

Obstacles to Black Men as Public School Superintendents in New York State

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Obstacles to Black Men as Public School Superintendents in New York State:

A Phenomenological Research Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the obstacles that black men in the world of education have faced in becoming public school superintendents in New York State. The research also sought to identify methods employed by this population that have allowed them to successfully circumvent these obstacles. The study was guided by three essential questions: (1) What specific challenges can this population identify in its ascent to the superintendency? (2) How did individuals already in the position of public school superintendent meet such challenges? (3) What recommendations would these individuals impart to those who aspire to the position in the future?

Findings for research question one were: (a) racism and stereotyping, lack of mentors, unfair and unjust expectations; findings for research questions two were: (a) support systems, perseverance, stress relief; findings for research question three were: (a) becoming as knowledgeable as possible, (b) not allowing others to place limits on who you are and will be, (c) networking, (d) seeking the support of others who share similar experiences, (e) enjoying family and recreation, (f) dealing with injustice in a professional manner, (g) working harder than others to attain success.

These findings confirm what has been identified through the literature review and encourage further research on a larger scale, with different populations and in different geographic regions.

Key Words: Black Men as Superintendents, Black Leadership, Black Superintendents in New York State

Chapter I: Introduction

Public school superintendents have a difficult job. The expectations that are placed upon them require patience, vision, leadership, and expertise. They also must have a working knowledge of the political landscape, and possess an ability to bring ideas and people together. Most importantly, the school superintendent must be able to create success for all students (Wheatley, 1999). The job becomes even more complicated by the fact that our school systems are becoming increasingly more diverse (Hodgkinson, 1999). The need to have a school system leader who both understands and appreciates cultural differences comes second only to the necessity of having this population be more reflective of our national demographics (Schlechty, 1990).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, minorities currently make up roughly one-third of our total population. By the year 2042, this minority will become a 54 percent majority. More importantly for educators, by the year 2023, minorities will comprise more than half of all school-age children. The population of New York State at last census was estimated to be just over 19 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Of that figure, blacks accounted for 17.4 percent (3.5 million) of the total. Yet, out of 720 public school superintendents in the state, they make up only 2.1 percent of the pool (New York State Council of School Superintendents Snapshot, 2006).

Importance of Research

As our nation and world continues to become ever more diverse and inclusive in nature, the importance of young children learning in school systems that are truly reflective of society becomes increasingly more important and pertinent (Delpit, 1995). If students of diverse backgrounds are going to receive a more fair and appropriate

education from our public school systems, then stereotypes that impede their opportunities to do so should be examined and resolved. As Delpit (1995) states “When educational leadership is not sensitive to diversity in the community, teacher diversity and diverse student populations.... There is a tendency to assume deficits in diversity rather than to locate and educate to strengths” (Delpit as cited by Johnson, 2005, p.74).

In studying the roadblocks that are present to African- American males who strive to become superintendents, we need to reflect upon the progress our nation has made towards equality and examine how much further along we need to strive in order to be truly successful. Children of color should experience a professional school staff that is reflective of whom they are, and who understand, appreciate, and share their same values (Delpit 1995). As the leader of school systems, superintendents are in the best positions to be change agents who can make diversity an embraced and accepted reality (Schlechty, 1990). The best manner to send the message that diversity is valued and taken seriously is to ensure that black Americans are more often placed in the roles of education system leaders (Glass, Bjork and Brunner, 2000).

What the Research Indicates

In examining past research into the complexities of African American men as public school superintendents several reoccurring themes were prevalent:

- A) Black men are largely recruited as superintendents in districts that are mainly comprised of minority students. (Eversley, 1999)
- B) Black superintendents are seen as not as “intelligent” as their white counterparts. (Delpit, 1995)
- C) Black superintendents are usually placed in districts that are in the midst of turmoil or extreme negative change. (Scott, 1980)

Researchers such as Glass, et al (2000) note that blacks are woefully under- represented in the superintendent ranks nationally. Less than 2% of superintendents nationwide are black men (Robinson, Gault, & Lloyd 2004). Tallerico (2000) argues that blacks are qualified and can have a more representative percentage in the overall pool of superintendents but that their numbers are suppressed by a “gatekeeper” system that makes a concerted effort to keep them out.

Banks (1991) argues that misunderstandings and the proliferation of ill formed stereotypes keeps the administrative ranks of our school systems from being properly and fairly diversified. The public seeing blacks as academically inferior and not as intelligent as their white counterparts has greatly interfered with their chances of attaining high level administrative positions within public school districts (Delpit, 1995).

Glass, et al (2000) makes note that non- white school system leaders are most often employed to make drastic changes or reforms within their respective school districts. Scott (1980) indicates that blacks in the role of superintendent often have to deal with substantial crises and challenges that are not necessarily faced by their white counterparts.

Eversley (1999) points to the alarming trend of black superintendents only being hired in black or Latino districts with constituents who look and speak like themselves. Scott (1980) also makes note of the fact that minority superintendents nationwide are mostly located in urban areas.

Research in this area has primarily focused on why there are such disparities in the numbers of minorities as school administrators. These studies have also mainly studied women of color with much less available research regarding black men. It has been difficult finding studies that specifically look at the lived experiences of black men in educational administration and the effects of these experiences. This study sought to share the experiences of this target

population within New York State and cast a public light on what they have been dealing with in private. These lived experiences can then be studied to create recommendations for black men who strive to attain the position of public school superintendent in New York State in the future. Additionally, this research aimed to be a vehicle for further discussing the concerns and disparities that still permeate our society and educational systems in regard to diversity and the acceptance of differences.

Individual Purpose and Research Questions

The intent of this qualitative study was to investigate the factors that have impacted the current pool of black male superintendents in New York State in regard to their ascent to these positions of educational leadership. Factors identified in the research literature were explored through interviews with the research participants.

The following questions guided this research study:

- (a) What specific challenges can this population identify in its ascent to the public school superintendency?
- (b) How did individuals already in the position of public school superintendent meet such challenges?
- (c) What recommendations would these individuals impart to those who aspire to the position in the future?

Chapter II: Literature Review

The purpose of researching this topic was to investigate the available data and background information relevant to the school superintendency and the African- American male. Throughout the research literature, several themes appeared. African- Americans in general have

suffered inequitable treatment throughout the course of our nation's history. This societal practice has both overtly and subliminally limited and stymied the opportunities for blacks in the field of education and, more specifically, the position of leadership within public education (Scott, 1980). Though one may hypothesize the reasons for this, research has indicated that black men who aspire to the position of the public school superintendent face the following obstacles (Glass et al., 2000):

Lack of Mentors

Racism in Hiring Practices

Unfair/ Unjust Expectations

The Superintendency

Throughout history, education has always been a privilege of the wealthy and advantaged. In the United States, education became the manner in which persons from any class could rise to live out the American dream. It was meant to be instructional in nature. However, as time has passed, the responsibilities of education became more complex. According to Johnson, (2005), educators were being asked to solve many of society's problems. These problems reached beyond the normal scope of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Johnson (2005) further notes that issues ranged from student housing and staff budgets to instructional supplies and hiring. Increasingly, educators found themselves having to formulate strategies to surmount community issues affecting their students. Largely due to these issues, single individuals were being increasingly designated as leaders of districts as opposed to governing boards or city or town officials. This allowed for more accountability, higher competency and less political gamesmanship in resolving issues. Glass, et al (2000) points out that by 1860, 27 cities in the United States had given individuals the position of school superintendent.

The term “school superintendent” was originally used to denote a position of statewide stature and responsibility. New York had its first state superintendent of schools in 1812. The three primary responsibilities of this position were: planning a system of common schools for the entire state, reporting public funds management and providing school related data to the state’s legislative body (Butts & Cremin, 1953). The position of district superintendent as we know it is commonly believed to have begun in Buffalo, New York and Louisville, Kentucky between 1837 and 1850 (Grieder, Pierce, & Jordan, 1969). The position was needed due to the growth of city districts, the consolidation of rural districts, larger academic curriculum, new compulsory attendance laws and mandates, and accountability (Kowalski, 2003).

The traditional pathway to the school superintendency has been teacher, assistant principal, secondary principal and central office administrator (Tallerico, 2000). Sixty- eight percent of all superintendents nationwide have been either associate superintendents, central office administrators or coordinators (Glass et al, 2000).

Realities of Black America

African Americans have not achieved full equality in the United States (Bell, 1991). African American males are attending college at very low rates yet they are filling our prison systems in astonishing numbers. According to the United States Department of Justice and Bureau Statistics, 40% of all incarcerated persons in the U.S. are African Americans even though they account for only 13% of the general population. Black men

are eight times more likely to have been incarcerated at some point in their lives than their white counterparts, at a rate of 16.6% compared to 2.6 %. (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001).

The number of black men enrolled in a four- year, accredited higher education institution pales in comparison to their levels in prison. At the turn of the century, there were 791, 600 black men in prison as compared to 603,032 who were attending college (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Furthermore, college graduation rates also point out alarming trends. Of all students enrolled in college in the United States, 63% percent of white students who begin college graduate while only 43% of black students graduate (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Black rates of graduation from New York State high schools stand at 54% while whites are at 82% (New York State Education Department, 2007). Unemployment statistics both nationally and statewide indicate that blacks are twice as likely to be without a job as their white counterparts and when blacks are employed, they are likely to make less money for the same occupations than whites (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007).

According to a report published by the National Urban League (2004), blacks have not moved much closer to equality with whites since the civil rights movement. Measuring existing economic, health, social justice, education and housing disparities between the two races, several statistical realities came to light. They are as follows:

- Economics -Black economic status measures 56% of white counterparts
- Health - Blacks' health status measures 78% of whites' health
- Fewer than 50% of black families own their own homes, vs. over 70% of whites
- Blacks are denied mortgages and home improvement loans at twice the rate of whites
- Black males' mean income is 70% of white males (\$16,876 gap); black females' mean income is 83% of white counterparts (\$6,370 difference)
- Education: Blacks' overall educational status is 76% of whites

- Teachers with less than 3 years experience teach in minority schools at twice the rate that they teach in white schools
- Forty- nine percent of black students' teachers lack a college minor in the subject they taught vs. 40% of white students' teachers
- Blacks attain college degrees at a rate which is 63% of that of their white counterparts
- On average blacks are two times as likely to die from disease, accident, behavior and homicide at every stage of life than whites
- Life expectancy for blacks is 72 years vs. 78 years for whites
- A black person's average jail sentence is six months longer than a white's for the same crime
- Blacks who are arrested are three times more likely to be imprisoned than whites
- Black felons are less likely to receive probation than white felons for the same offense

As illustrated by the data in this report, blacks are at an inherent disadvantage in general society and live in a cycle of desolation, despair, and hopelessness.

Stereotypes and misrepresentations of black men have also permeated mainstream culture and society contributing to a negative view of their abilities and intelligence. This general perception then transfers to the world of education where continued racism and pessimistic stereotyping influence the consciousness of black men aspiring to become leaders (Anderson, 2002). Black men who eventually rise to positions of leadership in education, even in a state as diverse as New York, which has the highest concentration of African Americans in the nation, find themselves the lone representatives of their race within that district (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). As pointed out by Thompson and Sekaquaptewa (2002), the feeling that you not only represent yourself as a leader but your entire culture adds to the stresses of doing your job in a competent manner. In New York State, there are 720 public school superintendents (NYSCOSS, Snapshot 2006). Out of this overall population, black men account for only 2.1% of these positions.

Nationally, black males make up only roughly three percent of all superintendents (Shakeshaft and Jackson, 2003). Finding a way to make this number more reflective of the general population is becoming increasingly more important.

Lack of Mentors

There is no underestimating the importance of mentors and sponsors in the socialization and success of aspiring educational administrators (Shakeshaft, 1987). However, because there is a tendency to want to mentor or groom those who are like you, black men often find themselves on the outside looking in (Coursen, 1989). Due to the fact that educational administration positions are white male dominated, the preponderance of selecting mentees from the “old- boy” network is significant (Doughty, 1980). In fact, according to Valverde and Brown (1988), African Americans of either gender are encouraged more by either college professors or other blacks to seek out administrative positions than by whites in mentor positions. The reality of upward mobility for the position of superintendent is that a large portion of applicants of any color that experience success, do so based upon the reputation of the individual sponsoring them (Moody, 1983). If black men receive fewer offers for mentorship or sponsorship, then it stands to reason that they will in turn have less opportunity to advance.

Cunningham’s (1992) research indicates that institutions of higher education are failing to give students of their programs the needed skills to be successful public school administrators. This research also found that while both black and white professionals leave these programs with an equal knowledge base, because of the informal networks to which white mentees have access, they gain valuable experiences and inside knowledge from their mentors that are not available to their black

counterparts. This lack of experience and advice puts them at a significant disadvantage when applying for superintendent positions.

When black men do receive the opportunity to take on administrative tasks and roles, it is usually in a quasi- administrative or diluted capacity (Russell and Wright, 1990). They are believed to have been selected for their positions because a quota has been instituted or a district is practicing tokenism. (Valverde and Brown, 1988). It then becomes difficult for the black male in the leadership position to effectively lead because white subordinates deem his appointment to the position as unfair or unjust no matter the qualifications or experience of that individual.

Until individuals of all races and either gender are able to utilize the same resources and networks, there will continue to be inequities in opportunities given for advancement. Charles Moody points out in his research, that informal criteria are often used for advancement. These informal criteria can enhance or even take the place of formal criteria. Persons with prestige or influence in the field endorse their mentees for available positions. These mentees are usually given preferential treatment due to their association with their mentors and because of the belief that the mentor would only recommend someone who is like themselves and very qualified (Moody, 1983).

Racism in Hiring Practices

Racism in America and in the field of public school education is real. As noted by Omi and Winant (2000), race plays an immensely important role in dictating one's opportunity for social and economic mobility. Being white in America has privilege. Howard (1993) reveals that:

Social research has repeatedly demonstrated that if Jessie Myles, an African

American friend, and I walk into the same bank on the same day and apply for a loan with the same officer, I will be more likely to receive my money- and with less hassle,

less scrutiny and less delay. This is in spite of the fact that Jessie has more education and is also more intelligent; better looking, and a nicer person. Likewise, if I am turned down for a house purchase, I don't wonder if it was because of the color of my skin. And if I am offered a new job or promotion, I don't worry that my fellow workers may feel that I'm there not because of my qualifications, but merely to fill an affirmative action quota. Such privileged treatment is so much a part of the fabric of our daily existence that it escapes the conscious awareness of most white Americans (Howard as cited in Shakeshaft & Jackson, page 6, 2003).

Due to the fact that research has indicated that society as a whole has maintained pockets of overt and subtle racism, it stands to reason that racism would be present in public education as well and plays a role in hiring practices.

Shakeshaft and Jackson (2003) report that in New York State, administrators, search consultants and school board members have been heard to lament that they cannot find African American candidates for administrative positions. Typically, the most common refrain is that there are not enough African Americans in the pipeline. Their research does not support this assertion however. They believe that statements like these are misrepresentations of reality. There are viable black candidates in the hiring pool.

Blacks make up just 12% of all teachers nationwide and only 3% of the public school superintendent ranks (Shakeshaft and Jackson, 2003). In New York State, blacks constitute only 2.1 % of all public school superintendents (NYSCOSS Snapshot, 2006). In 1980, Scott hypothesized in his research that there would be an increase of black superintendents but nothing close to the number of their white colleagues. He also believed that this increase of black superintendents would only occur in urban areas with large-scale problems.

Just as they do nationally, the majority of superintendencies held by black educational leaders in New York occur in districts with black or Latino majorities. These districts are usually designated as troubled systems that face significant social and economic issues (Eversley, 1999).

Shakeshaft and Jackson (2003) researched hiring practices in New York State regarding minority candidates for the superintendency. They focused on 126 Nassau and Suffolk County districts along with community school districts in Queens and Brooklyn. Six percent of the districts in Suffolk and Nassau counties had blacks as leaders of their systems. Eleven of these 126 districts were predominantly minority. Of these eleven districts, seven were headed by black leaders (4 of which were male), while the remaining four were headed by whites. In the year of their study (1999) there were twenty-two vacancies for the position of superintendent, twelve of which were selected for further study. These twelve vacancies attracted 550 candidates. African American males made up 4.5% of the applicant pool while white males accounted for 76%. Only 1.3 % of the original black male applicant pool went on to the second round of interviews while 71.2% of white males advanced. Of those eventually hired, 83.3% were white males, while none were black males. (Shakeshaft & Jackson, 2003)

This doesn't paint the entire picture but their research demonstrates a clear disparity between blacks being hired or even receiving a second interview and whites being hired. The researchers went on to examine the causes for such a disparity by interviewing board members, search consultants, and superintendents within the studied districts. They concluded the following:

Search consultants and school board presidents had not really considered the possibility of hiring any one other than white candidates. Boards did not make it a priority to diversify the applicant pool they chose from and there was an underlying yet prevalent belief that black applicants were only really suitable for black or minority districts. Additionally, superintendent

search firms found it controversial to bring black candidates before boards so they often only introduced white candidates. Blacks who received first round interviews did not believe the effort was genuine. They felt that the interview was more of a formality so that the district in question could state that they made an attempt to hire diversely. Board members also felt their communities were not ready for, nor would be accepting of black leadership. Lastly, blacks were negatively viewed within some of the communities that were involved in the study. (Shakeshaft & Jackson, 2003).

Unfair Expectations

Due to the negative views of society regarding black men, applying for and receiving fair opportunities to compete for superintendent positions outside of predominantly minority districts remains an obstacle. However, when black men finally do make it through the interview process, are approved by the board and community, and find that they have successfully risen to the post of the highest professional salaried position in the public school sector, they are faced with the unrealistic expectations of doing more with less and assimilating into multiple cultures.

Charles Moody (1983) believed that there was a double standard and conflict in expectations of black superintendents. They were expected to do more with less. (Moody as cited in Marriot, 1990). Black superintendents are usually the leaders of districts that have poor tax bases, have crumbling infrastructures, and have experienced substandard academic achievement. They usually inherit districts that whites do not want or think of as second tier organizations. In fact, Moody noted that 80% of black superintendents nationwide worked in these types of districts. Yet, even though they are beset with these disadvantages, they are still expected to have their districts perform at unrealistic levels (Moody, 1983).

American society has made many positive changes towards equality in the 44 years following the signing of the Civil Rights act. Yet black superintendents find themselves at the

helm of districts that seem to be excluded from this notion of fairness and equality. Crary (2004), points to the fact that minority dominated districts in the United States are woefully under-funded when compared to non- minority districts. Though the Jim Crow concept of creating separate societies within one nation has long since ended with the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the echoes of such a mentality still pervade our public education system. With the passage of 'No Child Left Behind' legislation, already failing black districts will fall further to the wayside as funding is taken away for failure to meet progress markers.

African American superintendents are also faced with a necessity to assimilate into two cultures concurrently (Jackson, 1988). They must simultaneously view themselves through the scope of white society and the black community. Black superintendents feel the pressure from those in the black community who expect them to be advocates or crusaders for their own race. Yet, superintendents are charged with creating the best educational environments for students of all races and cultures, not just their own. They must operate within a system and if they tend to overly represent their own culture, then they can render themselves ineffective as change agents (Jackson, 1988).

The status quo of inferior education for blacks is one that has been caused by societal power (Delpit, 1995). Thus, breaking this chain means that black communities and districts have to not only reflect on their own issues but must study the successes of differing districts so that valuable lessons can be adopted. Additionally, the stark reality of our accountability driven education system means that black districts run by black superintendents are not participating in black-based assessments. Students in these districts have to take the same exams that non- black students across the state are taking. So in the opinion of black school leaders, wasting time

focusing on important but peripheral problems only divert valuable time and energy away from the reality of the matter.

Chapter III: Method

The purpose of this study was to investigate the obstacles that presented themselves to black men who aspired to become school superintendents in New York

State. The research was conducted around the following key questions:

- a. What specific challenges did this population identify in the ascent to the public school superintendency?
- b. How did individuals already in the position of public school superintendent meet such challenges?
- c. What recommendations would these individuals impart to those who aspire to the position in the future?

Research Design

A qualitative design was utilized for this research project because the focus of qualitative research is to explore a problem or an issue. This approach was used because of the need to study a group or population, identify variables that can then be measured, or hear silent voices (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research gives power to those who might lack authority and gives the unheard an opportunity to intimately dialogue issues and concerns.

In order to more clearly give all black superintendents in this study an opportunity to articulate their experiences, this researcher utilized a phenomenological qualitative study. According to Creswell “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon.” (Creswell, 2007, pgs. 57- 58). The point of such research is to detail the commonalities of experiences mutually shared by all research participants. Moustakas (1994) believes such a description includes the “what” and “how” of their experiences.

Research Participants

Participants for this qualitative research study were 10 of the possible 15 current African- American public school superintendents employed by New York State public

school districts as of September 2008. This population made up 2.1% of the total 720 public school superintendents statewide (NYSCOSS Snapshot, 2006, p.13). Districts led by these superintendents varied in size and population.

For the research project, this researcher used purposive sampling. In purposive sampling, “the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposely inform an understanding for the research problem and central phenomenon in the study.” (Creswell, 2007, p.125). This researcher selected the entire pool (15 total) of available black male public school superintendents in New York State. Ten of these superintendents agreed to participate in this research project. The other five superintendents did not return phone calls or e-mails. No sub- groupings of the sample population were created.

Procedure

This researcher interviewed nine superintendents via phone conferences and one in a face- to- face meeting utilizing open- ended questioning. All interviews were conducted during the months of March and April, 2009. The interviews were guided by questions in Appendix A. This format of interview questioning was selected to permit for true perspectives to be delineated from the participant’s vantage point (Marshall and Rossman, 1999).

Data Collection

All superintendents who participated in this research were notified and made aware of this proposed study by letter, follow- up phone conversations and e-mail. The cover letter is in Appendix B. The researcher made scheduled appointments with each participant in advance and each interview averaged 30 minutes in duration. Seven of the ten participants requested the

interview questions in advance via e-mail. Interviews were conducted at a private and secure location. The one face-to-face interview was conducted at a participant- designated location. Each superintendent was identified by a color-coded labeling system and all transcribed information and notes were documented and stored in identically colored folders.

The collected data were then stored in a locked safe box at an undisclosed location under the supervision of this researcher for a period of thirty days following the last interview. Once all interview notes and information were documented and the data analysis was completed, the color coded folders along with all transcribed documentation were destroyed. All communications via e-mail were permanently erased from both the researcher's computer desktop and e-mail system.

Limitations

Limitations of the study included: (a) The participants were purposefully selected by the researcher; (b) Generalization of the study was limited due to geographic location and size of the sample; (c) Gender of the participants; (d) Positions that participants held

Limitation A: The participants in this study were purposefully selected by the researcher due to the specific pool that was to be studied. All individuals meeting the criteria of being a black male in the role of public school superintendent in New York State were sought for this

research study. This research pool was not inclusive of any other minority designated group such as Latin American, Native- American, or Asian- American.

Limitation B: The study focused on a specific pool of participants that was located only in New York State. This study did not seek similar participants in other states or geographic areas.

Limitation C: The participants in the study were all black men who attained the position of superintendent. The research was gender exclusive and did not seek to study women of any race in similar leadership roles.

Limitation D: The study was narrow in scope. The research focused on individuals who had attained the top level of leadership within New York State public school districts. The study did not seek to study individuals of the same race in other administrative positions such as directors, assistant principals, principals, and assistant superintendents.

Limitation E: The research for this study was conducted by a black and Latino man. Reporting bias was neutralized through accurate, participant generated, data collection.

Chapter IV: Data Analysis

As a phenomenological study attempts to gain an understanding of lived experiences this research was conducted with the expectation that the researcher would be able to draw together all the commonalities of the questioned phenomenon. (Creswell, 2007) Utilizing Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method approach, this researcher read each participant's transcripts several times in an attempt to extract an overall feeling for them. Prevalent themes were then formulated from the interviews based upon significance of statements and frequency in which topics arose. The topics and statements were then categorized under the appropriate and corresponding research question. The guiding research questions were as follows:

1. What specific challenges did this population identify in the ascent to the public school superintendency?
2. How did individuals already in the position of public school superintendent meet such challenges?
3. What recommendations would these individuals impart to those who aspire to the position in the future?

Research Question One

The participants in this research project were presented with questions that were constructed to gauge the challenges presented to them as African American male superintendents and how they dealt with such obstacles. The themes that emerged from the interviews were:

- 1) Racism and stereotyping
- 2) Lack of mentors
- 3) Hiring practices
- 4) Under- representation within the teaching ranks
- 5) Unfair/ higher expectations of black education leaders

Racism and stereotyping

All superintendents in this study pointed to both racism and stereotyping as very real challenges that they faced on an everyday basis. As pointed out by Omi and Winant (2000), the color of an individual's skin plays a critical role in how that individual's life plays out and what opportunities they are afforded. Participant six stated "I am reminded everyday about my race. It is never in an overt or obvious way but you know it's there. You can just feel it."

Participant two said that he tried to suppress his feeling of working in a racist environment but that “It becomes obvious when every move you make is questioned so much. Everything is open to scrutiny, from the professional to the personal.” He went on to state that he had never known any of his white colleagues to have so many rumors spread regarding their marital status or personal endeavors and some of them were single.

Participant nine stated that he most felt the racism when he attended statewide or large-scale functions in which superintendents from all over the state attend. He was often not spoken to or made to feel that he was an outcast. He went on to describe the practice of superintendents attending dinner after conferences with vendors. This superintendent stated that he would actually be sitting at a table or within a group of white male superintendents while they arranged dinner plans and he would not be asked to attend. If it was a matter of the others knowing one another and not knowing him that would be one thing, but he explained that these superintendents were often meeting each other for the first time. He often asked himself “what am I doing that is causing this?” When he met with fellow black male superintendents over the years, the realization that he was not the only who felt this way brought the truth to the forefront for him. It wasn’t what he was doing but what the white superintendents weren’t. Participant three stated that, though one might think the job of superintendent is high profile, he felt “invisible” when he attended large superintendent meetings as well.

Participant two explained that he had heard on several occasions through “back room” conversations that “he had been hired to meet the quota of diversifying a district” or had been asked several times by persons within the community as the new school superintendent, “You’re the superintendent? You mean you’re the assistant superintendent, right?” Participant one made several comments about himself and his counterparts not being

serious contenders or even being called for interviews unless the vacant superintendent position was in a minority district.

Nine of the ten participants expressed that there was a general feeling in America and in education specifically, that black men were not capable of being good leaders. According to Foster (1995), African American leadership is often perceived as sub par when compared to that of their European American counterparts. Thus because of this, they always feel like they have to work twice as hard as their most successful counterparts to get even a fraction of the rewards.

Lack of Mentors

Shakeshaft (1987) alluded to the fact that aspiring administrators of any color desperately need mentors to help them advance in their careers. The fact that African American males seem to be passed over by potential mentors underscores the disadvantage they are at almost from the very beginning (Coursen, 1989). Participant five noted that he could find no one who wanted to act as a mentor to him in a real capacity. “Sure, I would have persons around me give me useful advice, but I had no one there to really tell me the truth, to scratch subjects below the surface, to be frank and honest.” He half jokingly, half seriously, thought about paying someone to act in that capacity for him.

Participant ten commented that no one other than black men in the role of college professors or community leaders or persons of color who had held similar roles elsewhere would really extend mentorship towards him. He felt envious of his white counterparts because as he stated “everyone knows that a mentor can play a critical role behind the scenes in getting you

interviews, putting in a word with search committees, or having districts look at you with interest.”

Participant six had a different take on mentors. He had a white mentor as one or two other participants had. He thought it was up to him to seek out a mentor and not wait for someone to take him under their wing. He noted, “I am not going to be one of those black men who say that no one wants to help me. I will make someone help me.” Participant one noted that he had never had a black mentor. All of the persons who acted in that capacity for him were white. He did state that he thought he was “in the minority” in that regard.

Ten of the ten superintendents were influenced by others around them in some shape or form over the course of their careers. Some were in the “official” mentor capacity and others were not. Of the ten participants, eight had mentors of color while two had mentors who were white. Of the eight who stated they had mentors of color, seven stated that they also had persons who were not of color who had some influence over their career paths.

Hiring Practices

Eight of the ten superintendents interviewed related their opinions that there seemed to be a shortage of black male representation in education. Shakeshaft and Jackson (2003) dispute this notion and believe that there are enough black men in the education system to assume the role of superintendent in more representative numbers. In fact, they assert that there are qualified black candidates in the pool but they are just not looked for or recruited. When asked about this research, eight superintendents stated that the research was not reflective of their lived realities.

Participant seven noted “looking around New York, there are what, 720 or so superintendents? Fourteen or fifteen are black men? Come on, are you kidding me? That’s it in a state as diverse as this? Something is wrong!”

Participant eight believed that this number will stay the same because that is the way “some folks want it”. He felt that search consultants only looked for candidates that looked like the school board or community. “They don’t want to rock the boat by introducing a black candidate, because they may not be called again in the event of another search being opened.” Participant five stated that black men would not get a fair shot until “black men actually become the search consultants.” He recalled one of his interview processes where he knew that he was more qualified than the other two final candidates but that “the board president of that district had privately lamented that his district practiced their needed diversity obligation by at least interviewing a black person.”

Participant two recalled privately hearing from a friend who was involved with superintendent searches that he should “Find a white person who would vouch for him” otherwise he would continue to only get calls for minority districts. Participant nine concluded that the system was set up in such a way that he and colleagues like him could only hope to get interviews in white districts. He noted “Look at the facts; they are right there in front of everyone’s face. Out of all the superintendents who look like me, how many are the heads of white districts? Two? And they are only there because they are the rock stars. The Baracks, if you will. They don’t want all of us.”

Under- Representation in the Teaching Ranks

According to participant three, “There are some black teachers but the majority of them seem to be women.” Participant four believed that “Our culture doesn’t make it cool to be a teacher or professional. You have to be the next Kobe or LeBron. You have to be the next 50 Cent or Diddy to make it. Educated black men are not often depicted on television. Think about it. When you watch TV, what is a black man doing? He is rapping, playing a sport or being a thug or gangster. What message does this send to young black children? Seriously?”

Participant seven stated, “When was the last time you heard a young black man say I want to be like my black principal or black congressman? Never. They always want to be what they are type- cast by society to be: athletes, entertainers, or that paid drug dealer in the neighborhood with the cars and girls.” Other participants lamented that they want more black men in the teaching ranks but with the realities of societal influences, this may never happen.

Participant one unknowingly agreed with his counterparts when he stated “there are just too many obstacles and burdens for young black men today. Getting paid \$40,000 a year teaching is not going to take their families out of the “hood”. Getting an NBA contract will. But only a small percentage of these kids will ever make it. What will happen with the rest?” All participants agreed to some degree or another that black men will never have the representation in education that is both appropriate and necessary.

In fact, all ten participants acknowledged that there were currently not enough black men as teachers and teacher assistants in the educational systems that they operated. Additionally, participants believed this reality was a by- product of both hiring practices and cultural career expectations.

According to research conducted by the National Urban League (2004) blacks are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than their white counterparts. There are also more black men in prison than there are in college (U. S. Department of Education, 2007). Researchers such as Shakeshaft and Jackson, (2003) believe realities like these are partially accountable for the lack of black men in teaching and other professions.

Unfair/ Higher Expectations

Participant five explained, “I am always amazed that we seem to always be placed in positions of miracle workers. We have to work towards the same educational standards as white districts, yet we receive the most inexperienced teachers, the least funding and resources and are

expected to make it work. That is a set up from the word GO.” Charles Moody points out that 80% of black superintendents across the United States work in disadvantaged districts (Moody as cited in Marriot 1990).

Participant two stated that he had never had a board or community give him slack because he had less money to work with or fewer resources. He commented that he was “expected to perform his duties and have students become successful just as if he were in a district with all the advantages.” He compared the situation that he and his counterparts were in with a professional sports situation. “I liken my situation to managing the Kansas City Royals. I have a payroll of 25 million and the resources of a small market. The white superintendent is the manager of the New York Yankees, with a payroll of 500 million. All the best players want to go there. All the best managers and assistant managers want to work there. He has the resources of the largest market in the country. Is it any wonder that the Yankees dominate year after year? But my Royals fans still want us to be competitive and win the title. This is absolutely unreal and unfair.”

Participant seven lamented that “he will never be able to truly make his students as successful as possible until society as a whole becomes enraged with the inequities that districts like his face. “I am at a disadvantage in trying to turn things around. I know that. But I already have a good education; otherwise I could not have become a school superintendent. I don’t feel badly for myself in facing these disadvantages. I suffer emotionally seeing the wrongs our children face. My students suffer a thousand times because limits are being placed on their potential and what they could become.”

Nine of ten participants concluded that they have always dealt with unfairly high expectations and that there will be always be unfair expectations of black leadership in education. One participant felt that class structure had a more to do with this unjust reality rather

than race. As he noted “I don’t see poor white, rural districts doing any better than inner- city districts.”

Research Question 2

Questions were formulated for the interview of each participant that would garner a strong indication of how each has dealt with and overcome the obstacles placed before them as school superintendents in New York State. The answers that emerged most often were:

- 1) Support Systems
- 2) Perseverance
- 3) Stress Relief

Support Systems

As noted by Kathleen D. Vohs (2006), “Humans have a fundamental need for security. Therefore, they develop characteristic strategies for terminating the activation of the attachment system (i.e., strategies for seeking support, reducing feelings of distress and increasing feelings of security) when they are feeling distressed or threatened.” In short, they seek out others who are experiencing what they are going through, in order to cope with distress.

Participant one stated that he “could not have made it if he didn’t have the support of other black administrators.” He is part of an organization for black superintendents and sees this as a vehicle for dealing with hardships. Participant ten stated, “When you have a bad day, you need the group. When you have a good day, the group needs you.”

Participant three explained that there was so much stress involved with being a superintendent in general, but it is magnified in triple because of his skin color. Being able to talk with individuals who are dealing with the same issues and situations that he is gives him an opportunity to bounce

ideas around and get feedback as to how others have experienced success or gotten through difficult times.

Participant five surmised that he would have left the superintendent ranks a long time ago if he didn't have some colleagues, friends and families that he could "vent" to and have listen to his frustrations. Participant eight stated, "Networks of family and friends are his lifeline in a deep ocean of aggravation and frustration." The other five superintendents not quoted gave similar answers in regards to support systems and leaning on others in difficult times.

Perseverance

There is a Burmese proverb that states: "Who aims at excellence will be above mediocrity; who aims at mediocrity will be far short of it." According to participant two, not only should you aim at excellence but in his words, "Black men throughout history have been through far tougher experiences than I have. Yet, we are still here and still striving. I owe it to my forefathers to work twice as hard as anyone else because my competence may always be questioned but it can never be denied if I have learned everything I possibly could."

Participant six and seven explained that success for anyone in any realm of business or life takes perseverance and determination. Though black superintendents face obstacles that their white counterparts do not, they should never feel self-pity or have a "woe is me" attitude. As participant six concluded, "That type of attitude will never help. No one else is going to make excuses for you and you certainly shouldn't. Deal with realities, figure out how to work through them and then just do it."

Participant nine felt that if "You keep moving forward, no matter what obstacles are thrown in your path, you'll succeed. Eventually they will get the message that they have to throw obstacles in the paths of others because you will not be deterred." Several other participants

agreed that persevering was easier said than done but that anger, frustration and the need to prove all the nay- sayers wrong was motivation enough to stick to their “guns”.

All participants agreed that in order to achieve any success in life that a person had to have incredible fortitude and perseverance, which partially comes from the building of your knowledge base and expertise level. This held especially true when presented with obstacles, injustice, and a dichotomy in fairness.

Stress Relief

According to the Mayo Clinic (2009), positive thinking and participating in stress relieving activities can increase your life span, lower rates of depression, lower levels of stress, reduce risk of cardiovascular disease, and give you better coping skills during hardships and times of stress. Being a superintendent can be a stressful occupation. Couple this with the added stress of racism towards black superintendents and there can be an overall negative impact to both their emotional and psychological health (Utsey & Payne, 2000).

Participant three noted that he unwinds from all the pressures and burdens that he faces by golfing and enjoying time with his family. Participant one explained, “Stress is a frame of mind. If you allow things to build up and not deal with them then they will over- burden you.” He swims, stays active and designates “down time” where thoughts of work are not permitted. Participant ten sought the company of those who are in his plight and gained his relief from stress through their stories and humor.

Participant six stated that: “You can’t take yourself too seriously. Life is short and people are dying everyday for inexcusable reasons. Enjoy your wife and children, seek the comfort of friends and colleagues, and above everything else, make time for yourself and what you may truly love to do.” All participants believed that having networks of people who support you, care for you and who listen to you was the most crucial aspect of relieving any accumulated stress

you may experience in your position. Above all, the superintendents interviewed stated that you shouldn't worry about the things you can't control. Racism, stereotyping, and bigotry are always there. We know that. As participant one stated "You can't let prejudice and injustices define who you are. You are your own keeper."

Question 3

The entire premise of this phenomenological study was to gain insight into what the lived experiences of the participants were, culminating with their advice and recommendations for the success of those who choose to follow behind them. Each participant had words to offer:

Participant 1: "Generally speaking, you will never be prepared enough. Don't let uncertainty paralyze you. Get as many varied experiences as you possibly can. Take risks and always be willing to learn new things. In regards to the injustices you may face as an African-American pursuing the public school superintendency, deal with them. Expect them and have a plan to circumvent them. Make no excuses for why you are not succeeding and work harder than anyone else."

Participant 2: "Being a superintendent is difficult work. The fact that you are an African American man who aspires to the position will only compound that difficulty. Be prepared, academically. Know what you are talking about and leave no room for second-guessing. Join professional associations and create networks of support. Be a competent public speaker and learn to think quickly on your feet. Know and embrace that whether you like it or not, you are an ambassador for your race. Don't allow others to put you in a box and create your own mark on the world.

African Americans like Native Americans, Jewish Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, and others have been persecuted and placed in disadvantageous positions by our society. Don't feel pity for your own plight because others have had worse experiences. Know

that what you do will have an effect on those who come after you. Do what you can to make their road easier to travel.”

Participant 3: “Persevere! Don’t give up ever! The cards are stacked against you from the start but the game is still winnable. As an African American male, you will have to get to work earlier, stay later, come in on weekends, work twice as hard, and know twice as much just to stay even with your white counterparts. But you can’t be bitter about this. It is simply the reality in which you will be thrust into. Be sure to join associations and learn to lean on others in difficult times. I would also say that you should do what you can for others who are in your situation. Remember, what you do is unfortunately a reflection of your entire race. Carry yourself with dignity, poise, and respect.”

Participant 4: “Have a clear educational vision. Know who you are, what you believe, and what ideals you hold. Articulate this clearly and never waiver from them. Be politically astute and make smart decisions based on what is happening around you. Be honest and straightforward while being respectful and sensitive. No one is ever going to hand you anything; you’ll have to work twice as hard as others just to be even. Study as much as you can and learn as quickly as possible. Those who would try to hold you back can only do so if you play the game by their rules.”

Participant 5: “If I could impart any knowledge to African American males who aspire to be superintendents in New York State, I’d say become familiar with the political climate. Know the key individuals and contacts at State Ed and use their expertise. Apply for districts that make a good fit for who you are. Remember all those people you met along the way up because they will be there on your way down. Though New York is a big place, the education establishment is small. Everyone knows everyone, so burn as little bridges as possible. Don’t approach your career with an “us versus them” mentality though it may in fact be that. Play

above those limits and define yourself. Be prepared to be questioned constantly, second-guessed, and even doubted. How you deal with that will be the key to your own success. You should be as expert as you possibly can. Gain experiences through joining district committees; speak with your current superintendent about his job duties and responsibilities. Take college courses even if you think you're finished with school because there is always something new to learn. Lastly, build a circle of individuals that you can trust and who will always have your best interest at heart."

Participant 6: "I would recommend that you try to be color-blind. Now I know that others around you will not be this but you should be. Build bridges to those who are not like you and try to differentiate realities from perceptions. Maintain your personal values and try to understand those of others. Network with people of all colors and don't limit your interactions to those who just look like you. Gain as many experiences as possible and diversify your abilities. Know finance and be astute at communicating your ideas."

Participant 7: "Always ask yourself if what you are doing is good for kids? Always try to live by a moral compass and let that guide your decision-making. Be flexible enough to listen to others. Try to be personable and approachable. You limit yourself if you come across as the angry black man. Get as much education as possible and don't be afraid to ask others for help. Always carry yourself in a professional manner no matter what others might be doing around you. Understand that you will have to deal with unfair attitudes and situations but you cannot show your frustration or annoyance in public. Keep a clean closet and do not allow others to hold anything over your head. Be an honest and good person and that will win out over negativity in the end."

Participant 8: "I suggest to those who follow, that they must push the system and status quo. They have to stop being accepting of limitations and glass ceilings. Understand that no man

is an island unto himself. Lean on others for support and guidance. Surround yourself with trusted individuals who share your ideals. Accept no limits and reach for the stars. If a mentor does not present himself or herself, then you go get one. Make someone take notice of whom you are and what you are about; write articles, and take college courses. Learn who is who in politics and always keep up to date on education trends and reform.”

Participant 9: “Be as knowledgeable as possible. Be so good that no one can deny what you are or what you can do whether they are pre- disposed to do so or not. Leave no room for people to say that you are incapable or incompetent. Know ten times more than others and be ten times better. Look the part. Be polished and professional. Know politics and be savvy and never let others place you in compromising positions.”

Participant 10: “My advice is short and to the point. Being African American comes with many burdens. Most cannot be changed immediately. Others can be changed within your lifetime. Focus on what you can change and help pave the way for those who will come after you. When you attain the superintendency, be the best superintendent period. Not just the best black one. When you settle on what you can do based on race then you have been influenced by society in general to the point of no return.”

Analysis Summary

This chapter reflected on the experiences faced by black male superintendents in New York State and examined the ways in which they overcame obstacles to become successful. The obstacles stated as being most prevalent for this group were: racism and stereotyping, lack of mentors, inequities in hiring practices, under- representation within the teaching ranks and unfair/ higher expectations of black education leaders.

In addition to participating in this research, the studied superintendents gave recommendations and advice to be used by future male superintendent candidates of color. The summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations will be presented in chapter 5.

Chapter V: Summary of Findings and Conclusion

Examining the lived experiences of others is essential in gaining an understanding of unfamiliar phenomena. What people have been through or experienced in their lives affects who they are, what they do, and how they view themselves in our society (Moustakas, 1994). What the superintendents in this research project experienced certainly influenced their career paths, actions they took and their views of the world. This study looked to gain first- hand insight into what is like to be a black, male school superintendent in New York State.

The interviews were guided by the following research questions:

- a. What specific challenges did this population identify in the ascent to the public school superintendency?
- b. How did individuals already in the position of public school superintendent meet such challenges?
- c. What recommendations would these individuals impart to those who aspire to the position in the future?

Several themes began to surface under question 'a'. They were:

- 1) Racism and stereotyping
- 2) Lack of mentors
- 3) Hiring practices
- 4) Under- representation within the teaching ranks
- 5) Unfair/ higher expectations of black education leaders

Racism and stereotyping

The superintendents who participated in this study all agreed that racism was a very real barrier to their success as educators and as black men in general. Due to what they perceived as an ever- present societal bias against black men, attaining success would always be more difficult. All participants felt that they had to work twice as hard as their non- white counterparts to experience the same level of accomplishment. Even the participant who noted that he was mostly helped and influenced by whites stated that he was “under no false illusions that his skin color didn’t play a role” in how he was perceived.

All participants felt that because of their skin color, they were under more “scrutiny” and their actions and decisions were questioned more than their white counterparts. They also believed that their credentials were called into question more often and six of the ten felt they had to often remind others around them of past experience and expertise.

All participants stated that they at one point or another felt the weight of being the “only one” in their district or region. As noted by Thompson and Sekaquaptewa (2000), “solo” status can weigh heavily on the person who finds himself as the lone representative of his entire race. The participants commented that it was unfair to be the “only one” and if districts and school boards in New York were more open minded then they would at least be one of several.

The superintendents also noted their disappointment that in a state as diverse as New York with millions of blacks in residence, there seemed to be clear segregation in schools based upon socio- economics. In fact, one of the participants noted that New York seemed to be one of the most segregated school systems in the country, with whites running white districts and those blacks that were presently in the system running the black districts.

Lack of Mentors

White persons willing to take on blacks as mentees seemed few and far in between. In fact, only two of the ten superintendents interviewed had white mentors. However, all but one participant at some point or another were influenced by someone who was not of color. All participants agreed that having a mentor was crucially important in their development as school district leaders. They agreed that mentors can open doors, assist with navigating tough situations, and can advise mentees of what to expect with the position.

Participants noted that there seemed to be an “old boys” network that for the most part was exclusive of them. These networks helped those being mentored to get interviews with

search committees, opportunities to be looked at by the best districts and the inside track on information.

Most participants also commented that they had to often seek out mentors rather than having those in higher or more influential positions take them under their “wings”. Most were not immediately encouraged by those around them and had to get to a place in their careers where they were deemed as “special” or “unique” in order to have persons who did not look like them take notice.

Hiring Practices

All participants in this study agreed that the chances of them becoming a superintendent for a “white” district in New York State were slim. They agreed that the jobs that were given to them were for districts with populations that were predominately minority and poor. Nine of the ten Superintendents felt that they really had to have a “white” sponsor or person to vouch for them in order to even get a shot at working in a non-minority district. All superintendents interviewed stated that school boards, districts, and communities statewide needed to double their efforts to fairly diversify the leadership of school systems. School boards and districts all too often look for candidates who mirror themselves in appearance and fit their pre-determined mold (Barth, 2002).

Nine of ten participants agreed that hiring practices in the state seemed to be unfair and confining. Several noted that they had lost out on positions to other candidates who were less qualified because these individuals were mentored by someone important, or the school board

didn't want to "stir the pot" with their communities by hiring someone black. Most participants agreed that superintendent search consultants often only looked for candidates that were "safe" and were representative of the constituents that were seeking to hire.

Several of the participants noted that it seemed to be incredibly difficult for black men to get their feet in the door in regards to establishing superintendent search firms of their own or being asked to join already existing ones. They believed that by getting more representation in such firms then they would place themselves in situations where they could exert more influence in diversifying candidate pools.

Under Representation in the Teaching Ranks

All participants in this study commented that there were not enough black men in the teaching ranks to feed the future superintendent pipeline. Their estimations were not based upon any scientific data or procedure but rather by what they have seen coming up through the education ranks as teachers, counselors, business officials, principals and superintendents.

Every participant agreed that it was vitally important for young children of color to see adults who look like themselves in positions of teachers, principals, and superintendents. The participants noted that most black men who found themselves in the teaching ranks were often relegated to schools that were predominately black, Hispanic or poor. Just as white districts don't seem to hire black superintendents, the participants commented that these districts don't seem to be very proactive in hiring black male teachers either.

Another issue brought up by five of the superintendents was the fact that not many black men seem to be interested in teaching. As one superintendent noted, "Young

black men are not made to think that they are intelligent enough to teach others. It is also neither cool nor hip in urban areas to strive to be a teacher. This is not the job that children think will get them out of the devastation of the ghetto. Only becoming a rapper or basketball player will get them the riches they think they need.”

Another point that was brought up by the participants was the fact that less and less black men were attending college. As a participant stated “You can’t become a teacher if you don’t have a degree.” With such a small pool of black men as teachers to begin with, you find that there is an even smaller pool of these men who look or are encouraged to become superintendents.

Unfair/ Unjust Expectations

All the superintendents who participated in this study commented that they were often under intense pressure to perform what they deemed as miracles. They were hired for very difficult situations that they felt their white counterparts did not want to do and were expected to be successful. Their districts were often under- funded, under- achieving, had poor tax bases, and were largely minority with students who had not been given a high quality education in the past. Additionally, most of their highly qualified teachers had left for the suburbs. Yet, even with all these negatives, the black superintendent was expected to make his district a success story in New York’s highly regulated educational system.

The general feeling of the superintendents was that there was an unspoken expectation to be the “keepers” of their own race. Though it was never explicitly stated, the participants felt that part of the reason they were in their districts was to keep their students under “check” or control. If they couldn’t do so or increase achievement then they would be out of a job with little hope of receiving an opportunity to become a second time superintendent because, unlike their white

counterparts who seemed to pop up with a job all over the state, they wouldn't get another opportunity.

The superintendents also spoke very briefly about how members of their own race placed undue expectations on them. They stated that some groups in the community wanted the superintendents to be hard-line advocates for black children without compromise. If they did not play this role then some members of their own race would think that they were "selling out". If they did so, then members of differing races would think they were too extreme.

After stating what they believed to be the most pressing issues facing them, the participants went on to answer question 'b' by talking about how they dealt with these issues and how they maintained focus in getting to their current level of success. This portion of the interview process also lent itself to categorization based upon theme. The themes were as follows:

- 1) Support Systems
- 2) Perseverance
- 3) Stress Relief

Support Systems

The participants in this research study all emphatically agreed that you cannot be an island unto yourself. You have to have others around you who will offer you sound advice, help you when you need the assistance, and be an open ear when solicited. The superintendents stated that having someone you could trust in your corner who was not just a "fair weather" friend was critical. They also commented that, with all the stresses that you face on a daily basis with your position and coupled with the realities of your skin color, it may be too much to go it alone.

Being able to network was another key issue that the participants brought up. Their white counterparts have an intricate networking system that only some of participants are truly

included in. Creating a system of their own assures them that they stay current with information and keep up to date on job opportunities.

Perseverance

Persevering through tough situations and times was a strategy for success that the participants thought was hard to quantify because it has a different meaning for everyone. They thought the most important idea about persevering was sticking to what you thought was right. The participants thought you should have a strong life and career philosophy that guided you through your decision-making.

It was also very important not to accept the limits that others tried to place on you. The participants commented that race and prejudice was something that would always hinder you to some degree but that you had to go into situations knowing that you wouldn't allow it to define who you were. Showing anger and frustration towards this reality would only serve to isolate you more. Knowing how to circumvent racism in a professional manner was always the best way to break down barriers. As one participant stated "You don't want to be that guy. You know, the ANGRY black guy."

The participants also thought it was important to realize that what you do now, just like those who came before you, will affect the chances of others in the future. You may make a seemingly small difference but it is a difference nonetheless. As a participant stated "Our children need us. No matter how few of us there are, if we work hard, our children will be better for it."

Lastly, the participants in this study felt that making yourself as knowledgeable in your craft as possible would help you persevere through any situation. Having the ability to fall back upon past education and experiences only serve to build the foundation of your confidence and allows you to make well informed decisions with conviction and clarity.

Stress Relief

As a group, the participants all agreed that having a way to relieve stress was extremely important. The nature of the job is such that many demands are placed on your shoulders. You are constantly making decisions and dealing with people all around you. As the superintendent, you have to be a picture of calm and stability. Add to this the fact that you are black, and your outward appearance becomes that much more important.

The group believed that you needed to be the picture of vitality and confidence. If you physically and mentally felt good then this would be reflected in your demeanor. Having an activity or hobby that you can involve yourself in that gets your mind off of work responsibilities is important. The superintendents also felt that you really needed to tune yourself out of work when you were not there. Focusing on family, yourself, and activities was paramount.

Lastly, the majority of superintendents in this research study agreed that having a sense of humor and not taking yourself too seriously was a great way to deal with stress and situations of concern. They believed that you will make mistakes and won't be perfect but that you should learn from your mistakes and not put more pressure on yourself than was already being placed upon you by other persons.

Advice for the Future

As noted in the Data Analysis portion of this research paper, every participant had very specific advice to offer to future pools of black men who might strive to become superintendents

in New York State. They believed that the advice imparted would serve to guide and help future prospects navigate the complicated road to the superintendency.

The first piece of advice that all participants thought to be vitally important was becoming as knowledgeable as possible about education and strategies for leadership. They noted that due to the fact that your abilities will be constantly questioned, you have to be able to field any question expertly. Additionally, demonstrating yourself as a competent leader was crucial in getting people to follow your lead. Knowing the myriad of leadership strategies that are available and when to employ them will get you through many difficult situations.

The second piece of advice given was never allowing people to define who you are. From their perspectives, this meant not allowing others to define your abilities or giving them the opportunity to place you in a situation where you behave in an unprofessional manner. The participants stressed never being outwardly angry at the injustices you face or placing blame elsewhere.

The group went on to stress the importance of being able to deal with people. Having the ability to be a people person, who works with others will serve to justify your supporters and may eventually win over your doubters. They stated that taking on a “me vs. the world” attitude would only serve to isolate yourself and embolden your detractors.

The participants also believed that networking with and using others like yourself as a support system would help you maintain confidence and perspective. They noted that by simply knowing that you are not going it alone and that there are others out there who are experiencing what you are is a huge motivator and source of support. It is also a manner of “staying in the know” and attaining vital behind the scenes information.

Having a life mission or guiding principles regarding children that were non- negotiable as noted by the participants was vitally important. Believing that what you were doing on an

everyday basis was beneficial to children and their needs would instill within you the necessary confidence and conviction that would be needed to make tough and sometimes unpopular decisions.

Finally, the participants believed that enjoying life outside of work with family and friends was crucial for success. Participating in hobbies and activities and keeping a balance in life would assist you in maintaining focus and passion for your career.

Results at a Glance:

- 90% of participants believed that black men were generally viewed as less intelligent than their white counterparts and were incapable of effective leadership
- 20% of participants interviewed had white mentors;
- 80% of participants believed there was a shortage of black men in the field of education;
- 100% of participants stated that there was a shortage of black men as classroom teachers;
- 90% of participants agreed that there were unfair and higher expectations placed upon black educational leaders;
- 100% of participants believed that they were not on an even playing field with their white counterparts;
- 90% stated that hiring practices in New York State were unfair and uneven;
- 100% of participants believed the chances of working in a predominately “white” district were small;
- 100% of participants interviewed agreed that having support systems and social networks was crucially important in being a successful superintendent;
- 100% of participants agreed that having an outlet or hobby to relieve stresses of the position was important.

Conclusions

Studies by noted researchers such as Glass, et al (2000) shed light on the reality that there is a severe shortage of minority superintendents nationwide. The NYSCOSS 2006 Snapshot on the Superintendency in New York State is reflective of such research in that it also highlights the fact that blacks hold a disproportionately small number of superintendent positions.

Understanding why there are such disparities, how that might change in the future and how support can be lent to those who are already superintendents is of the utmost importance not only to black men who may seek the position in the future but also to school boards, teacher unions, administrative and superintendent organizations, and the State Education Department.

As a result of interviewing ten black, male superintendents of New York State public school districts, the following conclusions materialized:

Conclusion 1: Black men need to be encouraged at a much earlier point in their careers to pursue leadership roles in education. Whether this is in the form of teacher- leadership, summer administrative internships, or building administrator positions, black men who display the appropriate qualities, characteristics, and potential should be more strongly urged and supported in becoming a leader.

As noted by several participants, mentors need to be color- blind when seeking out the next generation of mentees. Their influence on future leadership is invaluable and these individuals are on the front lines when it comes to diversifying state pools and determining who will have opportunities to advance themselves.

Conclusion 2: Hiring practices need to be more equitable and fair throughout the state. Candidates of any color should feel that if they possess the appropriate credentials and

experiences then they will have a fair opportunity in attaining any superintendency that is vacant, no matter what color the majority of the residents of that district may be.

Search firms and consultants must make it a priority to put a diversified pool of high quality candidates before a school board or community rather than keeping the system at the status quo. Boards of education and community leaders need to transform their thinking to meet the realities of a global society where people from all backgrounds and cultures interact fluidly. Maintaining a practice of isolationism is impractical and does a disservice to the students who are educated within that system.

Conclusion 3: Black men and persons of color, who are already in administration and in the position of the superintendent, should be supported and made to feel as if they are truly a part of the educational community of New York State. Their achievements and efforts are not recognized enough and they should be challenged to take on many more roles and responsibilities. Having a district headed by a black man should be the norm and not the exception.

Conclusion 4: Attaining the highest levels of education and competency has to be a priority for future black, male superintendents. Becoming as knowledgeable about the process of education and leadership as possible increases both the level of their competency and abilities to make the most informed decisions. Additionally, it increases the perception of their subordinates that the black male superintendent is a capable and intelligent leader who is in the position based solely on his credentials and ability level.

Conclusion 5: Black men aspiring to the position of superintendent in New York State must be aggressive in marketing themselves and what they can bring to the table. Being complacent and waiting for an opportunity to present itself to them is unrealistic. Black men

must network, work twice as hard as others, and help to place themselves in positions to be successful.

Conclusion 6: Black men who become administrators or superintendents suffer in silence. They deal with many instances of prejudice, injustice and unfairness yet cannot be too vocal about what they are going through. Doing so may place them in a situation where they are blacklisted or not taken seriously. Black men must come up with coping strategies to deal with such realities.

Conclusion 7: Having a strong sense of self, purpose, and direction is key in being successful and persevering through turbulent times in your career. Leaning on others who share your ideals, philosophies, and experiences is important as well. Black men who are in administrative and superintendent positions must realize that they are not alone in their struggles and need the camaraderie of their peers.

Conclusion 8: All persons who are in positions of leadership in the field of education need to have outlets available to them to relieve stress. This is even more pertinent to black men who have to deal with racism and prejudice in addition to the normal stressors of the job of superintendent. Enjoying the family, hobbies, and activities that get their minds off work is critical to emotional balance and general well being.

Recommendations for New York State Education Department

1. The State Education Department should actively and vigorously encourage all public school districts to diversify their superintendent candidate pools through a concerted public relations initiative.
2. The State Education Department needs to work with organizations such as the New York State Council of School Superintendents and the National Alliance of Black School Educators to aggressively recruit black men to the superintendency through targeted programs, internships, and workshops.
3. The State Education Department needs to offer grants to districts that are actively seeking to diversify their staff populations to assist in recruitment, diversity training, and minority retention.
4. The State Education Department should offer opportunities for public dialogue regarding race and hiring practices through forums and conferences with the Commissioner of Education.
5. The State Education Department should sponsor scholarships geared toward minority students who are graduating high school and will be attending a college or university teaching program.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Participants in this study strongly felt that they do not really have fair opportunities to lead white- majority districts. Future research could address the following questions: What strategies have other states that have effectively diversified their superintendent ranks employed? How might those strategies be utilized by New York State?
2. Participants in this study discussed their concerns of stress and unfair expectations. A future study might address the questions: What are the ways in which stress negatively affects the job of the school superintendent and do these stressors cause medical complications down the line?
3. Participants noted that there seemed to be a shortage of black men in teaching. A future study might address the question: Is there truly a shortage of black men in the field of education?
4. Most participants spoke about credentials and earning higher level degrees such as doctorates. A future study might address the question: Does earning a doctorate give black men more employment opportunities as superintendents?
5. All participants noted the importance of mentors. A future study might address the question: How does mentoring impact the careers of superintendents?
6. All participants in this study agreed that racism and prejudice pervade the New York State Education system to some degree or another. A future study might address the question: In what ways does racism and prejudice affect minorities in the state's education system?
7. This study should be replicated with superintendents of various races and genders.

Concluding Statement

Superintendents have tremendously difficult job responsibilities. They are expected to be expert educators, motivators, financial officers, planners, and leaders. The participants in this study have confirmed that in their experiences, this career path can be made exponentially more complex when it is coupled with the realities of race.

In general society, race, prejudice, and bigotry play a role in the everyday lives of minorities. In utilizing a phenomenological research approach, this study gained insights into the lived experiences of ten black, male superintendents of state public school systems.

Data gathered indicates that these studied superintendents believe that because of their skin color, they have to work harder, are questioned and doubted more often, don't receive every possible opportunity to advance, are often treated as outsiders, are type cast into certain roles, have unfair expectations placed upon them and don't play on a leveled field. Information collected also points towards the fact that most of what these superintendents deal with is below the surface and is not easily quantified.

Advice given by these superintendents illustrates the need for those who might follow in their footsteps to become as knowledgeable as possible in their craft, effectively learn to deal with subliminal racism, lean on others like themselves, be leaders who listen to those who work around them, have ways to deal with stress, value friends, colleagues and family, always conduct themselves in an ultra- professional manner, not allow others to place limits on them and do what they can to make the road for those who will follow them easier to navigate.

Recommendations formulated from the interviews and conversations with these superintendents point to a need by the state and its districts and communities to genuinely seek to have education staff and leadership be more reflective of society, have the hiring practices of superintendents and administrators be more transparent, give further support to those persons of

diverse backgrounds who already hold superintendent positions and give a more equal and fair education to all students.

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Appendix A

1. Please talk about your background and path to the superintendency?
2. Please talk about persons who have influenced you and why?
3. What are the challenges of the superintendency in general?
4. What are the rewards?
5. What are the challenges and rewards that are unique to New York State?

6. What do you believe to be society's perceptions of black men in general?
7. How do you feel black men are perceived as educational leaders by their colleagues?
8. Why do you believe these are the views held by society and those within public school education?
9. How are you perceived by members of your own race as a superintendent?
10. Do you feel that it is more difficult to be a black male in the position of superintendent? Why?
11. Why do you think there are so few black male superintendents in a state as diverse as New York?
12. In your opinion, is there discrimination against black male professionals in New York public schools? Why do you feel this way?
13. Can you describe instances where you feel that you have been discriminated against in your profession?
14. What is your assessment of the opportunities afforded to black men in the field of public school education?
15. What is your opinion of hiring practices in regards to black men in the position of superintendent?
16. Did you have a mentors or persons who encouraged you? What race and sex were they?
17. What words of advice would you impart to the future pools of black men who may seek the position of public school superintendent in New York State?

Appendix B

Dear Superintendent:

I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership in the Department of Education at the Sage Colleges in Albany, New York. The purpose of this letter is to request both your support and participation in my doctoral research study.

The purpose of my research is to identify the obstacles that Black men face on their path to the position of public school superintendent in New York State. The study will involve all fifteen current black male public school superintendents in the state and will seek to identify the barriers facing them and ascertain their methods of overcoming those challenges. This research could then potentially be used to assist future black male superintendent candidates in successfully navigating the obstacles that are presented to them. In essence, they would be learning from your experiences and successes.

The interview will be no longer than 30 minutes in length and with your approval, will be audio taped. At any point during the interview at your request, audio taping will be halted. All information given will be kept confidential by a color- coding system and transcripts will be made available to you upon request to check for accuracy. Interviews will be conducted during the NYSCOSS Mid- Winter Conference (January 11- 13) at the Desmond Hotel in Albany, New York. If you are unable to attend the conference or cannot schedule the interview during this time, other arrangements can certainly be made on my part to gain your valuable insight.

I will be contacting you by telephone within a few days of mailing these letters to ascertain your willingness to participate in this research study. Upon confirmation of your participation, I will send via U.S. mail and e-mail, a time and room location for the interview. If you have further questions regarding this research, please direct them to:

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Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Casey C. Parker