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3C1. The Role of Community Support in Navigating the Superintendency for African American Women

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The Role of Community Support in Navigating the Superintendency for African American Women

Session Category: Paper Session

Topical Strand: Community Engagement and Partnerships

Abstract: African American women are underrepresented in the superintendency (Angel, Killacky, & Johnson, 2013; Bynum & Young, 2015; Grogan, 2014; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011; Liang, Sottile, & Peters, 2016; Robicheau & Krull, 2016). In their journeys, they face barriers such as discrimination based on race and gender, negative stereotypes, and a lack of opportunity (Angel, Killacky, & Johnson, 2013; Grogan, 2014; Kowalski et al., 2011; Liang et al., 2016). This phenomenological study (Glesne, 1999; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990) examines the barriers experienced by four African American women superintendents in a Southern state as well as the resiliency (Henderson & Milstein, 2003) strategies they employed to overcome the challenges they encountered en route to and within the superintendency. The purpose of this discourse is to highlight the role community support plays in the success of these superintendents to fill the gap in extant research.

In keeping with the topical strand of *Community Engagement and Partnership*, this paper explores the plight of African American women in the superintendency and the ways in which they navigate community support to successfully attain and maintain their positions. African American women are underrepresented in the superintendency (Angel, Killacky, & Johnson, 2013; Bynum & Young, 2015; Grogan, 2014; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011; Liang, Sottile, & Peters, 2016; Robicheau & Krull, 2016). Further, the K-12 public school superintendency remains a male-dominated field thus these women remain in the minority (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). A lack of research on their leadership and experiences in education exists (Gardiner, Howard, Tenuto, & Muzaliwa, 2014; Lumby, 2015; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Ngunjiri, Almquist, Beebe, Elbert, Gardiner, & Shockness, 2017). African American women superintendents have practically been overlooked and unreported (Collins, 2009; Horsford & Tillman, 2012).

Superintendents face numerous challenges due to the nature of the position itself, without having to account for race and gender. In particular, African American women superintendents

face many barriers relating to race, gender, negative stereotypes, apathy, and limited opportunities (Angel, Killackey, & Johnson, 2013; Grogan, 2014; Kowalski et al., 2011; Liang et al., 2016). Support is a major factor in the decision to become school superintendents yet women have inadequate support systems (Shakeshaft, Irby, Brown, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007). African American women superintendents have the same challenge (Terhune, 2007). Another hurdle faced by these women is a lack of mentorship due to the limited number of African American women in the superintendency; this greatly impacts future aspirants to the position (Goffney & Edmonson, 2012) and their retention (Brown, 2014; Kay, Hagan, & Parker, 2009).

Resiliency is the way a person bounces back from adversity and overcome them (Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). To build resiliency, these African American women superintendents rely on *environmental protective factors* which are qualities of their families, schools, communities, and peer groups that help them overcome hardship (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). They have sought and enjoyed relationships with mentors, spouses, students and teachers in their school communities, and colleagues in their pursuit of the superintendency. While research in educational leadership does stress the importance of having mentoring relationships for success, there still exists a paucity of research on the types of community support African American women draw upon in accessing the superintendency.

Method

This phenomenological inquiry is based on a larger study conducted in 2015 which explored the perspectives and lived experiences of four African American women superintendents in a Southern state in rural and urban school districts. Participants were recruited by phone, given a biographical survey, and interviewed using open ended questions. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants, their school districts, graduate

institutions and/or any other type of identifying information. They were assigned to the participants by alphabetical order based on the order of the interviews. The data was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for deeper meaning.

Findings

In the findings from the original study the subthemes of *developing mentoring, support systems* and *forming relationships with gatekeepers* emerged from the theme *external mechanisms* (protective factors). Gatekeepers are people who have access to knowledge and opportunities concerning the superintendency. They often function as allies and sponsors. The superintendents fostered relationships that provided them with guidance as well as access to opportunities. They relied on various types of community support such as: professional (i.e., mentors, colleagues/peer networks, school board members, sponsors); familial (i.e., spouses, parents, children), and school communities (i.e., administration, students, and teachers).

Conclusion

It is necessary that African American women superintendents and aspirants to the superintendency to form positive relationships with gatekeepers (Brown, 2014; Grogan, 2014; Johnson, 2012). This includes the media, county representatives and school board members. Nascent African American women superintendents must be intentional in making connections with people that provide support and nurture them (Brown, 2014). The interaction with their communities by serving on community boards helps to hone interpersonal skills especially when the members have differing opinions and are diverse (Brown, 2014). This is a valuable interaction.

Despite the barriers faced in ascending to the superintendency as well as within the position, the four superintendents in this study are thriving and have much to proffer to their

constituents. They have employed strategies of resiliency to help them to overcome these challenges and to be successful superintendents. The role of mentorship is important as well as the reliance on other types of community support such as familial, peer groups, school communities, and the broader community. Mentors and networks are essential for the recruitment and retention of African American women in the superintendency; they extend opportunities for growth and learning through the sharing of their leadership experiences and encouragement for the pursuit of the superintendency (Brown, 2014). Aspirants and current African American women superintendents need mentors to reality of the position (Brown, 2014) in an effort to help these women navigate the unfamiliar terrain of the superintendency. To deal with isolation and tokenism, for example, African American women need people to give them advice, feedback, and to serve as caregivers such as mentors, networks and family members (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015). Strong African American women superintendents are also needed to mentor and serve as advocates for aspirants (Brown, 2014). Various types of community support should be extended to African American women superintendents and aspirants so that they are successful in navigating the superintendency.

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