p. 42). Regarding the treatment of blacks in work groups or organizations, Edmondson- Bell et al. (1994) notes the assumption that as the number of blacks in an organization increases, the rate of discrimination and hostility will decrease because of the belief that negative behavior visited upon one, or a few, by a majority group would cease if the victim had a larger group with whom to identify and develop a system of support (p. 42). Accordingly, a way to minimize discrimination and

hostility in the workplace is to expand the numbers or density of blacks in the organization.

### **Organizational Level Barriers**

- Access to mentoring- This denotes racial dynamics that hinder black managers' access to quality mentoring. This barrier exists because in organizations where racism persists and detrimental covert behavior undermines the success of black managers, it is difficult to find a mentor to help develop their skills to advance to the next level of management. This may be secondary to the values held by the potential mentors that mirror the culture of the organization. Conversely, it may be that the potential mentor does not hold the values of the organization but chooses not to expose his or her dissimilar value system by openly supporting and fostering the professional development of the black manager.
- Performance evaluation and promotion processes- Generally, organizations conduct performance evaluations to support decisions for promotion and salary increases. The barrier in this sphere rests in the subjectivity of the evaluator as a biased evaluator can foil the advancement of the black manager. The question becomes, can the competent black manager, in a hostile work environment, realize career advancement when racial bias may influence the performance evaluator? Gardiner, Enomoto, and Grogan (2000) conducted research in the state of Washington seeking to identify reasons for the miniscule representation of African-American and Hispanic women leaders in their public school system. Study participants indicated that the "double jeopardy" of being both "of color" and female were impediments to their upward career mobility (Gardiner, Enomoto, &Grogan, 2000, p. 112). The authors also cited assertions that misperceptions persisted among authority figures about their competence and authority noting that

despite the level of competence of white males, the questions regarding authority and capability that hindered the women of color were not asked of and did not stifle the upward career mobility of white men (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000, p. 112).

- Functional segregation into staff-type jobs- This barrier occurs when the black manager is hired in a position that has no potential of advancing to top-level management. Collins (1989) noted that primarily in response to government requirements and black community outcry for equal opportunity, black professionals emerged in jobs that had traditionally been unavailable to them in corporate America during the 1960s and 1970s. According to Collins (1989), they occupied racialized (p. 326) and politically constructed niche jobs (p. 328) that kept them employed in less powerful corporate positions with no real chance of career advancement.
- Downsizing policies- Corporate downsizing is the final organizational barrier, which refers to the restructuring of a company as a cost or profit savings mechanism, which results in layoffs. According to Edmonson-Bell et al. (1994), downsizing disproportionately affects blacks and offers two reasons for the phenomenon: First, because African-Americans are often the last hired, they are the first laid off during corporate downsizing. Second, if they are selected as a survivor, they have mixed feelings about the motives of management--whether they were kept because they were good or simply because they were African-American. (P. 49)

Northouse (2004) examined the barriers women face while working to advance their careers. Even though his research is broad and includes all women, the literature reveals that the barriers that exist for women, as a group, are particularly challenging for black women, as a subgroup. He cited three categories under which barriers to leadership exist for women: (a)

organizational, (b) interpersonal, and (c) personal. Northouse (2004) explicitly describes the barriers under each category as following:

Organizational barriers:

- 1) Higher standards of performance and effort for women
- 2) Inhospitable corporate culture
- 3) Preference for homophily (gender similarity) as a basis for promotion decisions
- 4) Ignorance and inaction by male CEOs and “silent majority” male peers
- 5) Imbalance of inadequate recognition and support with excessive difficulties
- 6) Lack of definitive developmental opportunities

Interpersonal barriers:

- 1) Male prejudice, stereotyping, preconception
- 2) Lack of emotional and interpersonal support
- 3) Exclusion for informal networks
- 4) Lack of white male mentors

Personal Barriers:

- 1) Lack of political savvy
- 2) Work-home conflict (p. 276)

Edmonson-Bell et al. (1994) aptly cited a Wall Street Journal study that was based on Equal Employment Opportunity statistics that showed where in 1990-1991, black Americans suffered greater net job losses than any other group, losing 59, 479 jobs. In contrast, other groups showed gains with Hispanics at 60,040; Asians, 55,104; and Whites, 71,144 (p. 49-50).

Although the critique of the Glass Ceiling study and Northouse’s research speak to issues in corporate America, the results are transferable to education. The invisible ceiling is a most

appropriate metaphor to describe women's accessibility, and particularly black women's accessibility, to the superintendency across the nation and specifically in the state of Georgia.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Portney and Watkins (2009), theory comes from the need to organize and give meaning to complex facts and observations and its purpose is to explain things.

Components of theory include concepts, variables, and constructs and research is about developing theories or explanations of things and then testing these explanations for how and why a certain treatment works given our observations and what we know from previous investigations. Consequently, we are not starting from scratch each time we look to give meaning to complex facts and observations within the context of research.

Howard-Hamilton (2003) argues that it is challenging to employ theoretical constructs suitable to explain and foster understanding of the life experiences of black women. She contends that, from a historical and ideological point of view, traditional theories fall short of explaining the issues faced by black women. Its selection should be "based on their cultural, personal, and social contexts, which clearly differ significantly from those of men and women who have not experienced racial and gender oppression" (Howard- Hamilton, 2003, p. 20).

Howard- Hamilton (2003) identifies black feminist thought as a promising construct for "understanding the intersecting identities of African American women and explaining ways in which their needs can be addressed effectively" (p. 21).

Schein (1971) theorizes that organizations maintain boundaries and a filtering system for selecting the most desirable candidates for promotion in the workplace. Kim and Brunner (2009) augment his theory to include the glass ceiling where, at the top levels of leadership, minority groups are separated "from the dominant groups by ethnicity or gender, and works as a screening

process in vertical and radial organizational career mobility” (p. 83). Thus, it is anticipated that at the intersection of Schein’s filtering boundaries within the model of organizational career mobility and black feminist thought is an explanation of the phenomenon of the black female superintendency in Georgia. Together, they provide the theoretical perspective for this study as Gall, Gall, and Borg (2008) defines theory as an explanation of observed phenomena organized into coherent interconnected terms.

### **Schein’s Model of Organizational Career Mobility**

The process of organizational career mobility occurs at any point when there is movement or a shift in employment over the span of a career. These may include promotion, lateral movement, retirement, or any other circumstance of movement in employment. Many times salary increases and rewards such as increased power and authority are a consequence of career mobility, noting that all movement, including horizontal movement, is thought to be included in the notion of career mobility (Schein, 1971). Schein’s model of organizational career mobility (OCM) is an analysis of career movement within an organization and comprises three parts: (a) three dimensions, (b) filtering boundaries, and (c) OCM model for conceptual analysis (Kim & Brunner, 2009). For the purpose of this study, filtering boundaries will be used to explain the phenomenon of how black women move through the ranks to executive school leadership.

### **Filtering Boundaries**

Schein (1971) identifies and describes the three filtering boundaries as those “which characterize the internal structure of the organization” (p. 404). More specifically, they characterize career mobility (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Kim and Brunner (2009), describe filters as “a type of a screening process aimed at monitoring the quality and appropriateness of the

individual for a vacant position and ensuring the rationality and fairness of a career mobility procedure” (p. 81). Schein’s filtering boundaries include (a) hierarchal boundaries, (b) inclusion boundaries, and (c) functional or departmental boundaries.

Accordingly, hierarchal boundaries “separate hierarchal levels from one another” (Schein, 1971, p. 404) and they “filter individuals in terms of attributes such as seniority, merit, personal characteristics, types of attitudes held, who is sponsoring them, and so on” (Schein, 1971, p. 406). Schein contends that inclusion boundaries are the most difficult to explain because they are rooted in subjectivity related to the degree, to which, an individual is trusted with organizational secrets and because “the criteria may change as one gets closer to the inner core of the organization” (Schein, 1971, p. 406; Kim & Brunner, 2009, p. 82). Accordingly, inclusion boundaries filter and separate by the degree of centrality or proximity to the inner circle of the organization where a factor such as competence might play a significant role in getting to the inner circle but other factors, such as “personality, seniority, and willingness to play a certain kind of political game may be critical in becoming a member of the inner circle” (p. 406). Finally, the functional or departmental filtering boundary denotes the separation of “departments, divisions, or different functional groupings from one another” (Schein, 1971, p. 405). Hence, functional or departmental boundaries filter proficiency and capability of the individual.

#### *How Boundaries Filter*

“Boundaries can vary in (a) number, (b) degree of permeability, and (c) type of filtering properties which they possess” (Schein, 1971, p. 406). For example, there are five hierarchal boundaries in a school system between a teacher, assistant principal, principal, director, assistant superintendent and a superintendent. Ortiz (1982) describes the typical pathway to the

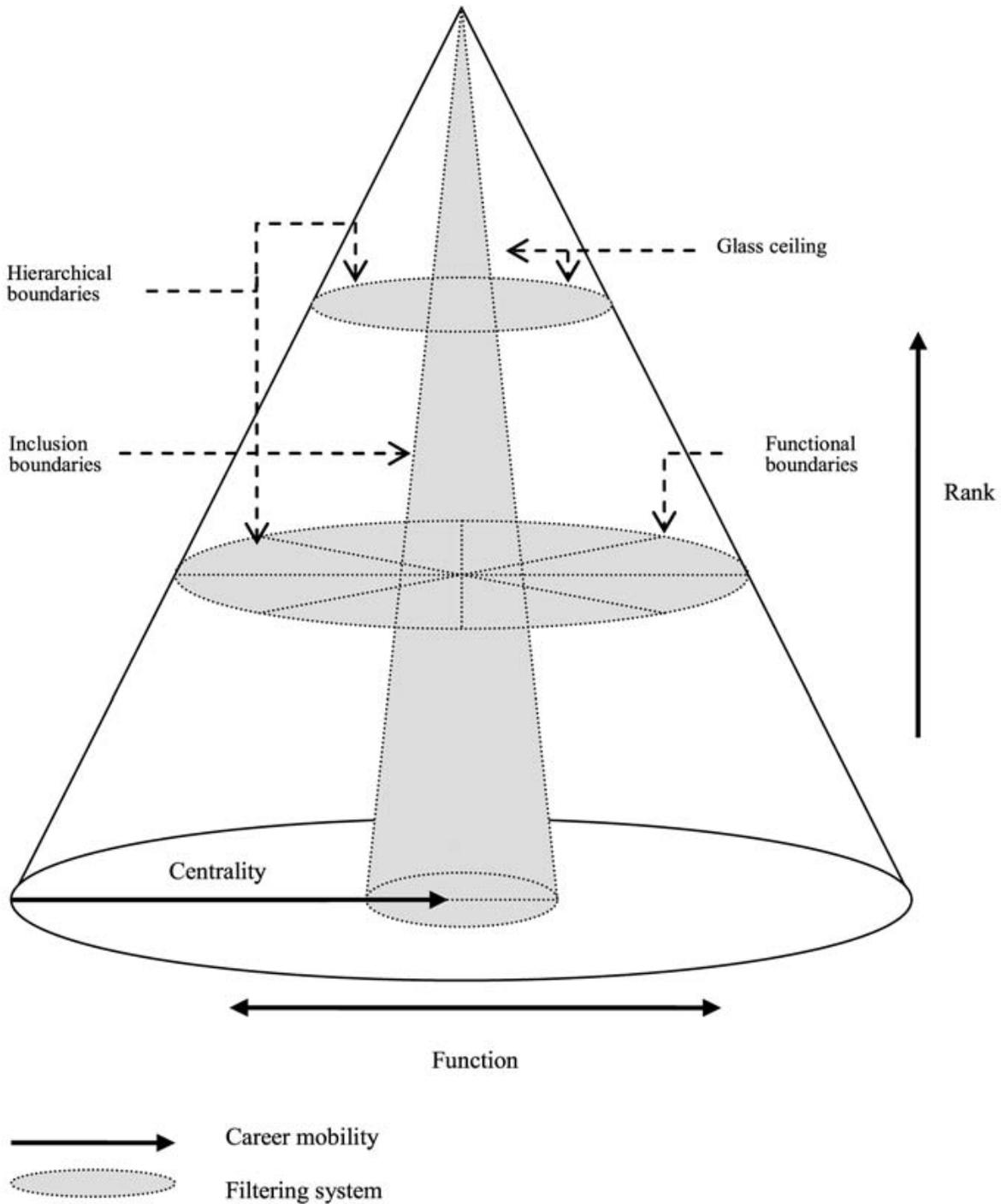
superintendency as moving from classroom teacher to assistant principal to principal to central office administrator to superintendent. Inclusion boundaries might include tenure, non-tenure, vested, and non-vested while functional boundaries will be as numerous and varied as there are departments and schools within a school system. The filters for advancing within the organization will also vary depending on the type of advancement whether it is a promotion or salary increase, etc.

Kim and Brunner (2009) enhances Schein's model to explicitly include glass ceiling boundaries (Figure 1.) that speak to the analysis of gender differences in career mobility, suggesting that the literature supports that the experiences of women's progression to executive leadership positions is a phenomenon worthy of analysis. The authors reason, "The glass ceiling is considered an obvious inhibition that prevents minority groups and women from moving up to administrative position in various organizations" (p. 83; see also Alston, 1999; Bjork, 2000; Brunner, 2000a, 2000b; Glass, 2000; Kowalski, 1999, 2003) and the boundaries here are both hierarchal and inclusion based on Schein's descriptions. Subsequently, black females aspiring to the superintendency may be especially vulnerable to the screening (or filtering) process aimed at monitoring the quality and appropriateness of the individual for a vacant position and ensuring the rationality and fairness of a career mobility procedure. In other words, black women would likely stand a greater chance of promotion to the executive ranks of education if fair processes and practices for promotion were established and observed.

In their study, Kim and Brunner (2009) found evidence that countless women face discrimination during the processes of selection and hiring and that wherever the glass ceiling occurs during career development; it creates varying limitations for women (p. 103). Further, they report that, "since a glass ceiling filters out individuals by using criteria of inherent personal

characteristics and dominant cultural boundaries, women and people of color stand to suffer discriminating treatment in career mobility” (p. 103) and therein lays an explanation for the underrepresentation of black women at the executive level of public school administration.

Figure 1. Three-Dimensional Model of an Organization enhanced by Kim and Brunner, 2009



**Note:** This figure is modified from Schein’s (1971, p. 404) model of “A Three-Dimensional Model of an Organization” with an additional filtering boundary, glass ceiling (Alston, 1999; Bjork, 2000; Brunner, 2000a and b; Glass, 2000; Kowalski, 1999 and 2003)

## **Black Feminist Thought**

In response to hooks' (1989) urging that "black women need to construct a model of feminist theorizing and scholarship that is inclusive, that widens our options, that enhances our understanding of black experiences and gender" (p. 182), Collins introduced black feminist thought. Much of this section is reflective of her theoretical work. Black feminist thought illuminates and places at the center of analysis the ideas and experiences of black women. Collins (2000) notes that it is derived from multiple voices that "highlights the diversity, richness, and power of black women's ideas as part of a long-standing African-American women's intellectual community" (p. viii). She purposefully chose to bypass traditional feminist tenets in its development because feminist theory is grounded in the experiences and ideas of white women (Collins, 2000). The lived experiences of black females who subsist despite what can be described as a double edged sword of oppression are wholly different from those of the dominant group and cannot be observed and analyzed in a side-by-side comparison.

Conceivably, the slow progression of black women to the school superintendency can be viewed through the black feminist thought lens. Oppression, as defined by Collins (2000), is "any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society" (p. 6). She advances the notion that:

Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups. (p. vii)

Systemic oppression has created a subordinate space for black females and worked to subdue the ideas and worldviews of black female intellectuals while, simultaneously, protecting the ideas and viewpoints of the dominant group. By discrediting black females as intellectuals, they are generally excluded from positions of authority and leadership. By placing black women's experiences at the forefront of Collins' analysis, it gives other groups (i.e. white women, black men) the opportunity to ruminate on the parallels and dissimilarities between groups.

Black feminist thought is a collection of ideas that speaks to social, economic, and political standpoints of black women who have been marginalized and excluded from the mainstream discourse dominated by white male ideas and worldviews. In her text, Collins (2000) establishes the importance of black feminist thought through six distinguishing features. Those features include how, as a collective, U.S. black females must participate in a dialectical relationship linking black women's oppression and activism. A dialectical relationship implies that there are at least two opposing groups on issues of social justice, in this case. To that end, as oppression persists, its practices and ideas must be resisted. Hence, the necessity of black feminist thought. Collins (2000) and Crenshaw (1991) describes intersectionality as the focal point where systems of oppression come together and for black females, the intersecting oppressions are race and gender. This position places black women in a particularly inimitable position to be able to convey the lived experiences of black women to foster better understanding of the black female's social position in society (Collins, 2000).

The second feature brings attention to the tension linking experiences and ideas. Collins (2000) point out that while black females have similar challenges and life experiences, they do not all do share all of the same experiences. It would be iniquitous if, to the exclusion of all others, only one black female's lived experiences served as the center of analysis in black

feminist thought. From this awareness comes standpoint theory, which is indicative of group knowledge and as Collins (2000) writes, “it is important to stress that no homogeneous Black *woman’s* standpoint exists” (p. 28). She goes further to say that “instead, it may be more accurate to say that a Black *women’s* collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges” (Collins, 2000, p. 28).

The third feature is the connection between the varying experiences of U.S. black women as a diverse group and the knowledge or standpoint they retain as a result of those differing experiences. The focus here is the recognition that social issues are multi-faceted and so dialogue about the differences in group standpoint and diversity of experiences is required in order to understand both the homogeneity and heterogeneity of experiences. “U.S. Black women’s collective historical experiences with oppression may stimulate a self-defined Black women’s standpoint that in turn can foster Black women’s activism” (Collins, 2000, p. 30). An example of this from Collins’ (2000) work speaks of a southern woman, who during the civil rights era took a job at a mill. She was responsible for cleaning the restrooms but the very restroom that she was responsible for cleaning, she was prohibited from using for her personal purposes. She, as did all blacks, had to trek one mile to the cellar for use of the restroom. One day, she questioned her boss and asked why, if she could enter the restroom to clean it, could she not also use it for her own purposes? In response to what she believed was an unsatisfactory answer, she decided to stop walking the mile to the cellar and use the restroom she entered each day to clean. This illustrates how the black woman found her boss’ standpoint inadequate so, she developed her own standpoint, which moved her to action. In this reference, thought informed action and action informed thought.

The fourth feature emphasizes that the contributions of black women intellectuals are essential to black feminist thought because, as previously mentioned, black women are uniquely positioned like none other to understand and talk about the lived experiences of black women. Effectively, black women intellectuals are less likely to view black feminist research as a passing interest and are, therefore, more committed despite the struggles that come with it. According to Collins (2000), “Black women intellectuals from all walks of life must aggressively push the theme of self-definition because speaking for oneself and crafting one’s own agenda is essential to empowerment” (p. 36). In essence, resistance to oppression is possible when intellectual black women can articulate expressions of consciousness and such articulation can be empowering for those who embrace it. In addition, the centrality of black females to black feminist thought lies in their ability to “foster the group autonomy that fosters effective coalitions with other groups” (Collins, 2000, p. 36).

Fifth, the significance of change is most relevant because “in order for Black feminist thought to operate effectively within black feminism as a social justice project, both must remain dynamic” (Collins, 2000, p. 39). Black feminist thought cannot become static because social conditions are fluid and ever changing. To remain relevant and to be prepared to continue to resist social oppression, the movement needs new black feminist analyses (Collins, 2000).

Finally, the sixth feature of black feminist thought is its relationship to other projects for social justice. It is widely accepted among black female intellectuals that black feminist research is greater than any individual is. To that end, the goal of this community of teachers and learners is to support black community institutions, uphold human dignity, empower others, and to advance issues of social justice (Collins, 2000).

Burack's (2004) treatment of black feminist thought is that unlike other social and political theorists who objectively separate themselves from their work, black feminist scholars include emotion in theirs. "They write about their own struggles to reconcile their interest in the group of which they are members" (Burack, 2004, p. 4). She describes black feminist theorizing as wrought with emotion but maintains that passion lies at the basis of their approach to forging respectful discourse about their struggles as a group. A seeming overlapping view, also prescribed to Burack (2004) suggests, "Black feminist thought also evokes emotion in many of its readers. I am convinced that, much like passion in political life, this emotion is defensive--an attempt to fend off guilt, self-examination, and genuine confrontation with otherness through rage, indignation, contempt, boredom, or idealization" (p. 5).

In her work, Collins (2000) alludes to the lack of a sanctioned definition of black feminist thought and the tendency of media pundits and academics to undermine the progression of black women's enfranchisement by challenging its name. This is not new terrain in the black intellectual community, as Collins point out. For example, the term "Afrocentrism" was maligned in the media during the 1980s and 1990s (Collins, 2000), even though, it had traditionally been accepted by blacks as a unifying term signifying black consciousness and racial solidarity. Many black women, even, tend to resist the word feminism because of mistrust or misperception of its intention. To neutralize any attempts to thwart the movement of black feminism, black women scholars pushed to focus on the reason why black feminist thought exists rather than focusing on the construction of a sanctioned definition of its meaning.

### **Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory**

It is reasonable to view black feminist thought alongside or as having evolved from critical race theory (CRT). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) writes that CRT advanced from a legal

movement motivated by scholars and activists with the shared interest in advancing the transformation and study of the relationship between race, racism, and power. “The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious” (p. 3). The authors declare the following as key tenets or postulates of CRT:

- 1) The concept of ordinariness, where racism is woven into the fabric of our society; it is the way we do things.
- 2) The concept of interest convergence, where the advancements related to racism serves the interests of whites and working class citizens rather than the interests of the oppressed group themselves.
- 3) The concept of social construction, where society is affected by race whether conscious of it or not because “race and races are products of social thought and relations” (p. 7).
- 4) The concepts of differential racialization and intersectionality. Regulating society racializes different minority groups at different times depending on the climate and necessities of the labor market. For example, at times, immigration can be an emotive political topic with politicians eager to bolster border control and restrict pathways to citizenship. However, when agriculture production is booming and more workers are required to support the demand of the industry, the Latino population is highly sought after and when this occurs, the political heat of immigration cools. Intersectionality suggests an examination of the overlapping of identity and how that is received in society. For example, that an

individual is black, gay, and female, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) argues, “Individuals like these exist at an intersection of recognized sites of oppression” (p. 51).

- 5) The concept of voice of color, where groups (Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, etc.) live as experts of their own histories, by virtue of their experiences and must be the storytellers of such lest they be marginalized or ignored by mainstream storytellers and scholars.

CRT pursues understanding of the formation of the social order and assumes a political-legal stance to right the racial and hierarchal wrongs visited upon oppressed groups. According to Hylton (2005),

CRT has come out of a particular struggle by black legal scholars who in challenging one of the most symbolic bastions of white privilege and power, the legal system, have developed a transdisciplinary tool in which to oppose the hegemonic influence of the white establishment. (p. 91)

Transdisciplinarity allow for research and theory to cross the boundaries of multiple disciplines of study. Hence, it is appropriate to use CRT and black feminist thought to influence the open dialogue, ideologies, and practices of how black women are supported in their efforts to reach the school superintendency.

Among many, where CRT and black feminist thought align includes storytelling, narrative analysis, and identifying intersectionality as crucial in the analysis of the relationship between gender and race. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), “Critical race theorists have built on everyday experiences with perspective, viewpoint, and the power of stories and persuasion to come to a better understanding of how Americans see race (p. 38). Storytelling is

viewed as a meaningful tool to give voice to the lived experiences of the oppressed, to offer a truth in the face of analysis that speaks only to the dominant group. Intersectionality is crucial because it is “grounded in individuals’ lived experiences according to their multiple category memberships” (Anderson & McCormack, 2010, p. 953). The boundaries between CRT and black feminist thought seems vague and it is, thus, easy to view them as one from the other. Collins, nevertheless, intends black feminist thought as critical social theory. “Black feminist thought’s identity as a “critical” social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups” (Collins, 2000, p. 9).

I analyzed Black feminist thought as oppositional knowledge. *Black Feminist Thought* recorded and legitimated Black feminist thought as one type of oppositional knowledge influenced by a particular outsider-within location. By positioning itself as documenting a tradition or canon, *Black Feminist Thought* aimed to legitimate Black women’s intellectual production as critical social theory. (Collins, 1998, p. 8)

An outsider-within location is a social location or border space marking the boundaries between groups of unequal power. Individuals acquire identities as “outsiders within” by their placement in these social locations (Collins, 2000, p. 300). This occurs when a dominant group invites a black person into the folds of their living but the black person can get only so close and go only so far into their sphere of living because the black person would not be viewed as a sanctioned member of the group. The black person is considered an outsider because despite his/her presence in the folds of the group, he/she have limited, to no voice, in the dialogue of the family unit or in determining how he/she exists within the dominant group.

Critical social theory brings attention to the manner in which society privileges some groups while oppressing others; therefore, it focuses on how the world should be and how to bring about social transformation (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). As put forth by Leonardo (2004), critical social theory is a “multidisciplinary framework with the implicit goal of advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge” (p. 11). Critical social theorists view knowledge as self-reflective comprehension and theoretical explanation and they “seek to understand the ideologies that inform and affect both their research and their own stances” (Savin-Baden & Major, p. 60). It promotes broad critical thinking and is Collins’ “explicit attempt to bridge critical and social theory with race and feminist theory” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 12).

### **Black Feminist Thought and Filtering Boundaries**

Before exploring the lives of the study participants, it is important to understand the ways in which black feminist thought and filtering boundaries interrelate. Filtering boundaries and black feminist thought are effective theoretical frameworks to center on the racialized and gendered experiences of black females in the white male dominated domain of the school superintendency. Schein’s concept of filtering boundaries is intended to analyze and explore how women move within organizations and the filtering systems that serve to thwart their career development (Kim & Brunner, 2009, p. 90) and black feminist thought is intended to resist oppression, enter the unique life experiences of black women into mainstream discourse, and to move society toward social justice. These theories allow for certain assumptions that will guide the development of this study.

One assumption is that raising the voices and experiences of black women through storytelling is both valuable and necessary for advancing a clearer understanding of the political

and social construction of public school leadership, which is crucial to gender and racial equality at the top level of school leadership. Storytelling is used to describe a condition to foster a better understanding of it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and in this study; it is constructive for dispelling myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions that have historically marginalized black women. The second assumption is that gender matters. There is no typical pathway to the superintendency for black women because while men typically move quickly and vertically through the ranks to executive school leadership, women are relegated to the more scenic route with horizontal and diagonal promotions to the superintendency (Kim & Brunner, 2009). The final assumption is that one's proximity to the inner circle of power (inclusion) matters; criteria for promotion in public schools can be titular, at best. That is, people in power, the school board in this case, often make hiring and promotion decisions based on criteria other than being highly qualified, competent, and skilled and this marks the conscious and sometimes unconscious spot where black women suffer the greatest discrimination.

In this effort to analyze the social construction of the superintendency in Georgia, from the vantage point of six former and practicing black female superintendents in Georgia, their voices will be used to shed light on the black and female experiences and not simply the female experience of the same. Black feminist thought, accordingly, is applied in this research to determine whether gender, racism, or race-related factors are potential barriers to black women advancing to the superintendency. Filtering boundaries is applied to determine if black women are particularly vulnerable to a filtering or screening process that may be neither rational nor fair as they look to move into executive school leadership. The work of this study is important because it focuses on the history and experiences of this double oppressed group to shed light on the current state of black female superintendency in Georgia. It also necessitates the analysis of

institutional and cultural oppression to add to the existing body of literature. The ultimate goal is to make a positive contribution to social justice, a tenet of black feminist thought.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter included a review of the literature relevant to black female superintendents in the state of Georgia and the theoretical perspectives used to guide the study. The lenses, through which, this study is informed are black feminist thought and filtering boundaries. The methodology selected for this research will be discussed in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER III- METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this general qualitative study is to add to the existing body of literature and underscore the underrepresentation of black women at the executive leadership level in schools with the goal of understanding the lived experiences of six black female superintendents in the state of Georgia through structured interviews. The subjects of the study include the first black female superintendent hired in the state and five others. The aim of the study is to identify the supportive constructs and barriers black females must overcome in pursuit of the superintendency in Georgia and to understand how the black female school superintendent experience has changed over time.

### **Research Questions**

The research question is the first step in the research process because it “provides an opportunity for scientific testing” (Portney & Watkins, 2009, p. 23) and guides the planning and analysis of a study. In qualitative studies, research questions, instead of hypotheses or objectives, are posed to guide the study. They give the participants leeway to tell a story, explain experiences, describe ideas, etc. (Creswell, 2003). The guiding research questions for this study are:

1. What are the lived experiences of black female superintendents in GA?
2. What obstacles or barriers do black females have to overcome?
3. What are the commonalities among experiences of black female superintendents?

4. How have the experiences of black female superintendents changed overtime?

### **Research Design**

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), design refers to the researcher's plan for conducting research; how one will proceed. Research design flows from broad assumptions central to inquiry, a worldview consistent with the assumptions, and a theoretical lens to shape the study (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research is a "non-numerical approach to social science research that emphasizes collecting descriptive data in natural settings, it uses inductive thinking, and emphasizes understanding the subjects point of view" (Bogdon & Biklen, 2007, p. 274). According to Trochim (2005), "qualitative research, and the stories it can generate, enables you to describe the phenomenon of interest with great richness, often in the original language of the research participants "(p. 120).

Qualitative researchers employ this technique when dealing with phenomena that are difficult or impossible to quantify mathematically, such as beliefs, meanings, attributes, and symbols. It is appropriate to use qualitative research when a problem or issue needs to be explored or when "we need a complex detailed understanding of the issue" (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). To unearth and understand the lived experiences of the black female, former and practicing GA superintendents, told as only they can, in this study the researcher engaged in general qualitative research procedures. This study intends to identify the "essence" of human experiences concerning a phenomenon as described by participants in the study (Creswell, 2003, p. 15).

Regarding the methodological framework, my purpose is to distinguish this work from previous studies in three ways. First, my approach to this research is to study the phenomenon of public school superintendents who rise to power and lead organizations from a double minority

perspective, black and female, in the state of Georgia. Second, I seek to distinguish this study from prior work by examining the perspectives and lived experiences of former and practicing superintendents from the state of Georgia. Finally, I seek to distinguish this study by narrowing the scholarship to black females who serve in the school superintendency in Georgia, given the lack thereof in the existing literature as compared to that of men and white women.

### **Sampling Strategy**

A purposive sample was employed in the recruitment of study participants. According to Creswell (2007), purposive sampling occurs when the researcher “selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). It can be described as sampling “with a purpose in mind” (Trochim, 2005, p. 41). This sampling strategy requires the researcher to determine “who or what should be sampled, what form the sampling will take, and how many people or sites need to be sampled” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). Because of the limited number of potential respondents who meet the criteria for this study, snowball sampling was used as a unique means for locating a desirable number of potential participants. This widely accepted method of sampling in qualitative research enables the researcher to access one respondent through the referral of another (Noy, 2008).

### **Participant Selection**

The six women of this study fit into one of two categories, retired and practicing black female superintendents. Specifically, the three retired superintendents served 1984-1999, the period closest to the year when the first black female was appointed in Georgia and the other three are currently practicing and accepted their appointments during or after 2000. The purpose of selecting these two distinct groups is that each group may speak to the climate, institutional

practices, and cultural oppression of the era in which they served. It is assumed that this approach will allow the researcher to postulate about how conditions may have changed from 1984, the year that the first black female superintendent was hired in Georgia to now, some 29 years later.

Women hold 49 (27%) of the 180 top interim and permanent executive level positions in the GA public school system. Black women hold 11 (6%) of the 180 top interim and permanent executive level positions in the GA public school system (GSSA, 2013). The variables in this study are race and gender, so there are strict requirements necessary to participate in this study.

1. The participant must be female.
2. The participant must be black.
3. The participant must have served as school superintendent in the state of GA 1984-1999.
4. The participant must currently practice or must have practiced as school superintendent in the state of GA during or after the year 2000.

Different methods were used to locate the potential study participants. To locate the former superintendents, the researcher found the first black hired in Georgia via the website of the school where she currently works. She was contacted at her place of employment, she agreed to participate in the study, and she provided the name of the one other retired superintendent she knows of. The process of snowball sampling began to take effect as the researcher conducted an internet search to locate the subject of that referral. Upon contacting her, she provided the names of two others retired superintendent she knows of and that process continued until I learned that only four people meet the criteria to participate in this study.

To locate those who currently practice, the researcher obtained a list of all 180 superintendents in the state from the Georgia School Superintendents Association's (GSSA) website. The list was reviewed and then reduced to females only by looking for clearly gender-implied names (i.e. Mary or Paula). Where names were less gender-implied, the researcher relied on spelling (i.e. Johnnie v. Johnny or Toni v. Tony). Finally, where there remained any uncertainty, telephone calls were made to school districts to verify gender. To reduce the list to black females only, the researcher called each school district to verify both, race and gender. The superintendents who practice within a 70 miles radius of Atlanta, GA were selected and invited to participate in the study. Telephone calls were made until three agreed to participate.

### **Setting of the Study**

To build a rapport and to establish credibility (Creswell, 2003) with the participants, the settings for interviews were held in the meeting place of the respondents' choice. The setting is vital because when in the natural setting, the researcher is better positioned to "develop a level of detail about the individual or place and to be highly involved in actual experiences of the participants" (Creswell, 2003, p.181).

One-on-one, face-to-face interviews were used to elicit the views and sentiments of each participant who could avail themselves to meet face-to-face. Where face-to-face interviews were not possible, telephone and computer based Skype<sup>TM</sup> interviews were offered as alternatives for securing interviews. These methods were chosen to enable the researcher to partake in extensive conversations with the participants and to ask exploratory questions related to their experiences and perspectives. Interviews are optimal because study participants are positioned to present historical information in addition to the control that the researcher maintains over the line of questioning (Creswell, 2003, p. 186). According to Creswell (2003), the disadvantages of these

type interviews are that they: (1) “provide “indirect” information filtered through the views of interviewees, (2) provide information in a designated “place” rather than the natural field setting, (3) researcher’s presence may bias responses, and (4) people are not equally articulate and perceptive” (p. 186). Based on the needs of the participants, the study yields three face-to-face interviews and three telephone interviews.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative researchers employ multiple avenues for the collection of data. The primary means of data collection to obtain descriptions of the respondents’ experiences was the use of semi-structured interviews, where the interviewer asked oral questions and the respondents offered oral responses. According to Trochim (2005), “qualitative research, and the stories it can generate, enables you to describe the phenomenon of interest with great richness, often in the original language of the research participants” (p. 120). According to Merriam (1998), semi-structured interviews are used when “specific information is desired from the respondents” and such a format is “guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording or the order of the questions is determined ahead of time” (p 74). The benefit of this method is that the researcher is free to respond to the ideas, worldviews, and new topics introduced by the respondents as they emerge (Merriam, 1998). The use of semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to delve into the stories of the participants to achieve an in-depth understanding of the black female superintendency in GA.

Given the enormous demands of the school superintendency, I found that securing time for face-to-face interviews was quite an ambitious endeavor. Even the three former superintendents continue to have high demand lifestyles and finding time for face-to-face or Skype™ interviews proved harder to achieve than anticipated. From the three face-to-face and

three telephone interviews, each respondent agreed to accept a follow-up telephone call for the purpose of member checking. Two slightly different protocols were used to guide the interviews with one (Appendix A) consisting of 21 open-ended semi-structured questions for the practicing superintendents and the other (Appendix B) consisting of 23 open-ended semi-structured questions for the former superintendents. Since qualitative research is emergent, the semi-structured style of interviewing allows flexibility to change or augment inquiries as the researcher learn more about the phenomenon and the interviewees (Creswell, 2003). The length of time devoted to interviews averaged 62 minutes per superintendent, depending on the needs and restraints of the respondents. Each interview was digitally recorded and later transcribed.

### **Analysis**

Analysis, in qualitative research, is the process of interpreting the research findings. According to Bogdon and Biklen (2007), “it uses inductive thinking, and emphasizes understanding the subject’s point of view” (p. 274) and is appropriate to use when dealing with phenomena that are difficult or impossible to quantify, such as beliefs, meanings, attributes, and symbols. The logic of inductive (bottom-up reasoning) data analysis is that it specifies a connection with other categories and fosters a higher level of abstraction. Data analysis began during data collection with the researcher carefully listening to the respondents reply to interview questions and taking notes in the margins of the interview protocols.

The interviews were transcribed and coded and those codes were searched for themes. Codes were influenced by data from transcriptions and the process of coding was used to identify concepts found in the data to show themes, similarities, differences, and to generalize across a study. Coding was utilized to categorize then reduce chunks of data into meaningful units as the researcher looked to connect the codes that “provide insight into specific coding categories that

relate or explain the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 161). The process commenced with the researcher extracting “samplings from the population of potential texts to select the ones that will be used” (Trochim, 2005, p. 128). Then, the researcher created a set of rules that guided the division of the text into chunks to be “treated as separate units of analysis in the study,” which is commonly referred to as unitizing (Trochim, 2005, p. 128). The next step was to apply “one or more codes to each unitized text segment, a process called coding” (Trochim, 2005, p. 128).

The researcher employed thematic analysis to discover emerging themes from the codes. “Like coding, thematic analysis or the search for themes in the data is a strategic choice as part of the research design that includes the primary questions, goals, conceptual framework, and literature review” (Saldana, 2009, p. 140). Code frequency enabled the researcher to identify major themes that emerged from the data. The themes were examined and revised after reflexive thinking about participant meaning and outcomes. Once a theme was defined, sub-themes were identified in an attempt to tell the stories of the participants in such a way that would provide insight about how black women break through the invisible ceiling to the superintendency in GA. The six themes that emerged include:

- Chartering new territory
- The inner circle
- Race and gender matters
- Getting there
- Evolution of the black female superintendency
- Second set of rules

Finally, to provide validation, member checking was used to solicit the respondent's ideas about the credibility of the findings. This approach "involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account" (Creswell, 2007, p.208). Creswell and Plano (2011), writes that member checking is "a frequently used approach" (p. 211). Hence, the sequential steps used in this study for data analysis include transcribing the interviews, coding the data, looking for themes, and member checking.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are three identified limitations in this study. One, neither the Georgia State DOE nor the GaPSC collect data regarding the number of black females who hold the certification to become superintendent in the state. Two, since there is no explicit licensing requirement to be superintendent in Georgia beyond the general Leadership Certification (L5), any person holding the Master's Degree or higher in Administration and Supervision is eligible. Thus, it is impossible to make assumptions about the population of black females who are specifically targeting the superintendency as a career choice. Finally, data from the AASA study are based on the number of respondents to the 2010 decennial survey (n= 1,876), which is not representative of all superintendents across the nation. Further, data specific to race and gender are based on the number of respondents who answered those specific questions, i.e. race/ethnicity, n = 1800 and gender, n = 1766.

### **Trustworthiness of the Data**

To ensure the credibility of this study, the researcher engaged in conversation with each participant to explain the purpose of the study. According to Trochim (2005), credibility involves establishing that the results of qualitative research are credible or believable from the

perspective of the participant in the research. Since from this perspective, the purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participant's eyes, the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results. Creswell's (2007) terminology for this process is validation where, in qualitative research, the researcher will "attempt to assess the "accuracy" of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants" (p. 206-207) with the objective of presenting outcomes as a representation of self as author.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In compliance with the University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, the researcher completed and submitted the IRB application (Appendix C) and informed consent form (Appendix D), which were approved August 20, 2013. An informed consent form was emailed to each superintendent who expressed interest in the study. The document, designed by the university, comprehensively explains the details of the study. It also identifies the researcher and the supervising faculty member who will monitor the progression and completion of the study and identifies the procedure for how to file complaints, concerns, or questions about the participants' rights as a person in this research study to the Research Compliance Officer of the University.

Most importantly, the informed consent form offers assurances to the participants that their identities will be held in the strictest of confidence unless either of the participants is willing to be identified in the study. Interviews did not proceed until each participant had the opportunity to read, ask clarifying questions, and sign the informed consent agreeing to participate in the study. All participants were instructed of their right to withdraw from the study

at any time. The consent forms will be held in the strictest confidence and kept in a locked file drawer in the researcher's home, to which, only the researcher has access.

### **Chapter Summary**

This study offers foundational information about the importance of studying gender and race in the school superintendency. Historical analysis reveals that being black and female in the white, male dominated sphere of the school superintendency continued to have an adverse effect on the representation of black women in this domain. Since 1910, the southern region of the US realized negligible trend shifts in hiring blacks in the role (Blount, 1998). The continued gross underrepresentation of black females at the executive school leadership level in Georgia indicates that barriers might exist to a greater extent for this group than others.

While the literature concentrated on women in the school superintendency is emergent, the body of evidence specific to black women remains miniscule. Since it is not possible to generalize research regarding the experiences of white females to those of black females in the superintendency, there is a substantial void in the literature. The preponderance of the research base appears to derive from doctoral students looking to delve into the relatively uncharted territory to satisfy dissertation requirements. According to Merriam (1998), research produces knowledge about the world. The researcher is optimistic that critical discourse about gender and racial prejudice in the superintendency will inspire continued scholarship in this purview.

## CHAPTER IV- FINDINGS

### **Introduction**

This chapter seeks to chronicle the responses or results of the six interviews held with the subjects of this study. Portney and Watkins (2009) opine that “the results section contains only a report of results, that is, a narrative description of exactly what happened in order of importance relative to the specific aim or hypotheses of the study” ( p. 774). The presentation of responses here are framed to enlighten the reader, in the voices of the six subjects, of their lived experiences as black female public superintendents in GA as well as to describe how black female superintendent experiences in GA may have changed from 1984 to the present time. For the purpose of this study, lived experiences refer to firsthand accounts of what is uniquely different about being black, female, and a school superintendent.

In this study, I interviewed three retired superintendents who served between 1984-1999 and three superintendents who are currently serving, but started their terms between 2000 and the present. The two protocols used to guide the interviews are the same except that one protocol (Appendix A) consists of 21 open-ended semi-structured questions for the working superintendents and the other (Appendix B) consists of 23 open-ended semi-structured questions for the retired superintendents. The two additional questions asked of the retired superintendents were designed to educate the researcher about the climate, institutional practices, and cultural oppression from the earliest years of black women in the GA superintendency as compared to the latter years of the same. It is assumed that their earlier experiences places them in a particularly

unique position to expound upon how conditions may have changed from 1984, the year that the first black female superintendent was hired in Georgia to now, some 29 years later.

Filtering boundaries and black feminist thought are the perspectives used to explore the susceptibility of black women to irrational and unfair filtering and screening out processes in relation to the selection of school superintendents. The two theories are further employed to determine if gender, racism, or race-related influences are potential barriers to the advancement of black women to the superintendency. The execution of a general qualitative study is necessary to raise the voices of Georgia's former and practicing black female superintendents to learn about their experiences and their conceptualization of what made/makes their superintendencies uniquely different from those of black male, white male, and white female school superintendents in Georgia.

### **Study Participants**

The six women of this study are divided into two categories - retired and practicing superintendents. The purpose of selecting these two distinct groups is that each group can speak to the climate, institutional practices, and cultural oppression of the era, in which they served. It was assumed that this approach would allow the researcher to postulate about how conditions may have changed from 1984, the year that the first black female superintendent was hired in Georgia to now, some 30 years later.

Different methods were used to locate the potential study participants. To locate those who are currently working, the researcher obtained a list of all 180 superintendents in the state from the Georgia School Superintendents Association's (GSSA) website. The list was reviewed and reduced to females only by looking for clearly gender-implied names (i.e. e. Mary or Paula). Where names were less gender-implied, the researcher relied on spelling (i.e. e. Johnnie

v. Johnny or Toni v. Tony). Finally, where there remained any uncertainty, telephone calls were made to school districts to verify gender. To reduce the list to black females only, the researcher called each school district to verify both, race and gender. To locate the retired superintendents, the researcher found the first black hired in Georgia via an online article. I contacted her at her place of employment and she gave me the name of one other retired superintendent that she knew of. The process of snowball sampling began to take effect as I conducted an internet search to locate that referral. Upon contacting her, she gave me the names of two others and that process continued until I learned that only four people meet the former superintendent criteria to participate in this study.

The next section contains brief introductions to familiarize you with the women of this study. Their names have been replaced with pseudonyms for the purpose of confidentiality. Additionally, specific personal, school, school district, and institutions of higher learning information were left out of the introductions to safeguard their identities.

### *Patricia*

Patricia was my first interview in my process, which made me both, happy and nervous at the same time because she also holds the distinction of being the first black female school superintendent appointed in the state of GA. We met in her office on the campus of pseudonymous Gateway Christian Academy where she sat behind a big cherry wood desk and sharing stories of her personal life and professional career with me. Patricia placed great emphasis on her upbringing and was the only participant who reached as far back as childhood to describe herself and to show how experiences from her childhood shaped her life. She is a self-described country girl, raised on a farm by sharecropper parents in rural GA.

With an undergraduate degree in mathematics and at age 21, Patricia took her first teaching job at a rural GA high school. To give an indication of how small the town is, the math department consisted only of Patricia. She taught there for two years then moved to a larger GA city with her husband where she taught math at a junior high school and then another high school. Five years later, she and her family moved to Metropolitan Atlanta where she took a high school teaching job, all the while, working on her Master's degree in mathematics. Patricia had another career shift and became assistant principal (AP) of that same school. She remained an AP for two years and during that time, went back to school to obtain her Education Specialist Degree (Ed.S.) and in class is where she met and developed a relationship with the superintendent of a small independent city school system. He was looking to hire a black principal for one of his middle school, offered her the position, and she accepted it. She remained in the position for four years until his resignation. With her husband's encouragement, Patricia decided to pursue the vacant position and was appointed to the superintendency in 1984.

At the time of her appointment, her school district had a 13% black student population. All of the other students were white; there were no other race groups or ethnicities represented in her school system. She remained superintendent there until she retired in 1994. Today, she continues to work with children, but as the administrator of a private Christian school that she helped establish in 1997.

To help me find the other early black female superintendents in GA, Patricia gave me Margaret's name, who was the only other person she knew of that met the criteria for participating in this study. Even though she had no contact information, she told me of her affiliation with the GA School Superintendents Association (GSSA) and she disclosed the name of the last school district where she served.

*Margaret*

I located Margaret's email address on the retired superintendent's page of the GSSA's website. I sent her a detailed message introducing myself, describing my study, and explaining how I came to know about her through Patricia. I took the opportunity to tell her of Patricia's decision to participate in the study and I expressed how I was hoping that she, too, would consider participating. She replied to my email in less than 24 hours agreeing to participate and offering me a phone number to call her. I called right away and our initial conversation lasted for what seemed like hours because she was so easy to engage and willing to help me locate other superintendents for my study. She gave me the names of two retired and three practicing superintendents as well as permission to use her name as the referral source in hopes of swaying a "yes" decision from anyone asked to participate in the study.

The interview with Margaret took place in my car while parked in front of a hotel. She lives about an hour and a half from the town where I live so we initially agreed that I would visit her home for the interview. We settled on a day and time but as our appointment neared; her schedule and availability changed so we made an adjustment and agreed to meet at a Starbucks half way between our towns instead. Starbucks was aromatic and festive because it was the Christmas season. Holiday music was playing throughout the store, which interfered with my recording device so we left and drove to go to nearby hotel in hopes of finding a quieter space. There was no room available and no quiet corner for us to interview so, we sat in my car in the parking lot and conducted our interview. Margaret was very introspective and forthcoming about all of her leadership experiences the good, and the not so good. Like Patricia, her responses, however, focused more on her professional career rather than her childhood experiences.

Margaret was hired to work in public education at age 25 and according to her, she started late because she was not convinced that she wanted to work in education so, she worked in other settings first. When she decided on education as a career choice, she started as a classroom teacher and she worked in two school districts before pursuing her interest in administration. To make herself a more desirable candidate, she went on to obtain her Master's, Education Specialist, and Doctorate Degrees. Throughout the span of her career, she worked in four school districts ranging in size from very small to very large.

Her atypical career path moved her from classroom teacher to principal to curriculum director to superintendent. All of her work experience was in GA and she served as superintendent in two school districts.

### *Rosalyn*

Rosalyn was one of the retired superintendents referred by Margaret, but since she had no contact information for her, I utilized the resources of the internet to find her. I found an email address on her former school district's website and sent a message introducing myself and describing my study. I mentioned Patricia and Margaret's decisions to participate in the study and asked for her participation as well. I had no success reaching her via email so I continued to search the internet for clues on how to find her. I learned of her hometown and resorted to asking colleagues and friends from that area if they knew her or if they could assist me in contacting her. Finally, I found someone who knew her and was able to secure a contact number on my behalf. Though no longer superintendent, Rosalyn continues to work with the public school system in addition to teaching at an institution of higher learning. Her demanding schedule added a layer of difficulty to finding time for an interview, but she was determined to be a part of my study. I provided options for conducting the interview including face-to-face in

the setting of her choice, Skype, or via telephone. Initially, we settled on a face-to-face meeting; however, due to some unforeseen glitches in her schedule, we had to reschedule. After several attempts to reschedule, one day when I called, she decided to stop what she was doing and said, “We are going to have that interview right now.” We both laughed and I grabbed my pen, notepad, interview protocol, and recording device and conducted her interview by telephone.

Rosalyn was hired at age 22 to work in public education as an elementary, then middle schoolteacher. She holds the Bachelor’s, Master’s, Education Specialist, and Doctoral Degrees. She went to work in central office administration at age 29. Her first educational administration job was curriculum director. She also served simultaneously as staff development director and school improvement specialist before becoming superintendent of the district. Reportedly, her career advanced every three years from the time when she was a classroom teacher until the executive seat.

In preparation for the superintendency, and while serving as curriculum director, Rosalyn attended a GA superintendent’s professional development program, which was a state sponsored program of the governor’s office, the state department, UGA and Georgia State University. She credits that program for preparing her for the executive role. It was in 1998 when she became superintendent of a small rural school district with 2,000 students and five schools. She remained superintendent for eight years then retired from public school education after 31 years of service.

### *Cynthia*

Cynthia is one of the practicing superintendents referred to me by Margaret because they knew one another personally. I drove 40 minutes to her home to conduct our interview, but before we started the interview, we spent about 30 minutes talking, laughing, and getting to

know one another while erecting her Christmas tree. I felt completely comfortable and welcomed in her home. During the interview, Cynthia was an open book as she talked about her professional self and experiences. Her replies did not include information about her upbringing; instead, she concentrated on walking me through the stages of her career. She holds the Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate degrees and credits the program, Preparing Superintendents, for training her for the superintendency.

Cynthia is the only participant whose professional experience extends beyond the state of GA. She was first hired to work in public education at age 20. Her career path took a zigzag pattern in that she worked in multiple positions in multiple states as well as served as superintendent in multiple school districts. She was a classroom teacher in two mid-west states for 11 years before taking a position at the State Board of Education responsible for compliance review and monitoring. While working at the state board of education, she made significant connections and networked with decision-makers and political power players because she worked directly with the public school system's board of education. Her work included writing policy that turned into school law specifically for the public school system for which she wanted to work as an administrator. She stayed at the state board of education for four years before returning to the public schools and when she returned, she went back to the classroom. In less than a year, she was appointed to a central office position as a teacher on loan, which is synonymous to a coordinator in today's hierarchal structure. She wrote an \$83 million grant as part of her job as a teacher on loan and turned down the offer to be the director of the grant. She opted to be the principal in one of the schools; for which, the grant was written instead.

She was principal for five years and moved to a southern state to work at a think tank for a year. She returned to the previous state but in a different public school system as a manager.

During the next three and a half years, she was promoted from manager to executive manager to interim associate superintendent to deputy superintendent. The first of her three superintendencies was in a mid-western state and one of the things that made her a prime candidate for the position was her desegregation background. She had done a lot of desegregation work in a prior mid-western state and this new position “needed someone to write the desegregation plan; the district was on a court order. It had taken segregation to an art form” and they were looking to make sweeping changes in the system’s policies and practices. She had become superintendent of a school district with 13% children of color and one black female teacher. White people, including the custodians and cafeteria workers, held every other position in the district.

Her next superintendency brought her to GA, where she was the first woman and the first black woman to serve in that position in her district. After a short term there, she went on to become the superintendent of another GA school district. From there, she plans to retire when the time is right for her.

### *Irene*

To locate Irene, I consulted the list of 180 superintendents in the state of GA found on the GSSA website. I closely examined the list to find all of what appeared to be female names then I called those school systems to confirm gender and to learn race. When I called Irene’s district, her assistant put me right through to her after I explained who I was and why I was calling. She immediately expressed interest in participating but warned of her tight schedule. She opted for a telephone interview so we scheduled it for that same week. On the morning of her interview, she had other meetings scheduled and could devote a very limited amount of time to our interview.

Irene was hired to work in public education at age 21 and to date; she has worked in education for 40 years. All of her work experience was in GA and she served as superintendent in one school district. After 10 years as a primary school teacher, she became a lead teacher for two years. Her career advanced to assistant principal then principal of that school for 15 years before moving to the central office as the director of curriculum. She worked in that position for five years before becoming assistant superintendent. After three years as assistant superintendent, the district's superintendent retired and Irene applied for the position, but it was given to a first year central level white male administrator from out of town. Nine months later, the board removed the newly hired superintendent and named Irene to the position.

In her county, Irene was the first black female employed as a principal, the first black female employed as an assistant superintendent, and the first black female to serve in the capacity of superintendent. She holds the Educational Specialist Degree (Ed.S.) and in 2010, after 35 years, became the superintendent of a small rural school district with seven schools.

### *Tamara*

Tamara became a prospective participant when a co-worker told me that he knew her personally. Since I was looking for the final participant for my study, I asked if he would arrange a meeting for me. He sent an email of introduction to both of us, including the details of my study and asked if she would be willing to talk with me. Her secretary replied and informed me of her interest so she gave me her telephone contact information. I called her right away to answer any questions and confirm her participation. She expressed her desire to remain anonymous and I assured her confidentiality. Tamara opted for a telephone interview so we scheduled it for the following week, but because the lives of superintendents are notoriously busy and hectic we were unable to accomplish the task as planned. One morning, two days later,

when we were supposed to be consulting our calendars to pencil in another interview date, she offered to submit to the interview at that moment. In response, I gathered my pen, notepad, interview protocol, and recording device and conducted her interview at that moment of availability. Because the circumstance of Tamara's superintendency is so atypical and commonly known, her introduction is much more scant than the others are. This is a purposeful act to guard against easy identification despite the pseudonym already used for the same purpose.

Tamara was hired to work in public education at age 26. Her career path moved her through the system at almost every level starting as a classroom teacher to assistant principal, to principal, to director of student services, to assist superintendent, to special assist to the superintendent, to superintendent. Along the way, she obtained her Bachelor's, Master's, and Ed.S. degrees. The nature of her superintendency is so unique that it is extremely difficult to talk about her progression to the superintendency without creating clues that will make clear her identity. She is; however, a product of the community that she now serves from the executive seat of the school district. "I'm from the area and so the learning curve for me was a little different and so I knew a lot of the players already." Rather than pursuing the superintendency, Tamara was sought after for the position.

### **Themes**

According to Saldana (2009), "A theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection" (p. 13). This section is a representation of the themes generated from my immersion in the data as I looked to establish a connection between the research questions and the data. The six emergent themes were (a) chartering new territory, (b) the inner circle, (c) race and gender matters, (d) getting there, (e) evolution of the black female superintendency, and (f) second set of rules. Sub-themes will also be presented within the discussion of the major themes.

The discussion of how the theoretical perspectives of this study were used to analyze the data will appear in chapter five.

*Theme one: Chartering New Territory*

The ways, in which, individuals experience life varies greatly based upon an infinite number of factors and to attempt to enumerate them would be an exercise in futility. However, the scope of discovery can be narrowed to focus on a single task, of a single population, in a single state. For this study, a very small number of individuals met the criteria to participate since black female superintendents in the state of GA were the central phenomenon to be analyzed. Chartering new territory refers to the racialized and gendered experiences of these superintendents. Here, they provide firsthand accounts of the unique differences about being black, female, and superintendent in the state of GA as can only be told by those who have lived it. The participants were asked about their experiences as school superintendents in a state where blacks and women have historically been underrepresented in executive school leadership. Existing in the double minority categories of black and female, the women of this research see themselves through a different lens than do their male and white female counterparts. This is also true for how others view them in terms of how they are received and how they function in the role. The fourth tenet of black feminist thought points out that black women are uniquely positioned to understand and communicate the lived experiences of black women and that black women intellectuals are less likely to view issues of black women as a passing thought. Rather, they embrace the struggle and become empowered by their ability to self-advocate and articulate an agenda to resist oppression (Collins, 2000). The sub-theme associated with chartering new territory is the burden of being the first black, the first woman, or the first black woman to serve as superintendent in a school district.

## **The burden of being first**

The study participants shared stories of how they viewed their experiences as different from those of their male and white female counterparts. Being first or among the firsts to break through barriers to success come with its own set of complications, but being black and female in the traditionally white male-dominated field of education adds another dimension to the gravity of it. Five of the six study participants were either the first woman or the first black woman superintendent in their districts. Patricia had experiences as the first woman and the first black to be appointed in her district; Rosalyn, as the first black woman; Margaret, as the first black woman; Cynthia, as the first woman and first black woman; and Irene, as the first woman and first black woman. When asked how their superintendent experiences were different from their male and white female colleagues, they replied:

**Patricia-** I had a real problem with one man and I am not sure if it was race... it was race and gender. He did not want to work for a woman and sure enough did not want to work for a black woman. That was a major hurdle for me because he worked at the central office level and he had a major position there.

**Margaret-** They have a different support system. Not necessarily better, but they just have more people that they can call on because you just said out of 180 school districts, the majority of the superintendents are white males and so, they just have people that they can call on... that they've gone up the ranks with. Therefore, they just have a core group that they can call on whereas... and I do not want to say that I did not have white males assisting me because that is not true. In fact, several white males encouraged me.

**Rosalyn-** Well, their networks are and were historical. Historical in that they have a long, deep-running history of running school districts and dealing with the finances, and

collaborating with the business community--that kind of thing. I am sure that every woman superintendent period, black or white, has to really, really push doors to connect with the business world because it is basically man-led.

**Patricia-** They did not have to be accepted; they are already in the fraternity; they are already in there together. They did not have to be accepted into that brotherhood/sisterhood, mostly brotherhood. I think--I hope that is going to fade out eventually, but it is not totally gone.

**Cynthia-** I started in 2004 as the first woman and the first African American, but more importantly, I was the first woman, okay? They had to change the bathroom in the superintendent's office for me. I walked in and the bathroom had a men's commode in it and I said, "Oh, my God! I can't use this." I think that was the first time they realized that there was not an appropriate toilet for a woman in that office.

**Irene-** In rural GA, the challenge here is that it is an unchartered territory for a black female. I was the first black female to be employed as a principal in the system and then as the first assistant superintendent. Therefore, it was the challenge of the community as well as the board of education, which, is predominantly male... which is all male. There has been a lot of hindrances in that, in rural GA, you still have those people who believe that a female, and especially not a black female can be successful in working with schools, to carry out this job. That this is a male-dominant profession, a white male-dominant profession and there are several people who still feel like that is who should be in these roles. You have racism on both sides that you have to contend with. You have people from both communities, black and white. That was something that I thought I had to fight; that I still have to fight... that is a constant there.

### *Theme two: The inner circle*

The inner circle of an organization takes on different meanings depending on whom you are and where you stand in proximity to it. Inner circle refers to relationships with the political players and decision-makers of an organization. It is the place where factors such as personality, seniority, and willingness to play political games may be critical in becoming a member. Getting invited to the inner circle is subjective and the criteria for acceptance changes from person to person. Black women are particularly vulnerable to exclusion because membership has its privileges and being black and female in a white male-dominant profession typically does not get you invited to the club. Schein's (1971) filtering boundaries theory labels the inner circle as an inclusion boundary; a subjective screening out process that looks to keep certain individuals from getting too close to the locus of control of an organization. To control access, Schein (1971) contends that the criteria changes as undesirables get closer to the inner core of the organization. Politics of the inner circle may be referred to as the good old boy's network when some are excluded based on characteristics such as race or gender. Consequently, in addition to school system politics, the good old boy's network are the two sub-themes associated with this theme. When asked about school system politics and inner circle experiences, participant responses were as following:

#### **School system politics**

There was no interview question about school system politics; rather, it was an emergent theme of the study. The superintendency is a most political position, and according to Johnson and Kruse (2011), "decision-making is the focal referent for political behavior. Given the leader's role as decision-maker, there is a political element associated with many of the decisions educational leaders are called on to make" (p. 3 & 4). Note, politics are not always negative, but

they are typically a consequence of competing interests or ideologies where individuals or groups act in their own interest. Most of the women of this study recognized politics at work during their rise to and while occupying the superintendent's role. The following quotes are from discussions about the politics of the job.

**Rosalyn-** If you are coming in from the outside, you have a job to do and there is a factor even after you set your expectations and your standards where the political workings begin to take place because everybody is jockeying for security; everybody is jockeying for their space to stay on the team. I have learned and observed that when that superintendent goes on that job, there is a political culture and there is a professional culture and that superintendent has to strike a balance between the two.

**Tamara-** Well, I am from the area and so the learning curve for me was a little different and so, I knew a lot of the players already.

**Cynthia-** I rode the buses because I wanted to make a reduction in something that happened with the buses. The buses go door to door; it stops in front of each kid's house. I am going, "why in the heck does it do that in the cul-de-sac?" It goes up in the cul-de-sac when it could stop right here on the outside of the cul-de-sac and wait for all of those kids to come down. If I stopped that, I have to know what is going to happen because something is going to happen. So, I watched and said "Okay, this is what I want you to do; I want to stop the bus from driving up in the horseshoe and picking up. Now Ms. London, what is going to happen if this stops? I want the bus to stay on a straight line so it can move fast." She said, "Well, now I don't know." I said, "Don't scratch your head and tell me that; tell me what's going to happen" and she told me, "You're going to get a bunch of phone calls and a bunch of parents at your board meeting." "Why is that, Ms.

London?” “Because they want to stand inside their doors and watch the kids get up on the bus. They ain’t coming down to no corner and watch them get on the bus.” I just let them do what they have been doing for years. If you do not ask--you see, when you are an outsider, they are not going to tell you. They only answer the questions you ask them; they are going to let you trip yourself up.

**Rosalyn-** A superintendent needs to select at least 50% of their cabinet and the reason for that is every community that you go into, large or small the networks are already established. When that superintendent goes on that job, there is a political culture, and there is a professional culture and that superintendent has to strike a balance between the two. But, meanwhile, you need someone that you do not have to worry about as you sort of learn the turf and get yourself together to drive the engine.

### **Good old boy’s network**

At the root of the good old boy’s network are two competing concepts. Hudson (1993) generally describes the good old boy’s network as an informal system of networking between men whereby they help each other get to the top of an organization. In this context, the practice of organizational leaders reaching back to extend opportunities for promotion to qualified others is good and decent; however, the lens, through which, many black people view it points to intentions that are less than good and decent. Half of the participants could speak to this based on their own experiences.

**Rosalyn-** You might have to sit down to the table and have lemonade with the ole boys; you know what I mean? You have to go to the kitchen table and eat a meal with folk who think they own the school district and the county and it is important to have a relationship

with the key leaders in the community. So, in this position, you are not an island; you cannot stand-alone because the schools belong to the community.

**Rosalyn-** When I went to superintendent's conferences, one that especially has etched a place in my mind--we were at a camp in Jackson, GA. The cafeteria was at the top of a hill and the auditorium where we met, was at the bottom of a hill. I remember when we went to that conference that we did breakfast first in the cafeteria and I remember when we went into the auditorium area, I kept saying to myself, "man this looks like a sea of just white men; the good ole boy's network." It was so clear-- and there were only three of us at that time as superintendents, three black women, and we only had about maybe about two or three men. If you can imagine 180 and only about five or six of us there, it etched a picture in mind forever. Initially it was chilly, but as they got to know me, it was like... looking out for me.

**Rosalyn-** It is amazing to me how I have always heard the board members say, even when I go to conferences, "we need to find us a good strong male superintendent" and so, I always understood that. They always look upon women primarily as maybe knowledgeable but not strong enough for the job.

**Tamara-** I can only speak from the experiences I have had as far as maybe being in on conversations with the powers that be and again, it is all through relationships. So, if you are not part of that structure, you are not going to be a key player in the political arena so, trying to become a part of that may be more difficult--it is more difficult. You have more white legislators than you do black; you have more white school officials than you do blacks. So, those are the kinds of structures I am talking about. So, that would impact some of the things that you do in your district.

**Patricia-** It was like a closed system. They did not want anybody from the outside in that system. So, the first thing I did was to get communication with the county school district closest to my schools and got people involved and talking. It was not easy, it was not easy because I did not know what to expect. I was in North GA and in a system that had 13% black kids and I do not know if you remember when Oprah Winfrey came down and marched against racial dissonance, we are right next door to that county. That gives you a general idea of what it was like.

### *Theme three: Race and Gender Matters*

Race and gender matters refer to the variables that play major roles in the lived experiences of the black female retired and practicing superintendents of this study. Given that black women make up on a mere 6% of the 180 superintendents in GA (GSSA, 2013), it raises questions about the existence of barriers to executive school leadership for black women. This is even more disconcerting when you consider the number of women represented in the education field of work. In chapter one of this document, there was discussion about the representation of women and minorities in educational administration. Specific concern was raised about the proportion of women in the U.S. population and in relationship to men as well as the proportion of women represented in specified educational positions. Results showed that women represented 51% of the US population, 65% of teachers, 43% of principals, and 7% of superintendents (Shakeshaft, 1999, p. 99). Because women are overrepresented in the teacher role, but grossly underrepresented in the superintendent role, the issues of barriers has a place in this study for analysis. Race and gender hindrances, the application and interview processes as barriers, and southern practices that keep women in a “woman’s place,” are the sub-themes associated with this theme.

## **Race and gender hindrances**

**Rosalyn-** When you get to this level it is very lonesome. Even though the predominance of the teaching culture is made up of females, females actually prefer male principals and male superintendents.

**Rosalyn-** I think the real challenge was it was never galvanizing support. In fact, I had been recommended to become an assistant superintendent in the district; however, race played a card. This is not racial, but race. In that school district the superintendent, who was a white superintendent, had already hired three black assistant superintendents; there were six slots to be filled. On the night that I was to be recommended for the assist superintendent slot, a community group brought another black girl to fill another position, not necessarily the position that I was going in, but another position. While no one said it, it was clear from the community, from the newspaper--the slant of everything that I completely missed out because that community group forced his hand to put another person in the chair. It becomes political at that level and I clearly understood that. I did not, after that point, put my application in. None of the slots were filled and the slot that I was to go in was not even entertained after that because it would have made the entire slate what? African American and there was room for only one more black person so, that is why I say it was race, but not racial.

**Patricia-** Back in the day, black men were not the ones that got the positions; they still are not really; not as much as they should be, but they were definitely not then. I think they would rather have seen a black woman get that position than a black man, although, there was not a black men who applied.

**Rosalyn-** Well let's put it like this, I do not know that race actually hindered me; I just think the playing table always looks different if that factor is not there. I was probably one of the youngest to ever go to central office as an African American central office administrator; I do know that. But, at the same time, you cannot help but feel, as you work through getting to know people and watching the projects and them aligning things that, had the pigmentation of the skin been different, I would have soared much quicker. I feel very strongly about that.

**Rosalyn-** For the job that I acquired, I think after the African American superintendent lost out before me and he was a man, I absolutely heard a board member say, "we're trying a woman this time, give it your best shot, Rosalyn." I felt a need to really show strength as a woman leader.

**Cynthia-** Race rules here. Race matters in GA.

When asked about race and gender hindrances in her district, Tamara replied:

**Tamara-** There were several things that had happened in the community and in order to balance things and resolve some issues, the board was looking at how to become more inclusive so, they needed more people of different races or different ethnicities to become a part of the decision- making body. Part of that process was another issue; how involved do we want women?

**Margaret-** He was a black man [the interviewer] so; I think with him, it was about females.

### **The application and interview processes as barriers**

Historically, the superintendency has been a white male job and they continue to be the dominate group appointed to the position. Education is a field where black women make up a

large percentage of the employees. It is only natural that they too would be interested in career advancement to the top executive tier of leadership; however, their struggles of pursuing the superintendency while black and being the first black female superintendent of a school district are distinctive and worthy of examination. Black women are not the group that school boards and search firm search for and recruit (Jackson & Shakeshaft, 2003). Black women must find vacant positions and pursue them on their own. Ironically, the very people who overlook them in the search process are the ones who will interview them for vacant positions, and so continues the black woman's struggle for equality and equal opportunities in America. Black feminist thought speaks to the consciousness of this struggle. Collins (2000) refers to it as a legacy of struggle in that there are prominent characteristic themes in the experiences and standpoints of black women. The experiences of the women of this study provide a unique lens through which they view themselves, the community of educators, and society. The school superintendency in GA provides a backdrop for understanding how black women negotiate a system not built for them in the face of race and gender oppression via sanctioned institutional practices.

**Margaret-** I was really young and sometimes people, especially board members--I recall once I was interviewed by a board and the oldest member was almost 80 and he questioned me about my age and the fact that I was divorced. So, the mindset of lots of board members during that time--first of all, a single woman, young, I do not know if they did not take me serious. At the end of many of the interviews they would say things like, you really responded well to the questions, but you're young--and then the older man that I made reference to even made a reference to the fact that I was not married; can you believe? The attorney was sitting there cringing and the man said, "I'm going to ask you all the questions that I'm not supposed to" so, he said to me, "How old are you? Are

you married? Where do you go to church?" As I said (giggling as if she could not believe what he was asking her), the attorney was just cringing when he said those things. I did not get the job, I did not get the job, but you know? That was ok because one thing that you learn, when boards are interviewing you, you are interviewing them as well, and it has to be a good match and so, if it is not a good fit, then you do not want it. So, it was ok.

Rosalyn talked her interview for the superintendency and how she thought being female was advantageous in some regard. She answered the question; do you think being a woman helped you?

**Rosalyn** - I do, I do. I tend to think women pay closer attention to details and their line of questioning was from a specific "how to?" and "what would you do?" I felt like I clearly did an excellent job of answering their questions on the "how to?" and "what would you do?"

**Margaret**- There were some problems because you know going on interviews around the state of GA--and let's face it, we are talking about GA. Some places were in the deep south and so yes, I'm sure there were times when all people saw, no matter what came out of my mouth, was a black woman and so that was a problem. I'm sure there were some concerns, but when people see what you are doing or attempting to do and when you are getting accolades that the district never received before and you're being successful, yeah, some people still have a problem with it. That segment of people--they cannot ever move beyond color and that is sad. You can tell by mannerisms and tone and the way they look at you and the way they kind of dismiss you. You knew you were

dismissed by certain questions they asked or did not ask. So, it was not always blatant, sometimes it was what you could read in their body language.

**Margaret-** If you are really serious about a superintendent, you are going to ask the hard questions. You know when you go into an interview and they ask all the little fluffy things, that was just an interview to say, “well, we interviewed so many people” and then they dismiss you, but you can see that--you can see in the eyes, the body movement, you just see it.

**Cynthia-** First of all, there is the application process and I do not mean the fact that you are writing something down. The fact that you are in a competition, you have to realize that most people wonder why women are in a competition--why women want to do this job. Men are hired based on their potential to do the job. Women are hired based on their experience and so, women have to have the experience in doing certain kinds of things, whereas, men have to look like they have the potential to do certain things.

### **Southern practices that keep women in a “woman’s place”**

Participants of this study revealed a presumption about how black women raised in the south should conduct themselves in the workplace and in the greater society. They suggest that expectations for black female behavior can be a barrier to career advancement.

**Cynthia-** I think Georgia... because I think Georgia is racist state. I think that black people have pretty much been told what their place is in the state of Georgia, in the south really. It is good enough for them just to be teachers and when they get a chance to be a principal they have really made it, much less, think of themselves as being, shucks, a superintendent? That’s really big!

**Irene-** In this community, I do not think there would have been a black male that would have been promoted to this position at this time. I think being a woman brought about some hesitation. I have always felt like I had to, as a woman--and not just in the superintendency, even as a principal, I had to prove that I was able to handle whatever might come through my door and whoever might come through my door.

**Margaret-** As women, we always say people are going to observe us and look at us differently and so, "I've got to do better." Being a black woman raised in the south, we are just taught that you have to do things two times better; you always got to be better. "I'm a black woman so, I've got to be better" was always in the back of my mind.

**Patricia-** I was used to the negatives so, that did not bother me and I knew that I was as good or better than anybody else so, that sort of helped me along the way. When I look at the challenges, since I wasn't aspiring to be a superintendent, all I wanted to do was make sure that I left a mark that was positive wherever I was and that at no time in my career would I leave a place that I couldn't go back to. So, all the things that could have been challenges to me were not challenges. I really still think that my background [raised in the south] helped me because of the experiences that I had growing up made me stronger than most people.

#### *Theme four: Getting There*

Theme four, getting there, refers to the aspirations of black women as it relates to pursuing the superintendency. It also refers to the supportive constructs, with particularly emphasis on mentoring relationship that helped the women of this study to reach the top hierarchal tier of school leadership. There are times when individuals pursue career advancement opportunities and other times when opportunities seem to fall into one's lap. The

women of this study have experienced both, but what they want to convey in this research is that they worked hard and earned their positions. The three sub-themes identified here include the career pathways to the superintendency, mentoring, and faith as a source of support.

### **Career pathways to the superintendency**

None of the participants said there was discussion, encouragement, or an expectation from the workplace that a black female could become superintendent of schools. Only one participant said that while pursuing her doctorate there was discussion, encouragement, and an expectation within her institution of higher learning that black females could become superintendent of schools. None of the participants aspired to the superintendency until after having served in some position of leadership. In the review of the literature chapter, Ortiz' (1982) theory about the typical pathway to the superintendency was cited. The author described the movement between boundaries as classroom teacher to assistant principal, assistant principal to principal, principal to central office administrator, central office administrator to superintendent. This study found that most of these superintendents experienced atypical pathways to the superintendency. Not only are they different from the mainstream pathway as described by Ortiz, they are different one from another. An illustration of career pathways is included in Table 1.

Rosalyn did not aspire to the superintendency until after she served as staff development director.

**Rosalyn-** Before that, I didn't give it a thought. Somebody brought it to my attention when I was curriculum director. Patricia did not aspire to the superintendency until after she served as principal.

Table 1

Career Pathways to the Superintendency Overview

	Teacher	State Bd. Of Ed.	Asst. Principal	Principal	District Admin.	Asst. Supt	Supt
Supt 1 Patricia	√(1)		√(2)	√(3)			√(4)
Supt 2 Margaret	√(1)			√(2)	√(3) curriculum director		√(4)
Supt 3 Rosalyn	√(1)				√(2) & (3) curriculum & staff dev't director		√(4)
Supt 4 Cynthia	√(1)	√(2)		√(5)	√(3), (4), & (6) teacher on loan, dir. Of student support, & manager	√(6)	√(7)
Supt 5 Irene	√(1)		√(2)	√(3)	√(4) curriculum director	√(5)	√(6)
Supt 6 Tamara	√(1)		√(2)	√(3)	√(4) student services	√	√

*Note: parenthetic numbers indicate order of career movement*

**Patricia-** My parents just always told us that you have to be twice as good as anybody else so, I always worked hard at trying to do things right and do it better than most people. I did not have any idea that I was going to end up--you have to remember—now here I am, a country girl from rural GA. We were on a farm; we were sharecroppers. I was not aspiring to be a superintendent; all I wanted to do was make sure that I left a mark that was positive wherever I was and that at no time in my teaching career would I leave a place that I could not go back to.

**Margaret-** I think it evolved over time, but when I was working on my doctorate, it was like an expectation. They did not talk to us about if you come to the next position it was when you become superintendent or when you become president of the college so, it was an expectation of the university. They expected us to get to the top position. If you were in secondary education, then you were supposed to be a superintendent, if you were in higher education then you were supposed to be president or dean of the university and so that was the mindset.

**Tamara-** In fact, I had retired.

**Irene-** My aspirations were for director of curriculum.

**Cynthia-** I didn't actively pursue the superintendency until I left the high school principalship.

## **Mentoring**

According to Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey (1995), “mentor is defined as someone who provides counsel and moral support for an aspiring administrator” (p. 410). None of the study participants indicated that they benefited from formal mentoring relationships, though, some responses revealed a belief that selecting one's own mentor is important.

**Rosalyn-** I didn't have a mentor. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. All I can tell you is sometimes an ordination of your progress takes place. You do not know where it comes from and so I never really focused on just becoming superintendent. I did my job and did it well wherever I was and if the opportunity was there, it came to me.

**Margaret-** We had mentors in that class [Doctoral program] and we had sitting superintendents come to talk with us and to help prepare us.

**Tamara-** There were no mentors or coaches or things of that nature for me so, it was basically my own research and professional development that got it.

When asked if she thinks it is necessary to have a mentor at this level, she replied, "No. To be honest, no." Irene had a mentor, but not formally so.

**Irene-** I chose an administrator who was in our central office that I saw a lot of skill as a director of curriculum. We had a conversation and I told her what my aspirations were and she took me under her wing and she made sure I knew what I needed to if I wanted to be a part of the central office.

Cynthia participated in a preparation program for school superintendents. When asked if she had a mentor, she replied:

**Cynthia-** No, I have never had anybody that has been formally assigned to me; I have selected somebody. I cannot even remember if somebody told me I should have a mentor or if I just knew I should. I've always known that I should set goals for myself and so, I set goals like, I'm going to have a Doctorate, I'm going to make a move, I'm going to buy a house, or something. I play tennis so I play tennis with somebody that is better than me. I want to be a superintendent, I am going to talk to somebody that is a

superintendent, and I am going to talk to somebody that has been a successful superintendent.

### **Faith as a source of support**

Witherspoon (2008) posits, “a separation of church and state and the public and private offer only a perceived buffer among faith and schooling” (p. 5). As a black female educator and researcher who often participate in workplace dialogue about faith and God’s plan for me, I assumed that faith and spirituality would be dominant threads in the data among all of the superintendents, but it was not. Only two of the participants cited faith as sources of support in their quest toward the school superintendency. One other spoke of family as a source of strength and support.

From childhood and throughout her career, Patricia considered herself a spiritual person, believing that God had a plan for her. In her superintendency, there were hard days and she turned to her Bible for comfort, guidance, and support. She tells of a story, at the time of her retirement, when a newspaper reporter from a neighboring county who loved her, but was widely known for being a bigot, wrote an article about her tenure as superintendent. His article read, “You have never seen black and white come together as you had with this superintendent.” She reflected on her upbringing in a rural and racially divided community to account for the kind of spiritual educational leader she became.

**Patricia-** I attribute all of that to my upbringing; I mean there are certain things that you just learn as a country girl. When you think about--I go back to my childhood when we knew it could not have been any different then. We used to work side-by-side with white people in the cotton fields during the week. We were best buddies during the week and on the weekend, when you go to the city, they didn’t know you. So, you learn how to

handle those kinds of situations from long ago. I had read Psalms 37 so many times when I was superintendent. I tell you, I would go in there, I would read Psalms 37, and I would come out and could do anything. If you are ever in administration, you need to have it out... read Psalms 37. But, I would not give anything in the world for my experiences.

Irene also talked about God and prayer as sources of support in her pursuit of the superintendency.

**Irene-** I prayed about it and came to a realization that this is something that I needed to do. I feel like this has been what God has called me to do and I am going to be successful because it is what He wants me to do.

#### *Theme five: Evolution of the Black Female Superintendency*

There has been significant changes in education since the era of Catherine Beecher and Horace Mann when there was very little that a black female could do in public education other than teach in very specific communities. Some of those advances are easily distinguished while others are more subtle and can be noted best by those who have navigated through the system to offer an inside perspective. Theme five, evolution of the black female superintendency, refers to how the experiences of the study participants have changed from 1984 to now in GA. Because black females are progressing to the superintendency at a much slower rate than white females in GA (GSSA, 2013), it raises the concern that the more things change the more they stay the same. In this study, only the retired superintendents were asked to talk about how the experiences of black female superintendents in GA have changed overtime because they have knowledge of institutional practices that spans from the time that the first black female was appointed in 1984 to the present day.

**Rosalyn-** Even as I listen to--and I serve on the board in my county right now... board of education... and it is interesting as we discuss the need for another superintendent. It is amazing to me how I have always heard the board members say, even when I go to conferences, “we need to find us a good strong male superintendent” and so, I always understood that. They always look upon women primarily as maybe knowledgeable but not strong enough for the job.

**Margaret-** I don't know that it has, I really don't. I don't know that it has and based on the numbers, has it?

**Rosalyn-** Oh, we have more women superintendents. I think that as we serve and prove that we can do the job that it surely does open doors for others. An honest account of mine is that women are not necessarily—African American women are not necessarily sought after.

**Patricia-** I'm not sure how to answer that. I know the numbers are low. I'm not sure we have that many who wants to go through the frustrations of being a superintendent; that's not an easy job.”

*Theme six: Second Set of Rules*

The data suggests that there exist different rules and expectations for black women who aspire to the superintendency than there are for men and white women. This discovery led to a curiosity and desire to learn about the advice the women of this study would offer to women, black women in particular, who aspire to the superintendency in GA. Black women who have made it to the top executive tier of leadership have a responsibility to help others overcome barriers to success. The advice from these superintendents is a step toward the view of the first tenet of BFT to resist practices of oppression (Collins, 2000). One way to do that is through the

sharing of vital information about how to prepare oneself to break through invisible ceilings to success. Theme six, second set of rules, refers to what the women of this study view as critically important to be a successful superintendent in GA. The interview questions were posed in two parts in an effort to highlight how black women have the burden of trying to be successful in leadership from two distinct perspectives - the woman perspective and the black woman perspective. The questions were

(1) Based on your experiences, what advice would you offer women who aspire to the superintendency in Georgia?

(2) How might your advice differ if giving it only to black women?

To the first question soliciting advice for women pursuing the superintendency in Georgia, Margaret advised:

**Margaret-** I would say that you really have to get your certificates in place and your degrees in place. In GA or the nation, most superintendents have doctorate degrees so you just have to get your paperwork, that is just a given. You have to have a good handle on curriculum. Yes, you are going to have someone in place to do that, but you have to have some knowledge of curriculum and instruction yourself. You have to have a good handle on finances, budgeting, and the budgeting process. Yes, you are going to have someone in place to do that, but you are responsible because the board holds you accountable and so, you still have to have a knowledge base. Then, you have to allow people to do the job, but you still have to be on top of it at all times.

To the second question specific to black women, she advised:

**Margaret-** In addition to those things I would add, just like my folks always added, you have to work harder. I mean, you just have to work harder and I would hope that we will

get to a day when we get beyond that, but in this day, you still have to work harder and smarter.

To the first question soliciting advice for women pursuing the superintendency in GA, Rosalyn advised:

**Rosalyn-** Do not come to the table without your credentials and experience. Many times people will ask if you require a doctoral degree. They say “maybe or maybe not,” but the advantage is to have it. I just know the difference; there is credence to the terminal degree when you are African American. I would recommend that anyone aspiring to become a school superintendent would spend time truly learning the art of school finance and would spend time in schools and at board of education meetings.

To the second question specific to black women, she advised:

**Rosalyn-** You have got to prepare. You have to look the part, sound the part, talk the part, but most of all, know. So, you cannot come to the table without knowledge, credentials, and understanding.

To the first question soliciting advice for women pursuing the superintendency in GA, Patricia advised:

**Patricia-** Do double the work that you are supposed to do all the way up and then be prepared. I always say always get yourself prepared educationally and now, you need a Doctorate degree... a black person does.

To the second question specific to black women, she advised:

**Patricia-** You have to be ready for when the time comes and be able to defend why you want to be a superintendent. You have to show that you are better than most of those folks who are applying for those positions so they do not choose them over you just

because they are white and someone they want. I think now, we are really better preparing ourselves. We are getting ready for the position so, that it is going to be hard for them to say no and I think that is the only way you going to do it. You are going to have to make it hard for somebody to say no to you. Have it shown your record shows that you are a leader; you have been involved in community; you have been involved in all those things that aid you in being a leader. They are going to look at all that stuff so, involvement in the community is just so important. You have to position yourselves right. If you aspire to be a superintendent, you need to do all the things you know to get yourself ready for that now, more than any time before now.

To the first question soliciting advice for women pursuing the superintendency in GA, Irene advised:

**Irene-** Go for it, and have a very hard shell. Know that this job is going to be very lonesome sometimes, but stay the course. You have to have your own value system; you have to know in your heart and in your soul why you are doing this job. If you are not doing it for the students then you do not need to be in this job. This job is not one for individual accolades; you are here as a servant to those boys and girls in your community and if you are not going in it in that regard, you do not need to go into it because it is not all about. It is not for your glory; it is because of those students out there and I feel like if you go in it understanding that that is why you are here, you will be successful.

To the second question specific to black women, she advised:

**Irene-** Sometimes we second-guess what we can do; we second-guess our potential and what I would say to black women is that, you don't second guess what God has out there for you to do. You just allow Him to work through you and in doing that, there is

nothing that you cannot achieve and I firmly believe that. You do not let race be an excuse of what you cannot strive to do. I have spoken with young ladies who have said, “I don’t think I can do it” and my question to them is, “is it that you don’t think you, the person God put here in this earth can do it or you think you, the black woman can’t do it?” No, you go out and do what you feel like you need to do, do not let anything stop you from your goals.

To the first question soliciting advice for women pursuing the superintendency in GA, Tamara advised:

**Tamara-** Be prepared to do the work and know that you really do have to work and understand and be grounded in your beliefs, as well. Know what it is you really want to do. If you really want to make a difference, then how hard are you willing to work for that? So, be well prepared and know what you really do believe, have your value system, and know what that value system is. What do you bring to the organization as a leader?

To the second question specific to black women, she advised:

**Tamara-** Do not speak to the audience based on just race. I say, you have to think of them as human beings. What does this human being need in order to be successful? I think that’s the first piece; what does a person need regardless of skin color, regardless of race, what do you need? That is where you begin that discussion and then you move on. That is where my conversation begins.

To the first question soliciting advice for women pursuing the superintendency in GA, Cynthia advised:

**Cynthia-** I think if you’re from here, you probably know what to do and you probably know how to behave. If you’re not, then you probably shouldn’t come here.

To the second question specific to black women, she advised:

**Cynthia-** I would say you can be a superintendent anywhere, anywhere. Just do not think you have to be a superintendent in a school district that has a lot of black kids in it, you do not. A lot of times, we think that we can only get jobs where there are a lot of black kids and where there are black people on the board because that's the way it is in GA.

### **Chapter Summary**

The results presented in this chapter are explanations for how the six former and working black female superintendents broke through the invisible ceiling to become school superintendents in the state of GA. From these stories, there is evidence that barriers faced by black female superintendents in GA in 1984 still exist in this present day. The set of themes included chartering new territory, the inner circle, race and gender matters, getting there, evolution of the black female superintendency, and second set of rules. The next chapter will be a discussion about the conclusions in relation to how the research questions were answered and how the theoretical lenses were used to analyze the data.

## CHAPTER V- DISCUSSION

“The discussion section is the heart of a research report. It reflects the researcher’s interpretation of the results in terms of the purpose of the study and the outside world. This is the part of the paper in which the author can express opinions” (Portney & Watkins, p. 775). The purpose of this chapter is to discuss of the lived experiences of six former and practicing black female superintendents to understand how and why black women continue to be underrepresented in public school executive administration in the state of GA. Any discussion on how white males in GA dominate in the superintendency is but a reflection of the national and historic trend. Were the condition of black females, who serve in the superintendency, a part of ordinary public educational discourse this research would not be necessary.

Filtering boundaries and black feminist thought are the lenses, through which, I analyzed the data to interpret the vulnerabilities of black women to screening-out processes in pursuit of executive school leadership and to determine if gender, racism, or race-related influences are barriers to the superintendency. The discussion is centered on the research questions:

- (a) What are the lived experiences of black female superintendents in Georgia?
- (b) What obstacles or barriers do black female superintendents have to overcome?
- (c) What are the commonalities among experiences of black female superintendents?
- (d) How have the experiences of black female superintendents changed over time?

The processes of coding, categorizing, and reflective consideration of the data enabled me to draw connections between the research questions and the data.

## **Lived Experiences**

Here, lived experiences refer to firsthand accounts of what is uniquely different about being black, female, and school superintendent. Conveying the lived experiences of these superintendents by lifting their voices to tell their own stories provides for authentic accounts of their experiences. Findings from this study suggest that their experiences are unique and require a supplementary skillsets to negotiate the education system to reach beyond discernible and invisible boundaries that lead to the superintendency. Consensus among the retired superintendents was that they perceived themselves as having walked in the shadows of white men and white women and that the dominant group was automatically well received in the position while they found themselves struggling to gain acceptance. Their responses demonstrated an astute awareness of the historical and current presence of white men in the superintendency, not only in GA, but also across the nation. The following statements are demonstrative of this point:

- “They have a different support system.”
- “The majority of the superintendents are white males and so, they just have people that they can call on.”
- “Their networks are and were historical. Historical in that they have a long, deep-running history of running school districts-- and partnering with the business community. I am sure that every woman superintendent period, black or white, has to really, really push doors to connect with the business world because it is basically man-led.”
- “They did not have to be accepted; they are already in the fraternity... they did not have to be accepted into that brotherhood/sisterhood, mostly brotherhood.”

Some responses were focused more on what it was like to be the first female or the first black female in their districts, despite having accepted their appointments only as far back as 2004. One respondent spoke to a retiring white male superintendent throwing his support behind another white male who was a first year central office level administrator from out of town disregarding her years of service and accomplishments in the district. Schein (1971) speaks to this issue in his notion of inner circle inferring that the inner circle is subjective and that only those who are trusted to keep organizational secrets are invited to the table. He also noted in his theory that as certain individual get closer to the inner circle, the criteria may change. Kim and Brunner (2009) speaks to this issue in their glass ceiling boundary theory inferring that black women suffer greater discrimination in career mobility than others because the “glass ceiling filters out individuals by using criteria of inherent personal characteristics and dominant cultural boundaries” (p, 103). Black feminist thought holds that being black and female is the apex of oppression and that the exiting superintendent overlooking this qualified black female as a candidate for the superintendency is an example of social oppression (Collins, 2000).

Despite Ortiz’ (1982) description of the typical pathway to the superintendency, an assumption of this study is that there is no typical pathway for black women. He outlined the typical path to be classroom teacher to assistant principal to principal to central office administrator to superintendent. Data gathered from these participants supported the assumption that for black females, there is no typical pathway. Not only were their pathways atypical of the mainstream course, they were dissimilar in comparison, one from the other. Irene and Tamara indicated that that their careers did follow in the path as detailed by Ortiz in that they went from classroom teacher to assistant principal to principal to central office administrator to assistant superintendent to superintendent. Cynthia moved from teacher to state department of education,

then on to central office administrator. Next, she moved to principal followed by central office administrator, after which she moved up to associate superintendent and finally to the executive seat. Patricia moved from teacher to assistant principal (AP) to principal to superintendent. Rosalyn's career path took her from teacher to two consecutive central office administrator positions to superintendent and Margaret moved from teacher to principal to central office administrator to superintendent.

Kowalski et al., (2010) and Glass, Bjork, & Brunner (2000) theorized that black superintendents are most commonly managing urban and rural school districts and findings from this study indicated that these participants managed rural, urban, and suburban districts. Two participants served in more than one district. The first was superintendent in two GA districts and in one district; she succeeded a black man in a rural district and in the other, a white man in an urban district. The second managed two GA school districts and one district in a mid-western state. In the first GA district, she succeeded a white male in an urban district, then a black male in a rural district, but in the mid-west state, she succeeded a black female in a suburban school district. The remaining four participants each managed one school district. Three succeeded white men in rural school districts and the fourth succeeded a black man in a rural district.

Two respondents indicated that other people in their districts found it difficult to accept them as both, a serious candidate and as the sitting superintendent. One suggested that people still feel that white men are the ones who should occupy the superintendency. This marks the place where the experiences of black female superintendents are unique. All participants perceived that the playing field is still not leveled for them to compete for the top executive seat in a school district.

A final experience prevalent in the findings is the issue of politics in education. Three respondents brought attention to politics and the political games one must play to be successful. They say that the political game is even harder for an outsider superintendent. Collins (2000) theorized about outsider issues but the way these participants talk about being an outsider within the ranks of their own executive team does not exactly match Collins' framework. To some degree, however, they are analogous. Collins (2000) described outsider within location as a border space in society where decision makers and faux decision makers meet. In her example, a black person is invited into the space of the dominant group and made to feel as if they are equal and have decision-making power. In reality, however, their position in the group is titular and really has no decision-making power because their group membership is not viewed as full membership with all of the privileges associated with being one of them. Elements of the outsider within location applicable to the superintendents in this study are that their position in the group is actual and they possess real decision-making power. What can compromise their position and/or decision-making power is if political games are at play and, as referenced by Tamara, the district's "power brokers or decision-making body" do not support them in their positions or in their decision-making. That is why it is essential to forge good working relationships in the administrative office, the superintendent's organization, and most importantly, the community where they serve.

### **Supports and Barriers**

"Race and gender may be analytically distinct, but in Black women's everyday lives, they work together" (Collins, 2000, p. 269). Where race and gender intersect, there are barriers for those who subsist in the minority group of both categories; hence, the complexity of being black, female, and in pursuit of executive school leadership. Collins (2000) referred to this as an

intersection of oppression. The constructs and people who support black women in and while rising to the superintendency are generally easily identifiable, but the barriers to the same can be covert. It is difficult to delineate every barrier faced by black women in this regard because situations vary widely. Black feminist thought as critical social theory is used to analyze the stories of these superintendents. Collins (2000) submits:

Black feminist thought as specialized thought reflects the distinctive themes of African-American women's experiences Black feminist thought's core themes of work, family, sexual politics, motherhood, and political activism rely on paradigms that emphasize the importance of intersecting oppressions in shaping the U.S. matrix of domination. But expressing these themes and paradigms has not been easy because Black women have had to struggle against White male interpretations of the world. (p. 251)

While attempting to unearth and understand the supports and barriers that these study participants experienced, it was discovered that they most frequently identified the interviewing process as a barrier. Margaret recalled a time when she was asked her age, marital status, and church affiliation irrespective of federal laws instituted to defend against the discrimination and oppression that comes from asking and answering those kinds of questions. She did not have to be asked the two questions that she knew lay at the center of her struggle in her interview; it was obvious that she was both black and female. Though an abysmal injustice to subject the black female candidate to questions known to be unlawful to ask during an interview, an inner strength allowed Margaret to continue in the process and not embark on a course of action to expose the discriminatory practices of the organization afterwards.

She rationalized that while they were interviewing her; she was also interviewing them and had decided on her own that she was not a good fit for the organization. Her subsequent

decision resulted in the desired outcome of the board as she saw it but their tactics for ensuring such an outcome were contemptible. Hiring authorities who operate from a place of bias against black women is one reason that black feminist thought exists. Collins (2000) suggested that because black women have been historically oppressed and remains so in the US, black feminist thought is necessary to expose injustice.

All of the respondents who identified the interviewing process as a barrier to career mobility also indicated experiencing feelings that no matter what they said in an interview, the interviewer seemed focused only on the color of skin or gender. Based on their considerable interviewing experiences, these participants expressed a keen awareness or perceptiveness when, even if not blatant, their candidacy for the executive leadership position was not a serious consideration by the boards that interviewed them. They were able to draw such conclusions based on the kinds of questions asked or not asked, that which showed in the eyes of the interviewers, body language, tone, and mannerisms.

The application process was also identified as a barrier to female career mobility. This is so because applicants are screened by what is written (or typed) about ones' experiences on the application. That can be a disadvantage for women because, according to the responses in this study, men are hired for their potential to do the work of the organization, but women are hired for their experience. If a woman cannot write and attest to her actual experience in certain areas, her candidacy is not a real consideration. Collins (2000) notes that white women in the United States are penalized by their gender but privileged by their race and citizenship status, while Black women are penalized by race and gender but privileged by their citizenship status. A deeply gendered constructs such as this is another form of female oppression that contribute to the continued disproportionate representation of males to females in the superintendency.

Participant responses revealed that while being black posed some hindrances in their careers, being female and black was more advantageous than being black and male in their perception offering examples of how their school districts were not yet ready to hire a black man, but were more open to hiring a black female. Their responses also pointed to a seeming continued preference for males over females in the superintendency by stakeholders, but this did not apply to black males. Black females were perceived as having an advantage over black males.

Another identified barrier has to do with lack of opportunity that can be linked with the third feature of black feminist thought. It reflects the connection between the varying experiences of black women as a diverse group and the knowledge or standpoint they retain as a result of those differing experiences (Collins, 2000). With the exception of Margaret, the participants reported no expectation, encouragement, or discussion in the workplace or in schools of higher learning about the superintendency as a goal for them. Note that opportunities for black people, opportunities for female people, and opportunities for black female people are three separate, yet equally important categories. Rosalyn indicated that because she actually became superintendent, she could not say that race hindered her, but she, as did others, believed that the opportunities would have been more plentiful and easier to attain if race were not a factor. These women resisted the standpoint that black women had no place in the GA superintendency so they developed their own standpoint, which moved them to action. Action in their cases was the active pursuit of the top executive position; hence, thought informed action and action informed thought.

The final barrier involves expectations for black female raised in GA. The respondents suggested that southern practice is such that black women have “a place” and they are taught

how to operate in that space. Cynthia referenced constant reminders that she holds her superintendency in a red state. Being one of only a few blacks in senior leadership, she characterized the boldness of her constituents who persistently and stridently voice their opinions about the current administration and constantly remind her of her race, as “The Obama Effect.” Her point was that the people in her rural GA district view her as the black female superintendent and do not extend the respect her position commands. Instead, they speak freely about provocative subjects in her presence as if to keep her in her place. This situation creates a space for BFT as critical social theory to evoke in Cynthia thoughts about how she thinks the world should be (Collins, 2000). However, given the fact that she is one of a few blacks in senior leadership in her county, the work to bring about necessary social transformation in this regard is not likely despite her desire to see that change come about in the future.

### **Commonalities**

Most of the women of this study were either the first female or the first black female to be appointed superintendent of their districts, but none aspired to the superintendency until after having served in a position of leadership. Neither of the participants reported having a formal mentor either while pursuing the superintendency nor while in their early years of the position but four of them indicated a belief that it is important to have a mentor. Conversely, two participants agreed that mentoring is not necessary to be successful in the superintendency despite the fact that the literature suggests that mentoring is important. According to Beem (2007), more and more state level professional associations are beginning to offer mentoring programs to newly appointed superintendents giving them the opportunity to learn how to navigate the position from experienced superintendents. “While some leaders over the years informally sought out experienced colleagues willing to offer advice, the current programs

formalize the tradition, give it a name and acknowledge the practice's value” (Beem, 2007, para. 5). The state of GA does not offer a formal mentoring program for new and aspiring superintendents. It is entirely possible that district size matters regarding the necessity of a mentoring relationship because as stated earlier, five of the six participants manage small rural school districts; one, with as few as five schools.

God, spirituality, and family were commonly identified as sources of support for the participants. The retired and the practicing superintendents reported a strong and deep sense of trust and faith in God that the superintendency is His plan for them and that with His blessings, they could do all but fail. The practicing superintendents more commonly implied a compelling sense of purpose in their role as superintendent. This is evident in the statements, “I feel like this is what God wants me to do and if it’s what God wants me to do then I have to do what I need to do for these—my children” and “... you have to know in your heart and in your soul why you’re doing this job. This job is not for individual accolades; you’re here as a servant to those boys and girls in your community.” Patricia reported that her strong family upbringing was a source of support. She spoke of growing up poor and having to pick cotton as a member of a sharecropping family. The lesson learned was that there is no greater challenge, including the superintendency, than surviving that time in American history. Another common thread among all participant responses was a belief that because they are black and female, they have to work twice as hard and be twice as good as their white counterparts. This is common counsel used in African American culture with children as a motivator and explanation of how the world works differently for them because of the color of their skin.

### **The Black Female Superintendency Over Time**

Only the retired superintendents were asked about how the experiences of black female superintendents in GA may have changed over time. The rationale for this decision is that they have knowledge and experience that spans from 1984 when the first black female was hired to the present. Unanimously, they raised their voices and echoed the findings of Jackson and Shakeshaft (2003) by suggesting that there is no appreciable increase in the representation of black women in the superintendency in GA. They acknowledged that, while more black women serve than ever before, they are not represented in proportion to the number of black female educators in the industry.

They all agreed that the primary reason for this is the lack of opportunities citing that many boards actively continue to seek men and white women for the position. The other reason is that, as a personal choice, black women may not seek the superintendency. The intent here is not to discount the gains made since 1984, but to acknowledge the fact that black women are progressing at a much slower rate than white females in that area.

### **Advice**

Each participant was asked about the advice for females aspiring to the superintendency and the practicing superintendents' responses were different from the retired superintendents. The common thread among those who still practice was the importance of having and knowing one's own value system. The common thread among the retired superintendents was the importance of credentialing, suggesting that the terminal degree renders the black female a more desirable candidate for vacant positions.

Given the unique experience of being black and female in the superintendency, each participant was asked if their advice would change if they were addressing black females only. There was no common thread among the practicing superintendent responses, but their advice included 1) black women should never second-guess what God has planned for them, 2) do not fall victim to race and gender barriers, and 3) never limit oneself to just the black school districts as an option to serve. The common thread among the retired participants was that black women must work harder and get prepared. Brunner and Kim (2010) explained preparedness using three dimensions; they are formal, experiential, and personal.

Formal preparedness is defined by the advanced educational administration training/education that can be received through the conventional coursework and programs offered by all types of institutions (colleges and universities) of higher education. Experiential preparedness is characterized by candidates' actual employment record (direct career experiences) and other experiences that could contribute to the quality of professional performance (these include indirect career experiences such as professional relationships, e.g., mentoring). Personal preparedness is defined as one's personal attitude towards both the pursuit and the role of the superintendency. (p. 277)

From the responses in this study, getting prepared include understanding school finance, understanding curriculum, understanding budgeting, attending board meetings, and getting involved in the community.

### **Differences and Similarities Between the Retired and Practicing Superintendents**

The researcher assumed that there might be significant differences in how women from both groups reached the top executive position given the eras in which they served; however, it appears overall, they had very similar lived experiences. The only major difference discovered

in the study was their pathway to the top executive position. Two of the practicing superintendents did follow the typical pathway as described by Ortiz (1982) while career mobility for the others involved very atypical moves. Definitively, there were more similarities than differences among the groups. Each group demonstrated a keen sense of awareness that race and gender were variables that created barriers for them in ways that they did not for men and white women. Despite barriers, all women from both groups demonstrated great pride in their achievement and their belief that black women are as capable as any other group of successfully leading school systems. Women from both groups were not aspiring to be superintendents until after they served in some other leadership capacity. None of the women from either group benefitted from mentoring relationships to help them move up the career ladder while all women from both groups replaced male superintendents in GA and managed small rural school districts.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

“Sex, like race, has been made the basis for unjust or at least unproved assumptions concerning an individual’s potential to perform or to contribute to society... These distinctions have a common effect. They help keep woman in her place; a place inferior to that occupied by men in our society” (Ginsberg, 2014, Makers Video). The superintendency is a complex job and I submit that adding the variables, black and female, further complicates it.

Research that informs this study as theoretical perspectives and supporting evidence assert that there are barriers that thwart the career advancement of black females in education. The Federal Glass Ceiling Study offers salient information, under the headings of individual, group, and organizational level barriers, regarding tangible and intangible constructs that function as barriers to the career advancement of black women in Corporate America. Recall

that Kim and Brunner (2009) augmented Schein's (1971) filtering boundaries theory within the model of organizational career mobility to include glass ceiling. Glass ceiling is conceptualized as an invisible boundary and filtering system where, at the top levels of leadership, race and gender is the basis for screening out minority group members as desirable candidates for promotion in the workplace (Kim & Brunner, 2009).

Results from this study suggested that the barriers outlined in that commissioned study are transferrable to the field of education. Individual level barriers speak to subtle racism and prejudice, which is a theme, gathered from the participants' responses to interview questions specifically formulated to better understand if and how racism and sexism is experienced in moving up the ladder to leadership in education. As the participants described, racism and sexism are generally inconspicuous, however, intuition and sensitivity to the subtle acts that occur around them makes them keenly aware of its presence despite efforts to disguise it. Edmonson-Bell et al. (1994) stressed that individual barriers have more profoundly negative consequences for black women because of the secrecy and veiled activities that can have devastating and damaging long-term effects on the group as a whole.

Information gleaned from this study also reveal that formal mentoring as an aspiring superintendent, or while new in the office, is not an option sponsored and provided by the GA School Superintendents Association. Organizational failure of this kind is denoted in the Edmonson-Bell et al. (1994) critique of the Glass Ceiling Study under organizational level barriers. The participants who benefitted from a mentoring relationship did so on their own by selecting an individual of their own choice. While there is no assumption that their mentors were not adept and capable, mentoring programs sanctioned by formal authorities and charged with developing future leaders provide easy access to the highest quality mentoring. The Glass

Ceiling Study advanced the notion that black females suffer a great disadvantage because where racism persists, and biased and prejudiced behaviors undermine black women's career advancement, there is difficulty in finding quality mentors to help them develop the skills to do the job proficiently.

The black feminist thought (BFT) perspective is critical for understanding that only these black females can tell the complete and authentic stories of their rise to, and control of the school superintendency in the face of racism and sexism. The intellectual fortitude of black women, according to BFT, should not be marginalized or excluded from the mainstream discourse led by white male ideas (Collins, 2000). Through the experiences, as told by the participants who broke through the invisible ceiling to the superintendency in GA, this study is a reflection of the intent of BFT to present the ideas and experiences of black women at the forefront of analysis. Their stories bring consciousness to diversity and the power of the black woman to move from oppression to high achievement against all odds. It is important to concede, as did the participants in this study, that there are white men and women who believe in equality and will support radical change in the GA superintendency as the fifth tenet of BFT extols the virtue of change. Since BFT is intended as critical social theory, it obliges black female intellectuals and others to contemplate how the world should be and work to bring about necessary social transformation.

As previously mentioned, evidence from the study showed that one of the major changes in GA is the increased number of black females appointed to the superintendency, however, many of the barriers encountered by the practicing superintendents are reminiscent of the types of barriers the retired superintendents faced and overcame from 1984- 1999. Despite this growth

in representation, the disparity in the number of black female superintendents in GA, as compared to men and white women, remains a significant issue.

*Characteristics and qualities of the study participants that led to the superintendency*

After spending time with the women of this study, the question of what qualities do they possess that allowed them to overcome the barriers to the superintendency came to mind? Based on what I learned about them, there are a number of explanations for this, including the belief that their professional aptitude eclipsed societal limitations that infer that black females cannot become top tier educational leaders. Instead, they viewed the inclusion of people of diverse backgrounds in executive school leadership as positive and necessary. Collectively, they were conscious of the different expectations placed on them and were determined to rise above all expectations to be excellent, found ways to access inner circles from which they were often excluded, seized developmental opportunities, rejected stereotypes and preconceived notions that black women are incapable of executive leadership, embraced diversity, and allowed the breadth of their work to speak for them.

Individually, they are unique in their own ways. For example, Patricia is family oriented, kind-hearted, and patient. She smiles and the room lights up because she is genuinely a nice person. She loves children and is optimistic about the educational success of children. Even though she is unassuming, her soft presence commands control of the room. With her level of confidence, I understand why she was recruited by the superintendent of the district where she later became superintendent. Patricia was so good at negotiating the multiple worlds in which she existed that she was able to win over a reporter known to be a bigot.

We conducted Rosalyn interview by phone, but if ever there was a giant in the room, it was Rosalyn. Her presence and confidence was so striking that they came barreling over the

phone lines and could also be detected in the digital recording of her interview. She is outgoing, energetic, task-oriented, highly intelligent, and one of the most articulate people I have ever met. She is also a people's person who thrives on relationships building. Rosalyn has a strong work ethic and I think she works harder now, in retirement, than she did when she was a superintendent.

Margaret has a winning attitude and is easy to engage. She is generous and wants people around her to be successful. She is a determined individual who understands people and systems. She sees the world as one community of people and endeavors to be a voice in the world through her service to others. Margaret is very introspective and looks for the lessons in her life experiences to become a better person and to teach others. She told a story of how her two superintendencies were so different, one from the other. She unselfishly admitted that in her first position, she failed to build organizational relationships. She ran the system as if she had all of the answers to the problems of the organization and her behavior alienated many people, which created multiple problems in the district. When she got the opportunity to move to another district, Margaret made the conscious decision that she could not lead in the same manner. She recognized her own faults, admitted them, and became a better, more inclusive leader. She told me that story to add to the literature, through my research, so that I, and others will never make the same mistake.

Tamara is more private and keeps information close to the vest, which is an excellent trust quality. She is highly intelligent, articulate, and has a heart of service. She came out of retirement to serve as superintendent because she has a love for children and community that exceeds most people's understanding. Like Rosalyn, even though we conducted our interview by phone, Irene's strong and resolute presence came through. She is student-oriented; her every

move is dedicated to doing that which is best for children. Irene was able to remain focused even when personal battles surrounding race, gender, and the superintendency could have easily distracted her. She kept focused on the work of the organization and was appointed to the top executive seat after the white male before her survived only a few months on the job.

Cynthia is smart, politically savvy, confident, and courageous. Moving south to be a superintendent was a revelation for her and she still marvels at the limitations placed on black female career advancement in GA. Cynthia had no one to tell her what to expect about the culture of GA's educational system, but she knows how to press people for information to get her job done. Cynthia is a determined individual who looks to prove that black women can be great superintendents.

These women broke through the invisible ceiling to become top school system executives. Even without formal mentors, they were able to negotiate boundaries designed to keep them from the kind of career advancement afforded to men and white women. The qualities, characteristics, and attitudes that describe the women of this study is what is required to accomplish what they have accomplished.

#### *Implications for practice: Policy and school districts*

It is undeniable that there are barriers to black women achieving the public school superintendency. Solutions to increasing the number of black women superintendents in GA are to look for them, encourage them, and to establish formal mentoring programs to guide them. It is hard to reach a goal that has not been set. As mentioned in chapter one, women represent 65% of teachers, 43% of principals, and 7% of superintendents (Shakeshaft, 1999). Although the data from that source does not reveal the number of black women holding either of those positions, we can glean from the national trend that, as women's careers advance to leadership, a

significant change begins to occur. That is, women fall off substantially in their representation among the ranks of executive school leadership. Clearly, there are issues that can be described as barriers to success that discourages or limit the presence of women as they move through the pipeline to executive leadership.

It is essential that state educational leaders, policy makers, consultant/search firms, and school boards expand their collective thinking and recognize that there are advantages to having more black females in executive school leadership. Diverse individuals bring about diverse thinking. The 21<sup>st</sup> century learner, 21<sup>st</sup> century instructional practices, and the overall landscape of education today is worlds apart from the educational system of 1984, when the first black female superintendent was hired in GA. Georgia's education stakeholder population is more diverse than ever; therefore, the population of executive school leaders across the state should be reflective of that diversity. Bias that influences judgment starts somewhere and I submit that it starts very early on in childhood when we learn how to treat and how to think about other people. Bias may be conscious or unconscious, yet, outcomes of bias and prejudice remain the same. One might be flabbergasted to realize the deeply held unconscious biases that inform behavior and decision-making. Johnson and Kruse (2011) posit, "Many decisions educational leaders make are biased in the sense that they advantage certain individuals and/or groups over others" (p. 81). Because bias does not dissipate at the point when individuals become organizational decision makers, it is conceivable that some individuals are prone to promote and hire in one's own likeness. In strategizing to ensure fair and rational career mobility, school districts have to acknowledge that the problem exists, and then invest budgetary dollars for trainings with objectives to eliminate bias from the equation when it comes to equal hiring opportunities for black women.

*Implications for practice: Institutions of higher learning*

The number of black women pursuing the school superintendency in GA is elusive because there is no system for tracking them, but research show that black women are underrepresented in the superintendency in Ga and across the nation. In Ga, black women represent 6% of the total superintendents (GSSA, n.d.) and according to the AASA Decennial Study (2010), blacks represented 2% of all superintendents across the nation (Kowalski et al.). Specific data about the representation of females among that 2% of black superintendents is missing from the study. Increasing the number of qualified black women in GA is critical for combating the shortage of the underrepresented group both in the state and across the U.S. Colleges and universities can play a pivotal role in sparking an interest in the specialty area by offering a course about the school superintendency for education majors at the undergraduate level. This is an excellent time to get those future educators thinking about where a career in education can take them and how to start thinking about the pathways to get to the top tier.

Data from this study indicated that while in graduate school, there was no emphasis placed on the superintendency as an option. Graduate schools of education can further simulate thinking about the superintendency by working with their state association of school superintendents to invite postgraduate education students to participate in superintendent conferences at the state and national levels. Exposure to executive leaders of education and the ability to participate in a dialogue with them can inspire interest in the role. It is wise for students to take the most relevant courses that align with their career aspirations. If black women are encouraged and taught that the superintendency is as much an option for them as it is for any other group they might make different decisions about their career goals. In that vein, Institutions of higher learning must make a concerted effort to engage with schools of education

at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and offer joint programs that target and work with black women who are interested in studying and learning about the school superintendency as a career choice.

In every local education system, there are black female educators who have leader roles, but not leader positions. These working professionals are also not the ones who are enrolled in graduate studies, though they have aspirations of securing an educational leadership position. Those professionals are prime candidates for executive leadership academies that colleges and universities can sponsor, in conjunction with State departments of education and local school districts, to provide the level of expertise necessary to prepare those leaders for leadership positions.

*Implications for practice: Black women who aspire to be superintendents*

As previously mentioned, state educational leadership, legislators, consultant/search firms, and school boards have a responsibility to ensure fair and unbiased growth and achievement opportunities within the profession. In addition, black women have a responsibility to their own career mobility. Black women cannot take on the role of victim of the industry; rather, they must look to champion competence and excellence as the basis for promotion and upward career mobility. Black women have to network, self-promote, and make known their intentions for leadership.

Those who have reached the top hierarchal tier must mentor and bring others along; much in line with the way men do it. The common phrase used to describe a form of bringing others along is the good old boy's network, which is a concept that surfaced in this study. I argue that the difference between the good old boy's network and black women helping other qualified black women is that no group of people is disadvantaged as a result. Black women in executive

school leadership must recognize that looking out for other black women is good, necessary, and it works. The first tenet in BFT implores black females to participate in a dialectical relationship that connect black women's oppression to activism. Reaching back, mentoring, and pulling along other highly qualified black women is positive movement in the direction of changing the face of executive school leadership in GA.

#### *Recommendations for future research*

The purpose of this general qualitative study was to attempt to understand the lived experiences of black female superintendents, an underrepresented group in the school superintendency. I sought to identify the supportive constructs leading to the superintendency, the obstacles or barriers to overcome in pursuit of the superintendency, and how the black female superintendent experience has changed over time. Throughout this study, the participants provided insight about their lived experiences, career paths, barriers they overcame, and supports that aided their progress. While great emphasis was placed on equitable distribution at the executive tier of education in GA, this issue permeates the GA borders. I identify three areas for future research to keep the findings of this study relevant.

First, policies and legislation that govern the manner, in which, GA record statistics should be examined. Appeals to the State Department of Education, the GA Professional Standards Commission, and The GA School Superintendents Association yielded no record of the name and landmark date when the first black female superintendent was hired in the state of GA. The process for locating certain groups of superintendents for the purpose of research can be aided by well-maintained official records, ensuring accurate historical data. Jackson and Shakeshaft (2003) deemed the inaccessibility of studies and statistics to be a barrier to research and understanding the changes that occur in the representation of race and gender in education.

Failure to collect and maintain salient information about the existence of black females in executive educational leadership perpetuates the tendency of research to be predominantly focused on white men and women in education.

Second, there is the need for national research that examines hiring practices that allow for biased and prejudiced decision-making. Although this study attempted to explain how the superintendency for black females has changed over time, no significant quantity of data was uncovered to accomplish the objective. It may be that the sample was too small to render rich and robust data or the interview questions were not formulated to best elicit rich and robust data. The interviewing process, however, was identified as a barrier. “Racial attitudes weigh heavy on the choices that African Americans have when seeking superintendencies—whether they are the attitudes held by those who hire or the beliefs of applicants about which openings are available to an African descent candidate” (Jackson & Shakeshaft, 2003, p. 5). School boards and search firms must be unbiased when considering the candidacy of black women for the superintendency. They must also be intentional about seeking out black female candidates for those positions and preparing prospective minority candidates. Until accountability find its way into the management offices of search firms and school boardrooms, the secret biased filtering process of eliminating black women from the pool of desirable candidates, based on race and/or gender, will continue to oppress that segment of the educator population.

Finally, future research should explore the intentionality of black female superintendents as mentors. It is widely accepted that mentors are instrumental in the professional development of aspiring superintendents. They often serve as the intermediary between the individual in pursuit of an opportunity and the opportunity itself (Glass, 2000). “Women and men in positions of power in educational systems must deliberately mentor more women and especially more

women of color” (Grogan, 2005, p.30). Black women in power have a responsibility to give back and should act as passers of the torch in the mentoring role for other black women aspiring to the superintendency. All too often, black women are caught up in the minutia of proving themselves capable executive leaders and missing crucial opportunities to groom and train other black women to also be capable executive leaders. If the 11 black female superintendents of GA each served as mentor to an aspiring black female educator that effort alone increases, by 11, the number of black women to add to the pool of candidates for the superintendency across the nation. Sitting black female superintendents play a critical role in increasing the representation of black women in the superintendency.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Study Interview Protocol for Practicing Superintendents

#### General superintendent questions

1. What is your highest degree earned?
2. How old were you when first hired to work in public education?
3. Tell me how you ended up being a superintendent.
4. Describe the type of school district you manage.
5. Describe any support mechanisms that benefitted your rise to the superintendency.
6. Describe any challenges to your rise to the superintendency.
7. What most prepared you for the superintendency?
8. Once you became superintendent, describe how you transformed as an educational leader.
9. How are you different from the superintendents before you? What makes you different?

#### Race and gender questions

Now, I'd like to switch gears a bit and ask you to reflect on how being an African American woman superintendent may have differed from your White male and female colleagues

10. What was it like being a black woman superintendent in your district?
11. Describe how you think race aided or hindered your rise to the superintendency.
12. Describe how you think gender aided or hindered your rise to the superintendency.
13. What supports do you think are ideal for black women aspiring to the superintendency?
14. Why do you think there are so few black women in the position of superintendent in GA?
15. How do you think your experiences as a black female superintendent may be different from those of white male and female superintendents?
16. Describe how you measure success for yourself as black female executive leader.
17. Describe how you think others measure your success as black female executive leader.
18. Tell me if you think race and gender should be considered when measuring your success as a superintendent.
19. Based on your experiences, what advice would you offer women who aspire to the superintendency?
20. How might your advice differ if offered specifically to black women?
21. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me or that you think I should know?

## APPENDIX B

### Study Interview Protocol for Retired Superintendents

#### General superintendent questions

1. What is your highest degree earned?
2. How old were you when first hired to work in public education?
3. Tell me how you ended up being a superintendent.
4. Describe any support mechanisms that benefitted your rise to the superintendency.
5. Describe any challenges to your rise to the superintendency.
6. What most prepared you for the superintendency?
7. Once you became superintendent, describe how you transformed as an educational leader.
8. How were you different from the superintendents before you? What made you different?
9. Describe the type of school district you managed.

#### Race and gender questions

Now, I'd like to switch gears a bit and ask you to reflect on how being an African American woman superintendent may have differed from your White male and female colleagues

10. What was it like being a black woman superintendent in your district?
11. Describe how you think race aided or hindered your rise to the superintendency in GA.
12. Describe how you think gender aided or hindered your rise to the superintendency in GA.
13. What supports do you think are ideal for black women aspiring to the superintendency in GA?
14. Why do you think there are so few black women in the position of superintendent in GA?
15. How do you think your experiences as a black female superintendent was different from those of white male and female superintendents in GA?
16. Describe how you measured success for yourself as black female executive leader in GA.
17. Describe how you think others measured your success as black female executive leader in GA.
18. Tell me if you think race and gender should have been considered when measuring your success as a superintendent.
19. Based on your experiences, what advice would you offer women who aspire to the superintendency in GA?
20. How might your advice differ if offered specifically to black women in GA?
21. Describe how you think the superintendency for black women in GA has changed since your tenure.
22. Tell me if you think any of your answers in this interview would have been different were you still a practicing superintendent.
23. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me or that you think I should know?

## APPENDIX C

### IRB Approval

Office for Research  
Institutional Review Board for the  
Protection of Human Subjects

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**ALABAMA**  
R E S E A R C H

August 20, 2013

Abilene Thomas  
5733 Winchester Place  
Lithonia, GA 30058

Re: IRB#: 13-OR-27: "Breaking Through the Invisible Ceiling to the  
Superintendency for Black Women in Georgia"

Dear Ms. Thomas:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on August 19, 2014. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Caranton T. Myles, MSW, CIM  
Director & Research Compliance Officer  
Office of Research Compliance  
The University of Alabama



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