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11-21-2017

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Allen, Patrice Lanette and Hughes, Joshua D., "A Multi-Generational Study of Aspiring African American Female Superintendents in Texas" (2017). *Contemporary Issues in Educational Leadership*. 5.  
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# A Multi-Generational Study of Aspiring African American Female Superintendents in Texas

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## Abstract

Only 8 of the 1,247 public school districts served by the Texas Education Agency are headed by African American female superintendents. In order for African American women to be considered for the superintendency in Texas, they must understand the barriers marked by intersectional misconceptions.

The narrative methodology focuses on accounts derived from experiences expressed in a form of storytelling. This correlates the conceptual framework with the variables of critical race theory (CRT), glass ceiling theory, and generational theory. This process was vital to understanding generational differences of African American women on the journey to the superintendency. This research focused on 22 African American women who were completing requirements for the superintendency, assigned to two separate groups for two methods of data collection. Through snowball sampling, six women were interviewed face to face. Through stratified sampling, 22 women completed an online survey consisting of open-ended questions. Research questions were developed from an exploratory question: In what ways does generation membership impact African American women' leadership development? This research addressed five research questions regarding the differences in experiences of aspiring African American female superintendents related generational membership regarding racism, career mentorship, leadership, motivation to aspire to the position, and the work environment with other African American women in other generations. The research produced five emergent themes: (a) Racial Awareness:

Legal Blindness, (b) African American Women Role Models: The Matriarch, (c) Diverse Leadership Styles: Mindset Shift, (d) Career Perspective: Change x Confidence, and (e) Guidance: Professional Expression. Five subthemes emerged: (a) Diverse Teaching Experience: Partition, (b) Early Leadership Development: School Favored, (c) Diverse Mentors: We Are Both American, (d) Awareness of Intersectionality: Sexism and Ageism, and (e) Admiration: Paying Respect. Although African American women reported similarities in their experiences, the differences across generational memberships were affected by societal influence on the African American community within education. This study supports the need for preparation of young African American women in future generations to enter the field of education with the skills necessary for advancement in educational leadership.

## Introduction

African American women have thrived through decades of racism and sexism in the United States of America. The struggle by African American women to be equally appreciated as contributing members of society has manifested in an intersectional disadvantage, beginning with their tenure in America. The experiences of these women differ as time changes the hidden perceptions of African American women in the educational realm. In the workplace, there is a substantial presence of three distinct generations: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Warner & Sandberg, 2010). Each of these generations has unique characteristics, leadership preferences, foci, values, and motivational preferences (Warner & Sandberg, 2010). Although African American women serve in various capacities in education, they are not being selected for superintendent positions as often as are their White counterparts (Domenech et al., 2014). African American women are often chosen to lead districts that are in need of transformation. To be successful, a superintendent must be able to set maintainable education goals based on their importance in senior administration leadership (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The hiring practices of school boards in selecting a superintendent should focus the premise that “sound leadership at the district level adds value to an education” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 8).

For purposes of this study, an *aspiring African American female superintendent* is a woman who occupies an educational position while taking steps or having taken steps toward the superintendency by participation in a program that

trains educational leaders. While becoming more aware of the superintendent responsibilities, her leadership practices are developed in working situations.

As times change and the society shifts to accept differences, new generations of African American women could have a chance to participate in the expanding numbers in leadership. The millennial generation has a higher tolerance for diversity because of exposure to multiple facets of social exchange. The three generations of African American women in the workplace display similarities and differences in terms of leadership (Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007).

This research examined whether there are common trends of advancement and discrimination across generational cohorts. The results can aid future generations of African American women who aspire to become superintendents. This research can raise awareness of unforeseen obstacles to professional advancement and lead to better preparation.

In education, the structure of districts includes an elite position of decision making known as the *superintendent*. According to the American Association of School Administrators, 17 of 1,711 superintendents who responded to their survey were African American females, representing approximately 1% of all superintendents nationwide (Domenech et al., 2014). Although there is a scarcity of representation from this demographic in the pool of superintendents in Texas, African American women are seen to possess critical qualities such as independence, strength, assertiveness, and outstanding communication skills—traits that are recognized as important for leadership situations (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). In the past decade, African American women have made significant gains in teaching positions but not in attaining the superintendent position. Although trusted to lead in the trenches, African American women are not sought for the executive leadership position of a school district (Jackson & Shakecraft, 2003). The historical leadership concept for African American women to be hidden in decision making can best relate to the bridge leaders during the Civil Rights movement: Men lead, women organize (Ospina & Foldy, 2009).

In view of the scarce literature on aspiring African American females in a new generation in the age of innovation through technology, it is important to identify elements that create effective superintendents. “Changes and additions generated from voices typically excluded in educational administration literature have the potential to create more inclusive views of who should fill the position of superintendent of schools” (Brunner & Peyton-Cairé, 2000, p. 546). To understand the challenges facing African American women regarding the superintendency requires understanding of the perception of successful career outcomes related to their generational membership.

Despite changes in societal acceptance of oppressed groups, there remains the question of whether African American women are acceptable candidates for educational leadership. Throughout Texas, many accredited leadership preparation programs train candidates who are currently teaching but who aspire to become superintendents. African American females are members of that group, aspiring to lead districts.

This study derived information through investigation of leadership experiences to determine whether generational membership affects career perspectives of aspiring African American females. Future superintendents are challenged to accommodate to rapid changes in the 21st-century classroom within the public education sector (Gober, 2012). Different generations come into the professional world with different experiences, including obstacles for African American women such as sexism and racism. Also, while some African American women report rich and unique experiences of having another African American woman as a mentor, the number of available African American mentors has decreased (Patton & Harper, 2004).

The purpose of this study was to show commonalties and differences among African American women on the journey to the superintendent position so future leaders can fully be aware of what they might face. Although society has become more liberal and more accepting, it is unclear whether it has changed in its acceptance of African American women. History raises doubts in that regard.

## **Method**

The methodological approach for the research was narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry, in its essence of postmodernism and literary criticism, originated in the 1980s (Bell, 2002; Casey, 1995; Josselson, 2006; Kim, 2015). The idea of narrative inquiry stemmed from the social and psychological exploration of experiences to be analyzed for underlying insights and assumptions. To understand the real dynamics of changes, experiences must be understood at a deep level (Bell, 2002). Narratology originated from early theorists such as Todorov, Barthes, and Genette (Kim, 2015). “A narrative is a form of knowledge that catches the two sides of narrative, telling as well as knowing” (Kim, 2015, p. 6).

Narrative inquiry in education surfaced in a research article by Connelly and Clandinin in the journal *Educational Researcher* (Bell, 2002; Josselson, 2006; Kim, 2015). Their first explorations sought understanding of the experiences of teachers. Through their narrative approach, they identified aspects that affected teacher education. “The main claim for the use of narrative in educational

research is that narrative is a way of organizing human experience, since humans lead storied lives individually and socially” (Kim, 2015, p. 18). They conceptualized their theories from a range of aspects, such as Dewey’s theory of experience (Creswell, 2013; Dewey, 1997). Dewey’s philosophy provided an in-depth explanation of human interactions and their impact through experience. Dewey (1997) defined the term *experience* as “a result of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (p. 17). These contributions to understanding educational experiences supported the selection of narrative inquiry for this research.

There are many branches of narrative inquiry, such as autobiographies, biographies, personal narratives, personal interviews, personal documents, life histories, oral histories, and autoethnographies (Casey, 1995; Creswell, 2013; Kim, 2015). The insights and assumptions behind experiences are unveiled through methodological approaches such as historical narrative. “Historical narrative depicts the reality of past events or what happened, which leads to the genre of biography” (Kim, 2015, p.6). This approach was chosen for the study because, to understand the experiences of African American women in education, there must be understanding of where they thrived historically. Generational membership is connected to many experiences due to the aesthetic perception of African American women. Therefore, understanding the many aspects that encouraged or hindered professional growth is key to developing a pathway for future generations of aspiring African American female superintendents.

The participants in this narrative research study were selected through a strict protocol. Women were identified for the interview portion of the study through snowball sampling. This method of sampling involves procedures within a paradigm in which empirical research is pursued (Noy, 2008). The study participants came from social networks of the researchers (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Noy, 2008). The next generation of informants was selected based on generational membership of the aspiring African American female superintendents.

The dynamics of the study were dependent on the natural state of the social networks from which these participants were identified (Noy, 2008). Twenty-one women qualified to participate in the online interview, identified using stratified sampling. This method of sampling involves strata, small subgroups of a particular population, formed based on shared characteristics (Creswell, 2013). This stratum was based on the generational membership of the aspiring African American female superintendents. The sample was disproportionate due to the absence of a concrete number of this population in Texas. These women had to have the defined qualifications of being aspiring African American superintendents, marked by participation in a accelerated leadership program in

a district for superintendent training, an advanced degree with a concentration in educational administration or leadership (either achieved or being sought), previous applications for a superintendent position, or sought after as a highly recommended candidate for a superintendent position.

Participants were sent a formal inquiry regarding their availability to participate in the study. They were asked to identify generational membership to ensure their qualification for the study. Participants were grouped by twos in each generational cohort (Baby Boomer, Generation X and Millennials), resulting in six total participants. The focus of this narrative exploration was to reveal insights and assumptions.

Time limitations was a concern for these women due to their unknown professional and personal commitments. Therefore, it was assumed that the participants dedicated as much time as they could, unless the snowball sampling had negative consequences. That negative connection could be from experiences of the parties involved, whether through first-hand interaction or second-hand perceptions.

There is a stigma attached to attitudes of African American women toward other African American women (Brock, 2008). That theory was explored in this study because personal experience revealed that African American women were more demanding of their sisters than White men in the same position regarding advancing their careers. These participants were protected from biases of the researcher, as the data were analyzed objectively only to expose common trends and correlations. The identities of all participants were kept confidential. A confidentiality agreement was signed that allowed each participant to stop participation at any time.

## Results

The findings from the investigation focused on research on barriers faced by African American women in terms of their generational membership. An overall research question guided the exploration: *In what ways does generation membership impact African American women's leadership development experiences?* Five research questions were used to support the purpose of the guiding research question.

1. How do the experiences of *racism* differ in relation to generational membership among aspiring African American female superintendents?
2. How do the experiences of *career mentorship* differ in relation to generational membership among aspiring African American female superintendents?

3. How do the experiences of *leadership* differ in relation to generational membership among aspiring African American female superintendents?
4. How does motivation for aspiration to the superintendent position differ among African American females according to generational membership?
5. How do aspiring African American superintendents' experiences in their work environment differ according to generational membership?

Demographic information was collected from participants in Generation 1 through snowball sampling, used to identify in-person interviewees. Social media, established universities with superintendent certification programs, and other superintendent preparation programs were contacted to generate a list of African American women to be contacted for an online interview. Brief profiles of participants described the generation cohort, level of education, current educational title, and location in Texas. Analysis of data was completed based on the Strauss and Howe generational theory models: mood era, archetypes, and diagonal. A summary and analysis of the findings are provide the emerging themes and subthemes.

The emerging themes based on significant generational differences were (a) Racial Awareness: Legal Blinders, (b) African American Women Role Models: The Matriarch, (c) Diverse Leadership Styles: Mindset Shift, (d) Career Perspective: Change x Confidence, and (e) Guidance: Professional Expression. Five minor themes emerged in support of differences on the spectrum of the emergent themes: (a) Diverse Teaching Experience: Partition, (b) Early Leadership Development: School Favored, (c) Diverse Mentors: We Are Both American, (d) Awareness of Intersectionality: Sexism, Ageism, and (e) Admiration: Paying Respect. These themes help to understand the generational impact of a shared aspiration on preparedness.

## Discussion

First, the societal construct of racism has had a direct impact on education throughout time. *Brown v. Board of Education* had a direct impact on awareness of racism. Those who lived before this law was passed experienced blatant racism in America. When the laws that implemented racial segregation were diminished, they created a lack of awareness over time for younger generations because of the practice of diversity in classrooms of the academic elite. This practice gave way to subtle racist experiences and explanations of those racist instances as being a result of ignorant implementation. The levels of integration



consisted of students, teachers, and administrators. The experiences of integration resulted in racism not only being blatant in daily encounters to arising in educational facilities. In earlier generations, as they entered the entry-level position as teachers in integrated situations, they encountered racism from those whom they were to serve, which shows the impact of childhood environment on the educational foundation of children.

Second, the presence of African American women in the lives of African American women educators made a difference generationally within the home and a distinct impact on educational experiences. The family structure for older generations consisted of a strong mother who led by example based on the expectations for the next generation. This created a generation of mothers who were career driven and who placed family lower on their list of priorities. The next generation was a product of single-family homes. This resulted in younger generations gravitating to their grandmothers for guidance and nurturing because the mother's presence in the home changed with the influx of incarceration and systematic approaches to destroy the family structure in the African American community.

Third, leadership styles of African American women correlated to their educational experiences, which were influenced by generational membership. Younger generations had more opportunities to experience a developed system of diversity. This allowed for integration into school systems with hidden curricula to guide the majority with the intent to satisfy their parents' expectations. The experience with diversity created an array of leadership styles. Older generations related leadership as younger generations placed emphasis on work ethics. These experiences were influenced by change in diversity of power among educational leaders. Leadership styles led to mentor relationships that exerted influence on career mobility. Participants from older generations mentioned White mentors with the inclination of breaking the barrier of racism, while younger generations mentioned Hispanic mentors as breaking the barrier of authority.

Fourth, the career perspectives of African American women relate to their years of experience in education. Older generations have a sense of establishment and a desire for change in societal perceptions of school districts. Younger generations recognize the same need for change but with fewer years and less success across leadership domains, their change is countered by the absence of confidence in their abilities. This deficit in confidence relates to the perception of obstacles to overcome in seeking the superintendent position. Participants from older generations identified sexism as a barrier to selection, while those from younger generations identified age as a barrier. These stem from experiences of discrimination across different racial cultures.

Fifth, the scope of perceptions in the African American women educators' community provides insight into the need for guidance regarding professional expectations. Younger generations fail to acknowledge professional standards of communication and attire. This relates to development of diversity, resulting in a comforting common ground of professional settings. No matter the race, gender, or age of the professionals in the building, there is a common expectation of professionalism that should not be challenged; everyone must be compliant to gain respect. At the same time, these African American women admired older generations for their professionalism. The lessons learned by older generations inspire younger generations, although they are not explained to younger generations but are simply expected to be known. This relates to the bearings of older generations as they had to solve issues of compliance and expect younger generations to follow suit.

Leadership development of African American women is influenced generationally outside the culture but also affects the mindset within their culture. There are known and unknown differences in the form of bridges that are not always navigated because of differences in generational personalities. Generational membership not only influences the experiences in developing a leader; it also influences the successes of the following generation. A timeline was created to understand the intersectional milestones that had an impact on the understanding and analysis of this research, with an emphasis on the impact of time.

The results of this study relate to the literature regarding leadership characteristics of African American women in education. It is necessary to compare these characteristics with the characteristics of 21st-century superintendents in Texas.

First, there were many similarities between the literature and the results of this research in terms of characteristics of African American women in leadership. One significant difference between this research and the literature on perspectives of women in leadership in the 21st century were the expectations for leadership style. The ideal leader of the 21st century will use a relationship-focused leadership style, described as "web-like" or "lead in the middle, which corresponds with an exhibited type in women's leadership (Adler, 1997; Boatman, 2007; Burkman & Garrett-Staib, 2015; Fiene, Miller, , 2006; Growe & Montgomery, 1999; Houston, 2001; van der Boon, 2003). This research showed that African American women use various leadership styles, such as relationship focused, servant, transformative, and authoritative. These leadership styles are associated with men and women, while men's leadership styles are described as the ideal global perspective (Adler, 1997). This difference is attributed to hidden curriculum in education settings that are not public schools. These settings are

acquired as property owned by a private sector. American society originated and resides on the power of property (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Therefore, more money should be invested in property to develop schools that teach young women the skills necessary to meet challenges.

Second, through this research it was evident that the African American women educators had advanced collegiate experience. More master's and doctoral degrees were reported in this research than in the reviewed literature. This is not to state that there is no literature reported on the number of African American women in education. These statistics can be known by analyzing three categories in reports by the U.S. Census Bureau regarding educational attainment in the United States: age, gender, and race.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2015) reports only high school diplomas and bachelor's degree (27.6%). There are no data on residents of Texas with a master's or doctoral degree. Only 12.0% of female Americans have a master's or doctoral degree. The lowest age group to have advanced degrees was 25–34, at 10.9%, which is consistent with all racial groups reported in the census, not separated by race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

The racial categories showed a significant difference, which supported the design of investigating experience with race in the current research. The African American population with advanced degrees was 8.2%, compared to the White population at 13.5%. There was no mention of educational experience being a necessary skill or trait for leadership by women in the 21st century.

This research highlights educational status because of its uniqueness among African American women. The African American woman has existed for centuries on this American soil without the legal right to know how to read and write. Therefore, the legal blinders associated with laws that created access to diverse education have created an unawareness of racism in later generations. It is crucial that the future generations of African American women aspire to educational attainment because it is a gift from their struggle, something their ancestors yearned to attain.

How many degrees do African American women need to become superintendents? African American women with advanced degrees have been shown to be intellectually capable by successfully asserting themselves. They face a quadruple jeopardy that hinders advancement of young female African American educators, beginning with discrimination through ageism. Ageism is conquered by seizing opportunities to increase experience through on-the-job training in leadership. Although superintendents are generally chosen from older age brackets, African American women in those brackets are not being selected. This research shows that African American women from the Millennial generation

have learned valuable lessons from African Americans in previous generations that have extended mentorship and guidance in a network of perceived matriarchs or mother-like figures. This transference of knowledge should continue to develop more African American women to break through the glass ceiling. The differences and similarities of African American women who are aspiring to become superintendents, in comparison with the literature, noted characteristics of women in leadership and necessary skills of 21st-century superintendents. The comparison of the findings of this research and those reported in the literature are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Comparison of the Current Research Findings to the Literature*

Characteristics of women in leadership (literature)	Characteristics of 21st-century superintendents (literature)	Characteristics of African American women aspiring to leadership (research)
Transformation	Strong communication skills	Relationship builders
Empowerment	Balance	Values collaboration
Self-awareness	Empowerment	Values change
Empathy	Collaboration, teamwork	Confident with experience
Diversity comfort	Creating a broad vision	Acclimated with diversity
Relationship focused	Diversity preparation	Strong educational background
Accommodative	Public school preparation	Strong aspirations
Collaborative	Individualized instruction	Effective communicators
Influential	Technology awareness	Empowered within network
Direct communication	Proactive	Effective educators
Lead in the middle	Web-like leadership	Various leadership styles

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