ASCENSION TO THE SUPERINTENDENCY: HOW FEMALE ADMINISTRATORS PERCEIVE THE ATTAINABILITY AND DESIRABILITY OF THE ROLE

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By

Nancy Brougher Benincasa

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A dissertation written by

Nancy Brougher Benincasa

B.A., DePauw University, 1994

M.A., John Carroll University, 2002

M.S., Cleveland State University, 2009

Ph.D., Kent State University, 2020

Approved by

_____, Director, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Rosemary Gornik

_____, Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Christa Porter

_____, Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Christa Boske

Accepted by

_____, Director, School of Foundations, Leadership and Administration
Kimberly S. Schimmel

_____, Dean, College of Education, Health and Human Services
James C. Hannon

BENINCASA, NANCY BROUGHER, PH.D., AUGUST 2020 FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP, AND ADMINISTRATION

ASCENSION TO THE SUPERINTENDENCY: HOW FEMALE ADMINISTRATORS PERCEIVE THE ATTAINABILITY AND DESIRABILITY OF THE ROLE (214 pp.)

Director of Dissertation: Rosemary Gornik, Ph.D.

Currently, 24% of national school superintendents are female (American School Decennial Study, 2010) within an overwhelmingly predominant female workforce. In the state of Ohio, that further decreases to less than 17%. The purpose of this qualitative, narrative study was to more fully understand why the number of female superintendents may be lacking from the lens of female administrators in the pipeline for the position. Primarily, this study attempted to understand whether female administrators, technically qualified for the role, thought the position to be attainable and/or desirable. Along the way, the study participants discussed many issues associated with the culture of educational leadership and females in leadership positions as well as perceived impediments female leaders face.

The study consisted of seven participants. Each participant served in a position in the career pathway to the superintendency as defined by Brunner and Kim (2010). Data consisted of two separate rounds of interviews from the seven participants and collected documents from five participants. Forty eight individual patterns emerged from the data collection which resulted in six major research themes.

Participants identified several impediments to the attainability of the superintendent position for female administrators. Additionally, the participants

discussed their personal navigation of many of these obstacles. Participants varied in their perceptions of the desirability of the role. Some desired to break barriers and serve in the position; others had serious reservations about the application process, selection process and, in some cases, the role itself.

Key Words: superintendent, educational leadership, feminist theory, culture, female superintendent, sponsorship, bias, women leadership

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Public Education and Gender

Public education in the United States has had a complicated relationship with equal gender opportunity throughout its history. At its inception, public schooling served as an institution that educated young men to become participating citizens of democracy at the exclusion of young women. During the late 18th and early 19th century, educating women became more acceptable as women's education essentially helped young mothers better educate their sons (Blount, 1998). This early gender inclusion, which ironically began as a means to further benefit young men, has evolved throughout time. As the need and desire for public education increased, so too did the need for teachers. Women became vital to the teaching industry because they were available and inexpensive. When men pursued vocations with better wages, women were willing to take teaching positions for less money (Blount, 1998). Additionally, when men returned from World War II, women gave up administrative positions so that men could have them (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1987). These two facts created a dichotomy. Women historically dominated the educational field in numbers, but lagged in educational leadership positions. This imbalance in leadership roles versus a highly female vocation still exists today.

Women and Leadership Statistics

Lack of women in top leadership roles is hardly a novel concept. Today, 25% of U.S. senators are women and 23.4% of U.S. representatives are women. Eighteen

percent of state governors are women. Although the numbers of women serving in office continues to slowly grow over time, today's current female Fortune 500 CEOs remain a staggeringly low 4.8% (PEW Research Center, 2019). These numbers plucked from the business world may make more sense because there is a corresponding low number of women in the funnel of technology and Fortune 500 management. It is difficult to explain an echoed inequitable number of women educational leaders when the funnel is so overwhelmingly filled with women.

Today, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), 76.5% of the educational workforce is currently filled by women. However, regardless of the dominance of women educators, the central leadership position within public education, the superintendency, is not dominated by women. In fact, national statistics show that women are nowhere close to equal representation in that position. Currently, 24% of national superintendents are female (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2010). In the state of Ohio, that number further decreases to less than 17%.

The Public School System as an Opportunity Engine

As U.S. public school education has evolved in the 20th century, there has been a great focus placed on equality and opportunity. John Dewey (1900/1990) asserted "what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children" (p. 7). Equal opportunity takes the form of the community. The community should want for all of its children. Nel Noddings (2013) assigned the task to the public school system as she argued "to provide equal opportunities for all children, the public schools must be preserved and strengthened" (p. 37). Adults seemingly began

to teach these democratic ideals of equality and opportunity to children at a young age through the means of a public education system. Dewey (1916) discussed social efficacy as an aim in education and defined social efficacy as "nothing less than that socialization of mind which is socially actively concerned in making experiences more communicable; in breaking down the barriers of social stratification which make individuals impervious to the interests of others" (p. 72). In Dewey's system, education as an aim for social efficacy acts as a means to counteract society's social stratification. Interestingly enough, today's educational aim has shifted to one that supports college and career readiness, which seems to undercut Dewey's intended social efficacy. Whereas Dewey speaks of society's stratification in terms of wealth and poverty, there is also still a need, today, for social efficacy in breaking down barriers of race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation discrimination. Schooling is a purported method of teaching for societal inclusion. While access is intended for every student, schools struggle to truly create equal opportunity as evidenced in current achievement gaps (Hansen, Levesque, Quintero, & Valant, 2018). From school funding, to school district facilities, teacher talent and school leadership, students learn at a young age that equity is not for everyone. Jonathan Kozol (2005) discussed one such division in equity by noting the experience of teachers in wealthy districts versus their counterparts in poor school systems "they are confections of apartheid and, no matter by what arguments of urgency or practicality they have been justified, they cannot fail to further deepen the division of society" (p. 86). These divisions continue, particularly as education's aim tends more to the economic success of students rather than the social efficacy of Dewey's progressive lens of education. One

such blatant division of society in the many layers of the public educational system begin with the top school district leadership position, the school superintendency.

Public school system's central public school official, the superintendent, acts as a representation of the school and community in which she or he serves. The superintendent is a figurehead for these systems intended to provide access and equity for every citizen. It is ironic the position itself seems to nationally underrepresent so many groups heavily favoring White males as evidenced by the results of the American Association of School Superintendents 2010 Decennial Study (Kowalski et al., 2010). In the study, less than a quarter of school superintendents are women and less than 2% of the respondents were people of color (Kowalski et al., 2010). Equal access and leadership opportunity within our public education system seems an illusion for several populations, including minorities and women (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Marshall & Oliva, 2010).

Women and Educational Leadership

Today, women have taken on a much more public role of power and leadership. From Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In movement (Sandberg, 2013) to Tarana Burke's #metoo movement (Garcia, 2017), this historical moment in time seems to encourage, embrace, and support the leadership and lens of women. Recently, while working with several leaders (who happen to be women) on several statewide initiatives, a conversation began regarding female superintendents. A colleague stated that less than 16% of superintendents in the state were women. Less than 16%. I was stunned. How can a vocation that consists of roughly 85% women have less than 16% occupy the top

leadership position (Gilchrist, 2017; Ohio Department of Education, 2017). I researched and immediately found the statistics were correct. National numbers were no more encouraging. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) cite women teachers representing 76.6% of the workforce, women principals equal roughly 52%, and women superintendents represent around 24% (Kowalski et al., 2010). When I asked several administrative colleagues, both men and women, whether they found this statistic shocking, their responses were generally "no" or "not really." I found their lack of surprise disconcerting. bell hooks (1994) stated, "lying takes the form of mass media creating the myth that feminist movement has completely transformed society" (p. 29). Her words now seem applicable to the numbers of my recent discovery. I wonder how did I not realize this discrepancy in the numbers of women superintendents, particularly when I serve as an assistant superintendent in a school district. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) remarked "documenting women's representation in formal leadership positions in schools is difficult because of the absence of reliable and comparable data either nationally or within and across states" (p. 27). While the disparity continues, historically there was little interest in studying the numbers of women in school leadership. Tyack and Hansot (1986) countered while historically there was substantial data collected about salary and staff across the country, the fact no information was formally collected pertaining to gender in education seems to point to "a conspiracy of silence [that] could hardly have been unintentional" (p. 13). Wendy Samford (2016) noted, "for the oppressed, there is an illusion of everyone working toward the same goal" (p. 25).

Perhaps, I have simply become a part of a system that represents an illusion of equitable access and in my ignorance have become a part of the systemic issue.

Statement of the Problem

Currently, less than 16% of school superintendents in the state of Ohio are women (Ohio Department of Education, 2017). Although the number is surprising, what is more surprising is that number in light of the 85% women who make up the education workforce (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Women continue to move beyond traditional gender stereotypes both at work and at home. While women take on larger responsibilities in the workforce, there is still a surprising lack of women represented at the highest levels of public education. The dearth of women serving in the role of superintendent in Ohio sounds alarm bells. School is the place where young girls and young boys see role models every day. Their lens will be one that has the potential to be steeped in a patriarchal model of male leadership at the very top sending unspoken messages about leadership and power. Additionally, if the vocation is so dominantly filled with women and leadership so dominantly filled with men, many of the field's most talented individuals may not hold the highest positions of power and influence in public education.

> Colleen Bell (1995) discussed her study of women principals and pointed out: Women in school administration are both members of a majority (women in education) and members of 'the few' (women leaders in schools); their positions as female leaders put them on the fringes of groups of teachers and groups of administrators. Administrative women's experiences encompass both authority

> and influence as leaders, and isolation and exclusion as women in a male-dominated occupation. (Bell, 1995, p. 289)

Women administrators are no longer peers of teachers and find themselves outnumbered by men in administrative circles.

The intent of this study was to capture the perspectives of female educational leaders who may or may not be marginalized in a system with implicit and explicit obstacles that impact their attainment of the highest district leadership position. It was important to understand these administrators' perceptions and experiences within the current educational landscape in order to help future leaders negotiate this system and/or change this system that seemingly disallows access and equity.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative, qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of female school administrators regarding the position of school superintendent, the pathway to the superintendency, as well as any perceived or real barriers that may have existed for them in their pursuit of the position. Additionally, the study looked more closely at particular external and internal barriers by asking specifically about bias participants have experienced in the field (external barrier) as well as any personal issues the participants may or may not have experienced (internal barrier). The perceptions of participants were generally defined as the participants' described consideration of the superintendency and the barriers, participants' current perceptions of experienced bias, and participants' internal barriers associated with the position of superintendent. The

study focused on this primary research question: How do K12 female administrators perceive the superintendency as an attainable and/or desirable career pathway?

The research focused on the participants' desire and/or intention to serve in the role as well as the participants' perception of the pathway to the role. This study was guided by one primary research question in response to the question ascertaining the participant interest in serving in the role of superintendent:

- How do K12 female administrators perceive the superintendency as an attainable and desirable career pathway?

Five secondary questions followed the primary research question:

- How do female district administrators navigate their personal career labyrinths?
- How has gender impacted participants' leadership experiences?
- How has gender impacted others' perceptions of participants?
- To what extent if any does failure or the fear of failure impact female district leaders' potential ascension to a superintendency?
- To what extent if any has family or household obligations impacted the career path of the female district administrator?

Gender and Research Implications

Gender was an integral component in this research study. First, it was important to understand and clarify the difference between sex and gender. Early researchers distinguished between gender and biological sex by "set[ting] the terms so that sex represented the body's anatomy and physiological workings and gender represented

social forces that molded behavior" (Fausto-Sterling, 2017, p. 6). This distinction was relevant to this study, not in terms of sex—all participants were biologically women—but instead by what was most relevant to "gender" and the implications gender had on the participants as they experienced the world around them as females. Because of this distinction, the research sought to better understand the experiences of these participants as gendered "females," rather than "women" in a gendered male vocation. These experiences involved gender stereotypes in leadership, culture, and personality characteristics. Eagly and Carli (2007) discussed:

> Because gender is a fundamental distinction of human life, categorization of people by sex is instant, automatic, and pervasive. With this categorization come automatic associations of feminine or masculine characteristics—communal qualities linked with women, and agentic qualities with men. This stereotyping is not mysterious but follows from everyday observations and reflects ordinary psychological processes. (p. 89)

These participants identified their gender as female in a highly male vocation. Each participant spoke about their experiences in educational leadership against the backdrop of masculinized leadership and cultural expectations. Each participant was a biological woman and identified as a cultural female. This distinction served as an important one because there were multiple implications for the participants based on gender and society's expectations and pre-determinations made by categorizing individuals within gender norms. Acker (1991) stated, "although there are great variations in the patterns and extent of gender division, men are almost always in the highest positions of

organizational power" (p. 167). This concept undergirded this study's examination. Statistically, males served in the highest education power position, the superintendency. So, what does it mean to be a female in the pathway to the highly masculinized superintendency? Is the highly male organizational position of power seemingly attainable for females or was it desirable for females? This study asked participants to examine being female in a highly male vocation and their desire to pursue the top, overwhelmingly male, position (roughly 83%). Based on this subject area, participants had to draw on personal and societal gender schemas. Chemaly (2018) highlighted them,

> Gender schemas—organizing generalizations that we learn early in life—simplify the world around us, but they also reproduce problematic discrimination. Male and female categories assigned at birth immediately form the basis, in our families, for how we assign roles, attributes, responsibilities, and status. (p. xv)

The gender schemas impacted the participants both in their current roles and in their consideration for the superintendency. Gender schemas, gender stereotyping, and gender bias affected participants in their lives and in their perceptions around the superintendency. Throughout this study, I purposefully chose the term female to signify the societal definitions and expectations of gender. The study focused on the perceptions of the participants as they navigated a highly masculinized field within their gender as female leaders.

Theoretical Frameworks

Feminist theory grounded this research study. Moreover, five tenets of feminist theory supported and guided the research questions. The first tenet looked at women as

"the other." Simone de Beauvoir (1949) wrote about women as "the other" in her work, *The Second Sex*. In this study, participants described their perceptions as "the other" in the highly male world of educational administration. In *Women's Ways of Knowing*, authors Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) discussed the silence of women as they noted, "women who live in silence have much in common with each other" (p. 32). The research looked at antiquated stereotypes of females as "silent" observers as it related to the research participants.

There are several career "steps" to the superintendency. Traditionally, the pathway includes teaching, building administration, and/or central office positions on the way to the superintendent's office (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Each of these career steps must be navigated by female educators who become administrators. Alice Eagly and Linda Carli (2007) identified a female "career labyrinth" women face in the workplace. Within the third feminist theory tenet of this research study, I examined the individual labyrinths of the participants. The participants have already successfully navigated their own personal labyrinths, I looked more closely at their navigations. In the fourth tenet, Carol Dweck (2006/2016) discussed high achieving female children who were hesitant to try new tasks beyond their abilities due to a fear of failure. Because the participants have already proven achievement in the field of education, the fourth tenet allowed me the opportunity to see if and how these high achieving female participants were or were not hesitant of the position and whether or not they feared the ascension to the superintendency.

The fifth and final tenet of this study focused on traditional family gender roles fulfilled by women and how these traditional roles may or may not have impacted participants desire or perception of their ability to seek or fulfill the superintendency.

The Significance of the Study

While many female educational leaders exist throughout Ohio, there continues to be a disproportionately low number that ascend to the role of superintendent. These numbers alone suggest something more than biological sex may be a factor in the attainment of the position. Thus, this research study examined the perspectives of gendered female educational leaders as they have experienced leadership in education. In order to best capture their experiences, a narrative qualitative inquiry allowed for a deeper understanding and examination of the participants lived experiences. There can be a great deal of value in understanding the lives of individuals and the stories they can share (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hatch, 2002; Merriam & Associates, 2002).

The personal stories of these participants helped to define and further the examination of this dearth of female superintendents. These personal, narrative stories gathered via researcher interview and document gathering allowed for an in-depth study of the stories that existed as participants' experienced the pathway to the superintendency. It is difficult to truly understand this dearth of female superintendents without examining those individuals who are able but not yet serving in the role of superintendent.

Many recent studies reflect the systemic, societal causes and issues surrounding this scarcity of women leaders (Ballard, 2010; Bronar, 2015; Heslinga, 2010; King, 2016;

Morrison, 2012; Smith, 2015). These studies focused on the perspectives female educational leaders had of their career pathways and their experiences of gender equity and leadership. These studies looked at female superintendents' leadership styles, lived experiences, and leadership capacity. Several studies highlighted female superintendents' perceptions of the barriers that exist in attaining the position of superintendent after they attained the position. Other studies explored female superintendents' job satisfaction and narratives. The majority of these studies asked female superintendents to discuss the pathway to the role whether it be the mentoring, or the work-family balance, and/or their experienced barriers to the position. As Young (2003) denoted, this research focused primarily on the feminist approach departing from the traditional "male-centered paradigms" of previous research studies (Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Young, 2003). These studies of female superintendents captured the lens of the females who have served in the role of superintendent, and they concentrated on the lived experiences of female superintendents (Armistead, 2017; Henderson, 2017; King, 2016).

While studies of female superintendents are important, there was a shortage of research studies of acting female administrators qualified for the position but who have not yet attained or do not wish to attain the position. In studies that do target female administrators, researchers tend to focus primarily on perceived barriers to the position or the gender disproportionality within the field. These studies generally assumed these female administrative participants have to or want to serve as female superintendents (Armistead, 2017; Henderson, 2017; King, 2016). These research studies failed to

identify and capture the stories of a growing workforce of highly capable female administrators who may or may not aspire to the superintendency. I hoped to better understand the perspectives of these school leaders and their opinions on the position of superintendent as well as their perception of the role's attainability. It stands important to understand this population of female educational leaders and their perceptions of the school superintendency. The work within this research study may further an understanding of why a growing number of female leaders are not ascending to the role of superintendent, perhaps by their own choice. These leaders either were choosing not to pursue this leadership role and/or finding the ascension to the role difficult. I wanted to better understand these dynamics from the perspective of the female participants.

This study will add to the body of scholarly literature by gathering data from sitting female district and building leaders. These leaders have not traditionally been the focus of qualitative data gathering. Research to date has focused on female superintendents and the pathways that have led them to the role. Linda Skrla (2003) suggested

> That women's ambition (or lack thereof) to be superintendents (whether articulated by the women themselves or reified by power voices in the field) is another area of research findings in the study of women in the superintendency that requires reexamination. (p. 275)

This study intended to "reexamine" this ambition. Rather than a focus on "women's ambition (or lack thereof)," this study focused on the participants' feelings pertaining to the desirability and attainability of the position of superintendent. This study examined

female leaders' perceptions of the role of superintendent as well as participants' personal misgivings (if present) regarding the position.

Positionality Statement

It is important to note I am a White, middle class woman currently in a similar career position as my research participants. I had, before this research study, never considered the role of superintendent as a pathway I intended to pursue. Additionally, I did not notice any gender discrepancy in the role of the superintendent. While I understood the job was held by a majority of men, I had no idea of the numerical disparity.

I was raised in a middle class household (a very happy one), the youngest of four children. My father worked, my mother was a home maker. I did not know any women who worked in my family except for one aunt on my father's side. So, female career pathways were not a subject with which I had much experience as I grew up. My socialization was very much stemmed in traditional gender roles. I was also raised by a group of very strong, athletic (outside traditional gender roles of their time) women who supported my every endeavor and instilled in me and my sisters a belief we could accomplish anything we put our minds to doing.

I have always worked. I have spent the majority of my administrative career being a minority female in majority male administrative teams. These administrative teams have been positive experiences, and I have been close to my male colleagues who have been an incredible support to me in my career. In this study, my experiences in educational administration benefitted the research. My shared experience helped me to

build trust with participants effortlessly and in short order. There are certain nuances inherent in being a K12 district female leader others may have difficulty understanding. This perspective helped in acquiring the data through strong participant relationships, shared experiences, and empathy. I had to be cautious to ensure my own experiences and lens did not infiltrate the views of the participants. While sharing stories can help to forge a relationship and build trust among researcher and participant, I did not want to influence the participants' responses in any way. My purpose in the research was to seek to understand the participants' lived experiences and analyze what the narratives showed. I noted participants may have been reluctant to share their stories with me because I knew some of them personally. I hoped to address this research dynamic by utilizing snowball sampling. So, while I may personally have known some participants, other participants I did not. I planned to include a minimum of six participants and a maximum of 10 participants. The final research yielded seven participants.

Throughout this research process, I marveled at my own naiveté. I had been negotiating my own administrative/teacher leadership pathway for over 20 years. As I reflected on my time in administration, I was clearly a minority in number. While I realized it, I was lucky to work with incredibly supportive, predominantly male, leadership teams. My career led me to trust and rely on my male counterparts who supported me with little regard for my gender. Perhaps, because I had great support, I did not realize the number of women leaders dropped at the superintendent level. Now, as a central office administrator and a female potentially on the pathway to the role of superintendent, I am much more aware of being female in a highly male world.

Another aspect of my own positionality emerged through the research and interviews with my participants centered upon race as another social construct that impacted participants' lived experiences. I am a White woman. Three of my participants were women of color. Two identified as "Black" and one as a "Woman of color." Michele Young (2003) mentioned "feminist researchers . . . tend to describe their approach as studying women from the perspective of their own experiences to reveal versions of reality that more accurately reflect their experiences" (p. 42). This was not my intent. The personal experiences, whether based in race, gender, workplace, or background, were different for all of the participants as they experienced this highly male landscape within the scope of their own personal lens. As researcher, I hoped to utilize my "insider" status to better understand and relate to the participants' lived experiences while working toward understanding their diverse lenses of experiencing the world.

My positionality showed up in my analysis in my ability to understand the participants' experiences and interpret them due to my understanding of their positions in educational leadership. I continually had to check my own positionality to ensure I was accurately reflecting and interpreting the experiences as relayed by my participants separately from my personal experiences in the field. Ultimately, my position as a female educational leader helped me to establish trust with my participants, better understand and relate to their stories, and more accurately interpret them into data.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature regarding the intersection of the K12 female administrator and the role of public school superintendent is disjointed. There does exist a great deal of literature on the role of the superintendent as well as women in educational leadership. However, there is scant information tracing the history of women who served in the role of public school superintendent, the highest position of school leadership that exists in a K12 system. In the middle of the 19th century when women began to become classroom teachers in more substantial numbers, "local and state officials, created the domain of school administration, a realm reserved from the beginning for men" (Blount, 1998, p. 26). This new role of school administrator kept men in charge and women teachers subordinate. Blount (1998) asserted, "communities [that] eventually had welcomed women into schoolhouses . . . hire[d] men to assume new authority positions configured suspiciously like institutionalized, idealized versions of the family man, husband, father" (p. 26). School leadership, particularly at the superintendent level, stayed mostly male until the middle of the 20th century. At this point, through the efforts of the women's movement, the number of female superintendents showed growth. But, by the end of the 20th century, women superintendents were rare. Around this time, researchers began to look at the low numbers of women superintendents through a feminist theoretical lens. While it is difficult to trace the systemic lack of women in the role of superintendent due to a lack of formalized quantitative data, it is important to look through the literature on both school leadership and women serving in educational administration leadership roles.

Also, the literature allows for an understanding of the inception of school administration in the changing landscape of women educators.

The Goals and Purpose of Public School Education

John Dewey (1916) discussed "culture as aim" in his work *Democracy in Education* (p.7 2). He defined culture to mean "something cultivated" which then can be used to "cultivat[e] . . . [an] appreciation of ideas and art and broad human interests" (p. 72). Dewey's supposition may be taken a step further. The culture of an educational system with the aim of "broadening human interests" must think about the culture the organization reflects. Today, as the Ohio superintendency is supported primarily by male leaders, the culture of the educational system cultivates a particular male interest and lens.

Dewey understood the importance of the public school. Michael Fullan (2003) agreed with Dewey the goals of public education have always centered on the greater good. Everyone, ultimately, has a stake in the caliber of schools, and education is everyone's business. The quality of the public education system relates directly to the quality of life people enjoy (whether as parents, employers, or citizens), with a strong public education system serving "as the cornerstone of a civil, prosperous, and democratic society" (Fullan, 2013, p. 3). Fullan identified the public school as the original teachers for democracy.

Dewey (1916) warned of the confines of a "feudally organized society with its rigid division of inferior and superior" (p. 72). In the current lens of school leadership, the inferior number (women) and superior number (men) sets up a feudal leadership

organization. So, when Dewey questioned this as an issue which fights against the very nature of the democracy, there is a need to study and understand this phenomenon. Dewey (1916) commanded that for democracy to flourish, education must be available to every person and every person must then give back to his or her society. While this notion is certainly an ideal, historically the public education system has not offered an opportunity for all. There is a certain patriarchal lens that runs throughout the foundation of the K-12 public education system. Nel Noddings (2013) noted, the public school system was "designed by men for the public life of men" (p. 67).

However, over the course of the last century an equity movement coupled with legislature has driven changes in public education. Harvey, Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, and Koff (2013) discussed these legislative milestones noting several components of equity based reform. First, the Civil Rights Act in 1964 marked an end to the idea of separate public school systems for students of different color as well as a commitment to creating a system which prioritized equity. Legislation continued to shine a light on marginalized populations. The Individuals with Disability Act of 1975 mandated access and dollars to students with disabilities who were typically excluded from public schools. Title IX in 1975 demanded equal opportunity for women in athletics. Recently, No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act granted dollars to students based in monetary designation and need to ensure *every* child could show evidence of learning and success in the public school system (p. 5). Some feel the role of schools is to drive this force for equity. Noddings (2013) believed "to provide equal opportunities for all children, the public schools must be preserved and

strengthened" (p. 37). Harvey et al. (2013) demanded "equal educational opportunity for all" is and must always be a federal civil right. These legislative measures were the means to demand equal access and rights for all children (p. 9). These legally enforceable rights could act as the impetus for eliminating the gender gap and addressing inequities of opportunity. However, this seemingly singular redress is not eliminating this divide.

Noddings (2013) referenced the ideals of John Dewey when she stated, "the schools should direct their efforts toward producing people who can act purposefully and morally in every domain of life" (p. 102). This edict underscores the importance of equity in schooling. In order to produce such people, moral and purposeful, students must see equal opportunity and access for all students regardless of labels (race, religion, gender) that separate. Barbara Bank (1997) observed:

> It was assumed that gender equity in schooling would result from a straightforward, determined effort to equalize opportunities and treatment across the sexes, but it was also assumed that gender equity in schooling would manifest itself, more or less automatically, in equal outcomes across the sexes. (p. 3)

The notion of creating a system of equity which then automatically allows for equity is a concept both Bank and Noddings questioned. Just because systems of equity and legislation for equity have taken hold in public education, it does not appear to ensure every student has the same opportunities. Legislation alone does not ensure equity. There still exist many issues in public K12 education that prohibit truly equitable education. Public education is still led by primarily White males. When the majority of

school and school district leadership is representative of a majority, a message (whether implicit or explicit) is presented. This dearth of female leadership in public school districts is a national issue.

Bank (1997) identified a primary paradox in the struggle for gender-equity in school leadership. First, the paradox that achievement equals opportunity. She noted, "despite their good grades and other educational achievements, girls and women have not been able to win the status and other rewards that are consistent with their educational credentials" (p. 11). This disenfranchised illusion feeds this research study. There are certainly capable women leaders ready for the challenge of the superintendency, well qualified for the job and willing; yet, the numbers of women attaining the position remain alarmingly low.

The Impact of School Leadership

The role of the superintendent as district-level education leader was defined in the standards as identified by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) under the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) for presentation to the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education in the fall of 2010. The standards outlined seven areas that effective superintendents must attend to which include: shared vision; teaching and learning; district organization and resources; collaboration with stakeholders; safeguarding values of democracy, equity and diversity (social justice); advocating for students and families; an effective internship experience (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2011). It is noteworthy that each standard in the definition of district-level education leader begins with the following

belief that these leaders apply "knowledge that promotes the success of every student" in every separate standard area supporting the core value that demands educational opportunity and success for every student. The position itself is one which assigns the work of social justice and the promotion of opportunities for every student directly to the superintendent and district level leaders.

In *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*, Michael Fullan (2003) discussed the importance of school leadership in the work of establishing schools that take on the complex issue of educating all students. He commented:

> In complex societies, producing and sustaining a vital public school system is a tall order . . . you cannot do this without a dedicated, highly competent teaching force . . . And you cannot get teachers working like this without leaders at all levels guiding and supporting the process. (p. 5)

Strong leadership within the role of the superintendent is critically important to a school district and the community it serves. Harvey et al. (2013) reinforced the importance of strong leadership by his assertion "that [superintendents] will succeed or fail as a leader based on the quality of the leaders . . . put in place in schools. It's simple. Good schools require good principals" (p. 22). Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) further quantified this notion by using meta-analysis to show school leaders have a substantial impact on student learning (p. 38). So, in order to best address inherent and systemic inequity of school, strong leadership is required. Harvey et al. (2013) stated outright it is the superintendents who must set out to tackle the achievement gap (p. 22) intimating

without leaders willing to tackle challenges of inequity, these challenges will never be addressed.

Harvey et al. (2013) further posed several rhetorical questions to superintendents about equity within the leadership: “When these students arrive in your classrooms what will their teachers look like? By that, we mean, will the teaching force bear any resemblance to the students they are teaching? The answer is unfortunately, no” (p. 146). The analogy can and should go further. When students arrive in schools, what do they see in terms of the hierarchal leadership system in place? Currently, the male dominated superintendency is difficult to understand in a field that has historically been dominated by women. Through decades of change and heightened need for classroom teachers, women dominate the classroom ranks in number. In doing so, the current lack of female leadership at the top is even more difficult to comprehend. Additionally, because school leaders have such an important role in the learning and growth of students, it is necessary to offer students the most talented leaders regardless of gender. However, the current structure of the selection of superintendents may impede this goal. It puts talented women and minorities seemingly (based in current numbers and trends) at a disadvantage to take on the responsibility.

The History of “Male” Dominated School Administration

In the early 20th century, as public schools increased the necessity of hiring female teachers, school communities instituted the notion of school administration. Blount (1998) noted:

> Just as communities eventually had welcomed women into schoolhouses to perform duties derived from the notion of republican motherhood, so too did school districts hire men to assume new authority positions configured suspiciously like institutionalized, idealized versions of the family man, husband, and father. (p. 26).

Blount (1998) also contended females who became classroom teachers were stepping out of their lane and out of the control of men. In their newfound careers, there was a freedom afforded to females outside of male's control. This was a dangerous precedent at the time which was handled by putting male dominated administrative positions in place. These male administrators could continue to administer control over a workforce filled predominantly with females.

While the teaching ranks were filled with more females, the role of the superintendent never experienced a similar increase. However, female superintendents did exist. When considering all classes of superintendents from state to local to county positions, by 1930 11% were female (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 11). The onset and conclusion of World War II brought about rapid and immediate change in female superintendencies. Males returned to the work force and took over administrative roles (Bank & Hall, 1997; Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1987). Shortly after World War II, men became increasingly interested in education and moved into the teaching and administrative ranks in great number. Blount (1998) noted, "one criticism aimed at the superintendents was that they tended toward cronyism and closing ranks against outsiders, keeping educational control tightly contained" (p. 119). A rapid

decline occurred in female superintendents from 1950–1970 which was the steepest drop in the 20th century (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1987). The national number of female superintendents dropped from approximately 9% to just over 3%.

The role of the superintendency and the number of females filling this role never recovered following this post-war period. This severe decline in female superintendents continued until 1970 at which point "women filled only 3% of all superintendencies" (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 5). In the entirety of the 20th century, the number of female superintendents serving in the role had nominal increase marking it as a highly masculinized position (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). National statistics suggest 22% of superintendents are female (Kowalski et al., 2010). Today, this number suggests a substantial historical gain in number. However, when studied alongside the percentage of females in the teaching ranks, 76%, the number still pales.

Females Entering the Education Workplace

As an increase in need for public school teachers in the early 19th century occurred, females began to take on more jobs in teaching and administration. An increase of the general population in the 1800s and the desire for an educated populace drove an additional need for qualified teaching staff that were not available in number. Males, who originally had been tapped for teaching, instead attended college and hoped to pursue other fields (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007). At this time, communities balked at the idea of hiring females for these roles as they were considered less intelligent than males. Also, females had not received much education themselves so

they could offer little in the ways of teaching other students. Any work pursued outside the role of the household would have conflicted with the traditional gender roles associated with females at that time. However, need eventually prevailed. The entry of females into the teaching profession was in response to two primary factors: the increase of public schooling coupled with a need and absence of qualified male teachers (Blount, 1998; Strober & Lanford, 1986; Strober & Tyack, 1980). Because of this need, females were able to secure otherwise unavailable occupations as school teacher. Also, females were willing to take low wages for the opportunity at gaining independence afforded them through work (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Strober & Lanford, 1986). Many believed females were not suited to teaching. Detractors felt females were not able to control the students, particularly older male students. However, female teachers with difficult students could utilize male administrators to handle student discipline perpetuating the need for males at the top of the educational field (Blount, 1998; Strober & Lanford, 1986).

Teaching and working held several advantages for females who had previously been dependent upon males and marriage for financial security. Females no longer had to get married. Instead, these females could afford some type of economic independence. Additionally, female teachers had a renewed need for education and training which they could employ in a vocation that supported females in number and need (Blount, 1998; Strober & Tyack, 1980). Suddenly, males found themselves in the middle of "an increasingly 'feminized' profession, feminized in that women constituted a growing

proportion of the teaching ranks, but also feminized in the sense the work had changed to fit traditional notions of women's work" (Blount, 1998, pp. 21-22).

Even as the numbers of females increased, males held onto power through professional male-only teaching organizations. These organizations often barred females from membership for 50 plus years in the beginning of the 19th century (Blount, 1998). It appears the numbers in the profession did not equate to stature in the profession. While females dominated the role of teacher, they lagged in areas of influence and leadership. So, as a result of this increase in females within the teaching staff, the teaching profession became feminized while the administrative legions of education became masculinized (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). The impact of this gender assignment is still present today and acts as a catalyst for this research.

> Researchers and others who study or pay attention to the history of women and top leadership roles in public education often discuss the topic 'with a sigh.' The sigh usually accompanies the fact that any general history of the public school superintendency is one primarily about white men.
>
> (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 11)

The Systemic Challenges of Being Female in Education

Nel Noddings (2013) discussed the historical perspective in the "wisdom of educating women." Even as the education of girls became acceptable, their schooling was not equal to boys. Instead, girls were given a "watered down" version of the curriculum of the boys. Girls were not educated to be equally productive members of

society. Instead, wealthy girls were educated to be companions of men, the men who were society's leaders (p. 67).

So, inequity for females began even at the onset through an access to education not equal to their male counterparts. Instead, the public school system labeled and tracked girls into positions of male companion. As schooling has modernized and equitable access has allowed females to study alongside their male counterparts, it is interesting and confounding to note there are still areas within the system of education that remain inequitable and unbalanced. It is difficult to understand when females now have equity in educational access and blatantly dominate the pipeline (teaching ranks) of school leadership, the school superintendency is still unbalanced in gender.

Several researchers have attempted to study this imbalance. Mary Woods Scherr (1995) interviewed 13 women in her study of qualified, superintendency candidates. Although all of these females were qualified candidates, half did not intend to pursue the position. In her research, she denoted

> The way [these women] saw the role enacted may have not been congruent with their views of themselves not their preferred way of working since they saw the role as one which is primarily traditional controlling, hierarchical, political, and public. (Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995, p. 314)

Sherr continued by adding all of her participants felt this way about the role of the superintendency. Herein lies a substantial impediment to the position of superintendent for women. The superintendent position is traditionally built around male stereotypes

and male gender. These stereotypes continue to undergird a highly masculinized culture of leadership in educational administration, particularly the superintendency.

Tallerico (1997) highlighted "three distinct theoretical possibilities" that account for this shortfall of women educational leaders" (p. 194). She continued by identifying all three. Her first theory is personal. Tallerico said, "women look to themselves for explanations, focusing on psychological traits, inherent qualities, and personal characteristics" (p. 194). These reasons are referred to as "internal barriers"—female administrators do not see themselves as viable superintendents. This theory is worrisome. Tallerico contended there is an inner belief within qualified female educational leaders that inhibits their ability to become superintendents. I spent much time in this research asking participants about internal barriers. I inquired how participants viewed themselves in the role of school superintendent and about their personal fears about taking on the challenge. Tallerico continued by noting a second structural and systemic barrier which

> May be overt (e.g., discrimination in employment and promotions; inappropriate or illegal application and interview questions) but are probably subtler (e.g., selective informal sponsorship; networking, and mentorship of prospective administrators; conscious or unconscious gatekeeping by those who influence hiring decisions). Thus, systemic gender bias is accompanied by limited opportunities for women. (p. 195)

Tallerico noted the research points to a systemic challenge in equity for women. In this space of covert sexism lies frequent messaging which consistently teaches female

administrators the superintendency is a male driven function of schooling. Tallerico (1997) discussed a third and final theoretical possibility which is society itself. She noted:

> This perspective underscores the folkways and norms of American culture, the different ways that boys and girls are socialized, the lack of female role models in positions of authority in general, endemic differences in gender expectations, and society-wide stereotypical thinking about 'what's ladylike' and who 'looks like' a leader. The schools then are viewed as just one small piece of a larger culture generally hostile to gender equity. (p. 195)

Tallerico acknowledged the public school system itself becomes yet another vehicle which perpetuates and sustains a larger system of inequity. It is important to fully understand the underpinnings of the issue of gender inequity from those who are capable of addressing it by stepping into roles of leadership and paving the way for talented female leaders.

This research study focused on the primary research question:

- How do K12 female administrators perceive the superintendency as an attainable career pathway?

Five secondary questions followed the primary research question:

- How do female district administrators navigate their personal career labyrinths?
- How has gender impacted participants' leadership experiences?
- How has gender impacted others' perceptions of participants?

- To what extent if any does failure or the fear of failure impact female district leaders' potential ascension to a superintendency?
- To what extent if any has family or household obligations impacted the career path of the female district administrator?

This research captured a lesser researched population. Rather than focusing on those who have served in the role of superintendent, I spoke with those who have not. These participants discussed their own perceptions of their desire to pursue the role of superintendent as well as their perceptions of the impediments they perceived to exist in securing the position. Until we are able to better understand the perceptions of the female leaders qualified for the role and their perceptions of the role itself, gender imbalance in the position will likely continue.

Culture

In addition to understanding the perceptions of female educational leaders in roles qualified for the ascension to the superintendency, it was also important to understand the culture of the vocation these educators inhabit to better understand their personal experiences and perceptions. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz (1973) defined culture as

> Best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters—as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call "programs")—for the governing of behavior. (p. 44)

Cultures "governing behavior" impacts every aspect of daily living from family structures and roles at home to the behaviors and expectations governing social interactions at work and beyond. As functioning individuals within a constructed paradigm (culture), it is incumbent upon the individuals within the culture to understand and interpret these "plans, recipes, rules, instructions" in order to successfully navigate and prosper within the paradigm. In other words, culture matters.

In this research study, culture undergirds nearly every aspect of the data. First, the culture of the field of educational administration serves as the parameters within which every participant operates and functions. Many participants spoke about elements of this culture whether it was directly or indirectly within the interviews. Because culture often defines elements and expectations for behavior in its participants, the culture of educational administration bears noting and analyzing against the participant interviews collected in the research. As Ortiz (1982) stated,

> Socialization processes are defined as those changes which occur in persons as they participate in organizational settings. The underlying assumption is that being a member of an organization, engaging in the organizational activities, and fulfilling organizational expectations requires fundamental and continuing personal changes. (p. 2)

These personal changes implicated the data from participants as outliers in terms of gender and, in some cases, minority status in the culture of the highly White, male administrative superintendency. Because gender (in terms of cultural expectations, leadership expectations, and societal expectations) made participants outliers to the

position, I defined the research question as posed to female educational leaders rather than to women educational leaders. The term "female" attempted to incorporate the understanding we live in a gendered society regarding positions of leadership.

The Impact of Culture

Culture impacted many elements of this research study. First, the educational administration culture sends messaging to its membership about a myriad of components including accessibility and desirability, this study's primary focus. Participants enmeshed in a particular culture are heavily impacted by the culture whether the impact is expressed implicitly or explicitly. Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson (2016) explained in *Shaping School Culture*, culture is a "way to help school leaders better understand their school's unwritten rules and traditions, customs, and expectations" (p. 7). These unwritten rules make up the expectations for daily living. Furthermore, culture helps members of a group know how to behave and the rules of the organization in which they serve (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009). Culture is a valuable teacher. Participants of this study exist within the cultural paradigm of the highly male educational superintendency. While there are many tentacles within this administrative culture, the two that were particular to this study were gender and power as they exist in the participants' perspectives in tandem with their perceptions of the desirability and accessibility of the superintendency.

Many participants noted elements of a highly male culture associated with educational administration in terms of both accessibility and desirability. This culture, as identified and described by participants, oftentimes influenced or deterred participants in

the work they pursued, the rules they followed, the relationships they developed, and their existence within the paradigm. Edgar Schein (2004) indicated in organizational culture "one can see clearly how culture is created, embedded, evolved, and ultimately manipulated, and, at the same time, how culture constrains, stabilizes, and provides structure and meaning to the group members" (p. 1). The participants in this study understood how the male dominated culture was created and evolved and were also aware of the constraints and structure of the field. Organizational culture, therefore, was important to understand in order to negotiate the participants' perceptions as agents existing within the culture. This study asked female administrators to look more closely at their perceptions of the attainability and desirability of the superintendency. As Schein noted culture as a potential constraint, there seemed to already exist a "constraint" in these female participants' occupation of these highly male roles. This "constraint" was not in the participants' ability to successfully navigate the role but, rather, the "constraint" lay within the female experience as an outsider within the highly male culture. In order to better understand and study the participants' perceptions of the desirability and attainability of the superintendency, it was necessary to understand the operation of culture both in gender roles and power structures. This particular research study was bounded by gender and power culture within the organization as they speak to the research study's participants' responses regarding desirability and accessibility. John Kotter (1996) stated, "because [culture] is everywhere yet invisible, you just don't think about it, despite the big influence it has on you" (p. 150). At times, the invisibility was deeply felt by participants in the study when they were forced to "think about it."

The Shaping of the Educational Administrative Culture

Historically, public education has been a male domain. Until the late 18th century, male teachers taught male students. Then, female teacher/housewives emerged and began teaching the youngest children letters in their households. As females were not formally educated themselves, they were hindered from much participation in the teaching ranks. In the 1800s, with the growth of industry, females had to fill "male" roles teaching in the classroom. As the demand for schooling increased and there existed a serious shortage of teachers, females were needed to help fill the void. Females then began to dominate in number for two primary reasons: they were cheap labor and they were perceived as maternal figures, a beneficial characteristic when working with children. As the roles of administration developed and the role of the superintendent emerged, these positions were historically filled by men. There has been historic fluctuation in the numbers of female school administrators, but as schools became more "bureaucratized," gender lines were formed defining females as teachers and males as administrators (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1987; Tyack & Strober, 1981). The history reflects the culture established in the educational field. Classroom teaching was historically defined as female's work and administration was defined as men's work. Brunner and Grogan (2007) noted, "because educational administrative roles have been most often filled by men, a male model of leadership evolved" (p. 43). So, males are perceived as leaders and females as the workforce. Today, remnants of this historical culture is still at work in the sheer numbers of male superintendents in Ohio.

The Prevalent Culture

The culture of the educational superintendency sends both explicit and implicit messaging to those within the field. First, the demographics of the overwhelmingly White male superintendency reinforces who "should" be in the role. Schein (2004) noted:

> Cultural norms define how a given nation or organizations will define leadership—who will get promoted, who will get the attention of followers. On the other hand, it can be argued that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture; that the unique talent of leaders is their ability to understand and work with culture; and that it is an ultimate act of leadership to destroy culture when it is viewed as dysfunctional. (p. 11)

This majority serves as the leadership and continues to define the leadership in educational administration. Yet, this predominantly male culture that invisibly surrounds participants impacts them in both their daily work and their career aspirations. The organizational culture shapes behaviors and sets leadership norms. Schein (2004) noted, "culture guide[s] and constrain[s] the behavior of members of a group through the shared norms that are held in that group" (p. 8). Leaders, defined by the culture, act within the set culture and learn to follow the rules already imparted by the culture. They set the norms. This notion of cultural norms and leadership had implications for this study. If leadership is set by cultural norms, and cultural norms have set the superintendency as a masculinized occupation, there already existed a conflict in the attainability of females to the position.

The culture of educational administration reinforces gendered messaging. The number of male superintendents sets explicit cultural expectations; the result of which sets implicit leadership guidelines. These leadership guidelines may hinder gender equity as leadership is still "gendered masculine" (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Williams & Dempsey, 2014). Joan Williams and Rachel Dempsey (2014) defined this gendered leadership "because the traits consistent with leadership and idea generation" are, culturally speaking, male traits (p. 32). Female superintendents break the cultural norm and in doing so work against both the culture and the leadership norms. This fact is relevant when examining the lived experiences of these participants who, in acknowledging an interest in the superintendency, would do so knowing the desire would conflict with the set culture and leadership norms.

Feminist Theory and Gender Roles

The vocation of teaching within the K12 educational system is 76% females (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), the male superintendents running the individual K12 districts number 76% nationally and 84% in Ohio (Kowalski et al., 2010). These numbers alone perpetuate a highly masculinized leadership culture in educational administration. This study intended to study several female participants, on the pathway to the superintendency, to research their desire and perceived attainability of the role. In order to better understand the male culture against the experiences of the female participants, a study of several feminist theories follow which compose the tenets of this research. The participants' experiences were viewed within and against these tenets in the discussion of these research results.

Feminist theory in the United States is divided into what many feminist scholars identify as waves. However, today, many modern feminists are critical of what they term an over-simplified historical wave metaphor of feminist theory and thought (Hewitt, 2012; Laughlin et al., 2010; Reger, 2017). Nonetheless, the feminist wave metaphor is still present as a historical foundation for feminist thought and thus bears explanation as a foundation for this research study. The first wave, occurring in the 19th and early 20th centuries, focused on the basic rights of women including the right to the vote, the right for representation and the right to an education. Scholars and activists in this first feminist wave desired access for women in terms of the quantifiable right to vote. The suffrage movement marks the basis for the work in the first feminist wave. The passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in August of 1920 marked the successful end of what scholars deemed the "First wave of feminism" (Hewitt, 2012, p. 658). As the rights of women evolved, so too did the feminist movement. The second wave in feminist theory began in the 1960s with an advocacy for women's place and role in society and the family. Betty Friedan (1963) in *The Feminist Mystique* captured the desperation of women college graduates relegated to the duties of keeping the household and raising children. In doing so, Friedan bolstered feminist thought which questioned the role women played in a modern society. Laughlin et al. (2010) described the second wave as a "resurgence of activism that broadened the notion of equality to include a reexamination of men's and women's social roles" (pp. 76-77). This "wave" of activism focused on the role of women particularly in the household and the limiting and repressive nature of this role. A third wave of feminist thought emerged in the late 20th

century which questioned more than the role of women and women's rights. Instead, this third wave called into question the singular lens of the white upper middle class women leading the feminist movement. The third wave called for representation from a broader span of "woman" and in doing so a more collective call to equality. Some say a fourth women's movement is emerging in response to the #metoo movement and the onslaught of a new, modern social media presence whose leaders demand women's rights. Regardless of the categorization of the waves, feminists throughout each wave attempted to improve upon the wave before them which perpetuates this feminist wave theory throughout time (Hewitt, 2012, p. 661).

Within these waves are several facets of feminist thought and beliefs. I intended to explore several components of feminist thought within this research. Primarily, I focused on five tenets that comprise the basis of my theoretical framework. These five tenets included: patriarchy and women as "other," the silence of the female leader, the career labyrinth, high achievers, and family gender roles. Because the waves of feminist theory span decades of time and countless components of feminist thought and belief, these tenets grounded the research and guided my study.

> Perhaps the myth of woman will be phased out one day; the more women assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvelous quality of Other dies in them. But today it still exists in the hearts of all men. (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 161).

Patriarchy and Women as "the Other"

The "Other" (de Beauvoir, 1949) is the concept women act as "the Other" in a patriarchal society. In the very beginning of Christianity, women are literally born of

Adam's rib to serve as companion to man. In the role of this service, women are, at their inception, lacking rights and responsibilities of their own. Within this paradigm, women in de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* are framed as "the Other." de Beauvoir (1949) denoted the oft used phrases like "thank God for creating women" that "in these and other similar phrases, man once more asserts arrogantly and naively that his presence in this world is an inevitable fact and a right, that of woman is a simple accident—but a fortunate one" (p. 161). Women are a literal creation of men for men. In this way, de Beauvoir positioned women as outside of the norm of man. de Beauvoir (1949) emphasized "society has always been male; political power has always been in man's hands" (p. 80). This ideology has several ramifications including the delineation of men as powerful and women as secondary. This power framework echoes the framework of power in public school districts throughout Ohio. Men have the "political power" as they overwhelmingly dominate the leadership role of the superintendency. In this study, I asked participants about this seeming patriarchal system as it impacts and defines the superintendent role and relates to their perception of the position as an attainable career pathway.

In Women's Ways of Knowing, authors Belenky et al. (1986) also discussed the role of women as secondary to men. The authors asserted "developmental theory has established men's experience and competence as a baseline against which both men's and women's development is then judged, often to the detriment or misreading of women" (p. 7). These authors highlighted a sense of "the Other" in their assertion men's experience and competence act as a societal norm, against which women's experience and

competence “the Other” is eternally measured (de Beauvoir, 1949; Belenky et al., 1986). If women are the Other, then how can females ever “measure up” against a system that normalizes the male experience, discounting the female lens, perspectives, feelings and experiences? bell hooks (1994) weighed in using her experience as a teacher. Her White male students brought to her classroom what she identified as “an insistence on the authority of experience” (p. 81). This authority of experience is indicative of a patriarchal society which normalizes the male experience and in doing so minimizes the voice of the female.

The Silence of the Female Leader

Whether it be in accepting the role of “the Other” or whether it be a simple by-product of a society dominated by males, there exists a complicit agreement among females who can successfully navigate systems of patriarchy do so as silent observers. Belenky et al. (1986) cited in several studies that it is “consistently” men who do most of the talking and women who do most of the listening (p. 45). Perhaps, in some ways, this female listening is one rooted in simple existence. Silent observers are able to navigate a variety of experiences and systems by simply listening. Taking this notion even further, there is an often understood tenet among females that to achieve and maintain success in a patriarchal world, female leaders must not make waves. Silence is a weapon in this paradigm. Betty Friedan (1963) discussed this notion in her Epilogue of the *Feminist Mystique*. Friedan categorized this silent complacency by separating these females successful in the navigation of these male waters. She said:

> Perhaps women who have made it as 'exceptional' women don't really identify with other women. For them, there are three classes of people: men, other women, and themselves; their very status as exceptional women depends on keeping other women quiet, and not rocking the boat. (p. 461)

Interestingly enough, Reardon, Glovsky, and Steinem (1993) wrote an article published in the *Harvard Business Review* about a fabled panel of experts who commented on an "HR Case Study" where a female corporate leader struggled whether or not to send a memo detailing a culture of sexism she experienced which permeated the company. Three diverse voices weighed in on the issue. One voice confirmed the sexism and encouraged her not to speak out. Another voice suggested she be mindful of her message, in implicit silencing. The third voice suggested that she, alone, was not strong enough to claim a culture of sexism. Instead, she should try to collect other voices to earn the right to speak up. In this *Harvard Business Review* article, it is easy to see why females prefer silence. Soraya Chemaly (2018) stated, "the worst thing a woman can do is speak up for herself and spread ideas that are not 'appropriate'" (p. 273). There is an expectation of quiet compliance that exists for females which become more complex as they navigate the workplace. Chemaly (2018) described this quiet as a feminine quality "we learn to expect women to speak less, so when we talk, it always seems like we are talking too much. Women are supposed to be quieter and, when they speak, apologetic. Being close mouthed is a feminine quality" (p. 161). This particular feminine quality becomes much more complicated as female leaders take on the task of

running businesses, leading the government and being in charge of our public school systems.

Beyond navigating the expectations of quiet and leadership in the workplace, females must successfully negotiate career paths as well. Often, we hear about the "glass ceiling" which females must conquer in order to make it to the top. This definition seems simplistic. As females navigate the steps of leadership in public education, there are several steps to mitigate along the way to the superintendency. Traditional pathways tend to include teacher leadership roles (coaches, grade level leaders, department chairs), building administrative leadership roles (assistant principal, principal), and district leadership roles (directors, supervisors, assistant superintendents). In order to navigate this tiered pathway, female administrators must navigate each level successfully.

The Career Labyrinth

Alice Eagly and Linda Carli (2007) declared the metaphorical glass ceiling as misleading in describing the pathway of women's career climb. Instead, Eagly and Carli highlighted the female career in terms of a labyrinth with several twists and turns, dead ends, and pathways. Eagly and Carli wrote about the myriad of barriers females face and must overcome on the way to success and promotion. This metaphor is particularly applicable to the pathway or potential pathway to the school superintendency for females. In order to successfully attain and achieve success in the school superintendency, females must persevere against their challenges and make it through their own labyrinth. Eagly and Carli stated, "barriers are no longer absolute" (p. 6). In this research, female administrators discuss their own personal career labyrinths and their perception of the

labyrinth associated with acquiring the role of superintendent. Participants discuss their perception of the labyrinth so we may better examine how and if their personal labyrinth impacts their aspiration to the role of the superintendent.

Eagly and Carli (2007) believed these career barriers are better negotiated by some females than by others. Part of one's ability to overcome the barriers and proceed through the career labyrinth is a fundamental component of how some females rise to the top of an organization. Those who are able to successfully navigate the barriers will continue on the career path.

High Achievers

Dweck (2006/2016) contended "the fixed mindset, plus stereotyping, plus women's trust in other people's assessments of them: All of these contribute to the gender gap in math and science" (p. 79). Dweck acknowledged multiple factors at play when discussing the noted gender gap of females in the fields of math and science. Additionally, Dweck discussed a phenomenon she associated with high achieving females—a fear of failure. Dweck highlighted a sub-population within her mindset studies concerning a group of girls historically identified as high achievers. This particular group of typically high performing girls hesitated to try tasks that were beyond their abilities. Dweck attributed this hesitancy to fear. These girls were used to achievement. Failure was not an option.

Claude Steele (1997) discussed fear through a different lens via a phenomenon entitled stereotype threat (ST). He defined ST as a situational threat that can affect any members of a group where a negative stereotype exists and group members may fear

being reduced to that stereotype (p. 614). Dweck's fear of failure in high achieving girls seemed to echo a stereotype threat. Rather than the pervading fear of failure, individuals who suffer from ST fear living "down" to the expectations associated with the stereotype. Spencer, Steele, and Quinn (1999) surmised:

> When a stereotype about one's group indicts an important ability, one's performance in situations where that ability can be judged comes under an extra pressure—that of possibly being judged by or self-fulfilling the stereotype and this extra pressure may interfere with performance. (p. 6)

If this is the case, females who may aspire to the superintendency may wrestle with a ST that adds an extra pressure of consideration of this position. For example, Spencer et al. (1999) contended the "stereotype threat that women experience in math related domains may cause them to feel that they do not belong in math classes" (p. 6). Similarly, females in the pathway of a superintendency, may begin to feel they "do not belong there." Instead, many females believe they belong at home caring for a spouse and children. These historical gender roles continue to impact females in the workforce.

Family Gender Roles

Struggles with traditional female morality and family roles may also pose a threat to female's ascension to the superintendency. Belenky et al. (1986) identified caretaking central to female's morality "often putting their own needs at the bottom of the list, preceded by other people, husband and children" (p. 77). Further, females who prioritize themselves are considered "abhorrent and selfish" (p. 77). This concept does little to aid in organizational female leadership. First, leaders are often associated with managing

tasks and impersonal decision making abilities. The assignment as one of caretaker counters a traditional leadership ideal. As females "take care" of others at work, their perceived ability to tackle more traditional leadership roles may be undermined by others and brought into question by themselves.

Beyond caregiving as a female trait, de Beauvoir (1949) discussed "the appearance and elegance demanded of the working woman impose another constraint on her; and she maintains responsibility for the house and the children" (p. 154). de Beauvoir pointed to what is still an essential struggle for females in the workforce today, the balance females attempt of job, house, children. There is a societal burden, while shared with males, which is still carried primarily by working females. This burden of primary responsibility may also impede the female superintendent. The position of superintendent is one in which the role demands the entire focus of the person fulfilling it. It seems a difficult task for females to claim the primary responsibilities of home as well as juggling the primary responsibility of public school officer. The two roles seem at odds. This de Beauvoir household responsibility is likened to the trend bell hooks ascribed to society in hopes to return to an idealized past where "the notion" of traditional "sexist roles are upheld as stabilizing traditions" (1994, p. 28). Society claims a hold on these gender roles at home as a nod to the good old days where females tended the house and males provided the income. de Beauvoir (1949) furthered bell hooks:

> To give birth and to breast-feed are not activities but natural functions; they do not involve a project, which is why the woman finds no motive there to claim a

> higher meaning for her existence; she passively submits to her biological destiny. (p. 73)

The only work females are able to do with convenience while raising children is household work. Females refuse to "claim a higher meaning" just by having children. Because housework is so closely aligned to female's natural biological child conceiving abilities, one does not exist without the other.

The Intersection of Race and Gender

All of the participants in the study were biologically women who identified as female. Two identified specifically as African American females. One participant identified as a female Woman of Color. The African American female educational leaders discussed specific intersections of race and gender where at times they felt an additional division of race. Nancy Hartsock (1998) recognized the importance of acknowledging all classifications:

> We cannot ignore these divisions. Only by recognizing our different situations in their complexity can we use our anger constructively. Feminists have begun to learn about the meaning of class and race by looking at the impact of these divisions on everyday life. (p. 39)

It is necessary to understand the participants' "divisions" as they accounted for different experiences within the culture of educational administration. Patricia Hill Collins (1989) stated, "on certain dimensions, Black women may more closely resemble Black men, on others, White women, and on still others, Black women may stand apart from both groups" (p. 757). The participants who identified as both Black and female have

different experiences seen through the lens of gender and of race. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) asserted the differences and their effect on White and Black women:

> Assuming that everyone is affected differently by the same interlocking set of symbolic images allows us to move forward toward new analyses. Women of color and White women have different relationships to White male authority and this difference explains the distinct gender symbolism applied to both groups. Black women encounter controlling images such as the mammy, the matriarch, the mule and the whore, that encourage others to reject us as fully human people. . . . White women are offered seductive images, those that promise to reward them for supporting the status quo. (p. 75)

The reality that everyone is affected differently by the symbolic images they face is important to understand in studying the participants' data sets. While this research study looked to assemble and analyze consistencies of experience, it is to also important to understand the complexities of diverse participant experiences within the participant group. Each participant identified within the category of female, others also identified under categories of race.

Culture As Rooted in the Tenets

The sheer numbers of male superintendents set against the backdrop of this highly female vocation speaks directly to this study's tenets of feminist theory. There is a cultural norm set in masculinized leadership at the top which means females who desire the role first must operate against these cultural norms. Also working in tandem to the highly masculinized male culture of the superintendency is the fact traits generally

associated with leadership are also traditionally "male." Eagly and Carli (2007) discussed how this male paradigm implicates female desire: "Because the cultural stereotype of leaders is relatively masculine, the mere activation of the female stereotype can undermine women's interest in leadership" (p. 93). As de Beauvoir (1949) wrote, "one is not born, but rather becomes woman" (p. 330). Females learn to be female by looking at elements of the culture surrounding them. As female educational administrators look around, their peers rarely ascend to the position of superintendent which may both define and reinforce the culture. Females are oftentimes perceived as "the other," a category described by de Beauvoir (1949) in the following way: "it is understood that being a man is not a particularity; a man is in his right by virtue of being a man; it is woman who is in the wrong" (p. 5). de Beauvoir poses man as the societal norm and "woman" the counter which sets to define and perpetuate the masculine culture of educational leadership within the superintendency. Female superintendents are perceived as the peculiarity.

Another interesting element of culture within the tenets of this research study was the "silence" of the majority. Females in educational teaching positions are a clear numerical majority working quietly within the highly masculinized leadership culture. Male school district leadership is an unspoken norm. There appears in the research data an acceptance of the reality of male leadership. Participants did not speak out about the numbers nor were they necessarily always aware of them. The participants were busily working with the cultural paradigm to better educate children—they did not necessarily want to work on the culture of the organization itself. In most cases, their work for

children outweighed their desire to change the culture of leadership. In some ways, the perpetuation of the culture depends upon the participants' acceptance of the current culture. As Kotter (1996) noted, "the biggest impediment to change is culture" (p. 155). The heavily masculinized leadership culture is perpetually reinforced within the culture of educational administration both by the males and females who quietly serve within it and are singularly unable to change the culture. As Diane Dunlap (1995) explained, "Silence. Inequality. Oppression. Missing viewpoints and perspectives. Contradictions. These words describe reality for educational leaders who struggle to integrate new perspectives of gender, race, and class in organizations" (pp. 429-430).

The male superintendency is also perpetuated by a belief system that poses females as unable or unwilling to serve in the role. Yet, there is overt messaging within the culture of the superintendency pointing out to females the position is a male domain. Internally, Claude Steele (2010) discussed stereotype threat as a very real obstacle minority populations face. Steele discussed these impediments as "cues" participants receive from the majority culture reinforcing their belonging or exclusion from a group. Steele (2010) studied how "these cues—often innocent-appearing cues that seemed to be natural, unavoidable ingredients to a situation—regulate how much identity threat a person feels" (p. 139). His research reinforced this internal impediment existing within individuals who experience stereotype threat. As Steele (2010) concluded, "now we have evidence that these cues, and the threat they caused, could impair performance and even make a person less interested in a career path" (p. 145). This data pointed to stereotype threat as a real threat to both career interest and a natural perpetuation of the male culture

within educational leadership. This male culture is deeply ingrained. Schein (2004) discussed the difficulty in veering from the accepted culture:

> We will not want to deviate from our group even if privately we think that the group is wrong. This process of trying to be accepted by our membership and reference groups is unconscious and, by virtue of that fact, very powerful. (p. 63).

The larger societal culture casting females as household caregiver and males as household economic supporter also implicates the culture of educational administration leadership. Many believe females, who often have taken time away from careers, are lower on the career trajectory as a result. Eagly and Carli (2007) stated, "dropping out of the labor force has many obvious costs beyond surrendering one's psychological investment in paid work: lost income, impeded career growth, depreciation of skills, and difficulty in reestablishing one's career" (p. 57). There may exist many obstacles for females to both desire and attain the superintendency in the state of Ohio. The data pointing out the lack of female superintendents versus the female vocational majority left unanswered questions.

Focus of the Study

This study focused on the primary question: How do K12 female administrators perceive the superintendency as an attainable and desirable career pathway? Additionally, the study focused on several secondary questions which further explored the five theoretical tenets described in Chapter 1. These five tenets included: patriarchy and women as "other," the silence of the female leader, the career labyrinth, high achievers, family gender roles. In this study, I sought to better understand how female

administrators perceived the attainability and desirability of the superintendency. Within this broader question, I questioned how female leaders experienced their own personal career pathways on the road to the superintendency. I collected data from female leaders, whether on the pathway to the superintendency or not, who experienced bias and their subsequent responses to bias or sexism through silence or through action. I asked participants about how both traditional household roles as well as general household responsibilities impacted their work and whether or not their household responsibilities impacted their perceptions of their own potential for a superintendency position. Finally, I asked about the participants' perceptions of implicit and explicit messages found in current school culture and leadership. Because the waves of feminist theory span decades of time and countless components of feminist thought and belief, these primary tenets both grounded the research and guided my study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The Methodology and Rationale

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of school district female leaders who were qualified candidates for the role of school superintendent. These shared experiences provided an understanding of their interest in and perceptions of the superintendent role. In these narrative inquiries, participants shared barriers they have faced or perceived that exist for them on the pathway to the superintendency. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discussed "in narrative inquiry, people are looked at as embodiments of lived stories" (p. 43). The participants lived stories were the information I used to try and better understand the disparate number of female superintendents in the state of Ohio. The study focused on this primary research question: How do K12 female administrators perceive the superintendency as an attainable and desirable career pathway?

Although there are many female educational leaders throughout the state, there continues to be a disproportionate number of females who ascend to the role of superintendent. These numbers alone suggest gender may be a factor in the attainment of the position. This research examined the perspectives of these female educational leaders as they have experienced leadership in education. I purposefully chose the term "female" in the research question to denote an understanding that the participants identified as female as they experienced a highly male gendered pathway and superintendent model. This understanding was essential in collecting their experiences as they related to their

perceptions of the attainability and desirability of what was a highly masculinized role. In order to best capture their experiences, a narrative qualitative inquiry allowed for a deeper understanding and examination of the participants lived experiences. There is a great deal of value in understanding the lives of individuals and the stories they can share (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hatch, 2002; Merriam & Associates, 2002).

The personal stories of these participants who currently occupy leadership positions and are qualified to be female candidates for the superintendency helped define and further the examination of this dearth of female superintendents. Merriam & Associates (2002) asserted within the basic interpretive qualitative studies "the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation" (p. 6). In this study, I was interested in the stories of the participants and how they understood and felt about the superintendency to try and better understand why so many female leaders do not attain the superintendency. These personal, narrative stories gathered via researcher interview allowed for an in-depth study of the stories that exist for participants who are in the pathway to the superintendency. It is difficult to truly understand this current reality without examining those individuals who are directly impacted by it.

Research Design

Ohio lags even further behind national numbers of female superintendents. While the nation records approximately 24% women in the role of superintendent, Ohio has approximately 16%. This number is curious because Ohio has a population of approximately 76% of women teachers and administrators (Gilchrist, 2017; Kowalski et

al., 2010). This study was designed to gather narrative stories from female participants who currently operate within the highly masculinized culture of educational leadership.

Participants were purposefully selected (Creswell & Creswell 2018; Hatch, 2002; Patton, 1990). In order to examine the experiences of female educational leaders as they may or may not choose to apply for the role of superintendent in an Ohio K12 school district, it was necessary to be highly selective in choosing participants for the study. Participants were selected by two separate criteria. Criteria for participation included:

1. Individuals served in a role considered a part of the traditional pathway to the superintendency as defined by Brunner and Kim (2010) including any central office administrative position or high school building principal position.
2. Individuals must be biological women who identified as female.

The first criterion established that participants were in a pathway position as defined by Brunner and Kim (2010) to the superintendency. These pathway positions included both the high school principal position and traditional central office positions such as Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum Director, Pupil Services Director, Director of Human Resources, Technology Director, and so forth (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Whereas school district administrative female leadership is often found in elementary principals, this study focused on individuals as identified by Brunner and Kim as traditional pathway positions in the highest numbers ascending to the superintendency which come from the high school principalship or central office positions. Several of the participants had, in fact, served as elementary principals and were now serving as central office administrators. In order to examine the experiences of female leaders within the Brunner

and Kim (2010) traditional pathway, the first criterion was necessary. The second criterion existed to guarantee the participants self-identified and experienced the world as female, understanding the term "female" indicated a social construct rather than a biological one.

Snowball sampling offered an additional step in participant selection (Patton, 1990). There currently exists a network of building principal and central office administrators. Throughout the course of my daily interactions in my own district, I often reach out to colleagues for help and/or advice. I anticipated there would be participants who suggested additional, potential participants within the course of their own interviews which did occur. This snowball sampling approach offered the opportunity to have a "relationship" with the participants through my already established relationship with the suggesting participants.

This research study did not seek to account for participant variances in race, ethnicity, or religion. While diversity of participants was attempted, the study itself focused on participants' experiences as *female* administrators. While differences of race did further participants' experiences of difference in addition to gender, their differences in race did not eliminate their identification as the minority identified in the participant criteria—female. There were participants who, within their interviews, discussed the intersection of race and gender and the implications of the intersection on participants' experiences in educational leadership. Additionally, participants were chosen regardless of school district size or type, district socio-economic make-up, or student population criteria. Again, recruiting a diversity of participant school districts was attempted in the

purposeful sampling process in order to collect a variety of perspectives and experiences. However, because the foundation of the research was based solely on the criterion of traditional pathway positions and female gender identification, these two factors were the main focus for participant selection.

I come to the research qualified to be both the researcher and a participant. I chose not to participate as a study participant with an additional self-study component to this research. Adding a self-study component and becoming a participant had the potential to increase the difficulty with which I disengaged from my own personal stories. The net effect of this may have inhibited the manner in which I was able to listen to and hear participants' lived experiences. I was hopeful the "role of insider [could] be helpful in getting across boundaries" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 76). Because of the personal nature of the interview topics, relationships were key in establishing trust and building a foundation to support participants as they shared their stories. My "insider" status also afforded me knowledge about the politics of central office and school district administration which aided in establishing trust understanding participant perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 76).

The data collection began with semi-structured individual interviews in which participants offered rich, detailed responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I began each interview with a list of questions which helped guide our discussion and covered the feminist theories grounding the project. This list of questions afforded me the opportunity to listen to answers, probe for further information, and ask follow up questions (Rubin & Rubin,

2012, p. 6). Each interview was conducted in a jointly selected location that offered privacy. The ability for privacy was particularly important in order to conduct these interviews. The topics covered by the central research questions within the semi-structured interviews were highly personal and sometimes (depending on participants' experiences) embarrassing or profoundly sensitive. Additionally, the nature of being a minority (female administrator) intimated these were topics that participants did not generally discuss.

Additionally, I collected documents which acted as a third data point. This data point included a collection of documents provided by participants that were relevant to the research question and the content of the interviews. The documents contained resumes, cover letters, email communications, newspaper articles, and thank you letters. These documents served as a basis to support the information gathered during the interviews and aided in a summation of data surrounding participants current and past superintendent search participation.

Before the interviews began, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form following a brief overview of the intent of the research project within the interview protocol. Each interview was audio taped for accuracy. This accuracy aided by immediate transcription was essential in offering accurate, credible and immediate data for analysis (Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Additionally, I kept notes throughout each interview which helped capture particular areas of interest to go back to or responses which required follow up or probing questions.

Transcripts of interviews set the foundation for the data analysis of this research. These transcriptions allowed accurate, timely access to the specifics covered in the interviews. Transcription happened as quickly as possible following individual interviews. As Erickson (2004) and Sipe and Ghiso (2004) agreed, the data now existed for the researcher to construct. After I finished transcribing the interviews from audio tape, I analyzed the data following the approach of Aronson's (1995) "Pragmatic View of Thematic Analysis" and Creswell and Creswell's (2018) coding steps (p. 197-198). These frameworks helped to organize and clarify the process of data analysis. The analysis was composed of the following steps (Appendix E):

1. Collecting and Preparing the Data
2. Reading through the Data
3. Finding Common Ideas: "Patterns of Experience"
4. The Process of Coding
5. Themes

The thematic data analysis consisted of multiple levels of searching the data in order to identify and discover patterns and relationships within the data. Aronson focused on the importance of piecing the themes together within the data so together these themes formed a "comprehensive picture of their collective experience" (Aronson, 1995, p. 1). Through processes of searching and coding, researching and recoding, comparison and contrast, the procedures of coding allowed me to identify themes and make conclusions (Aronson, 1995; Erikson, 2004; Hatch, 2002; Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldana, 2009). First, I collected using audiotape and prepared the data by

transcribing the data as soon as I was able to do so. Then, I uploaded finished transcripts into the software program, Dedoose. Next, I read and re-read the entirety of the transcripts several times to digest and understand participant meaning, identify prominent areas of emphasis and recurring ideas between participants. Within the Dedoose program, I was able to identify participants' recurring "patterns of experiences" (Aronson, 1995). I, then, assigned each recurring pattern of experience a code. I chose code names that described the content within the code to help clarify and separate individual codes. Next, I analyzed these codes by looking at the recurrence of codes within and across the interviews (Appendix F). Following the first round interview, I grouped these codes into potential themes which set the foundation for the 2nd round interviews. This selection of potential themes from the first round interviews also allowed for a member check in the second round interviews. I repeated this analysis process with the second round interview data and document analysis. I grouped codes that represented common ideas which then became the basis for the study's themes. I worked to validate the themes by using peer debriefers to help look at the data and see if my analysis resonated with them and if they found my themes plausible based on the data set.

In the first round of transcripted interviews, there were 29 identified codes as described by participants. These codes sometimes represented needs identified by participants ("Mentoring"); sometimes they were experiences described by participants ("Experiencing Bias," "Experiencing Isolation," "Fear of Failure"); and sometimes (particularly in the second round interviews) they were what participants did not say

("2Silence"). Following my identification of these codes from the first round interviews, I worked to combine and catalogue codes into related patterns. This combination happened in several ways. First, I looked for codes that were close in content and combined them to eliminate superfluous categories. Next, I worked to identify the prominence of codes by studying the Dedoose Code Applications spreadsheet which listed the total numbers of identified codes within each individual transcripted interview as well as the totaled categories across all interviews (Appendix F). These numbers allowed me to identify the prominence and commonality of codes which set the basis for the development of the themes.

These prominent codes, identified in the first round interviews, included the following: Mentoring (46 occurrences); Experiencing Bias (34)/Struggle to Identify Bias (17); Working Hard (32); Barriers (19)/Male Culture (19)/Pathway Attainability (19)/Obstacles (16); Work/Life Balance (16); and Fear of Failure (15). These six code categories set the basis for the identification of themes. Rubin and Rubin (2012) identified themes as "summary statements, causal explanations or conclusion" (p. 194). I continued the coding and analysis by looking for specific emerging themes within and across interview transcripts (Aronson, 1995; Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldana, 2009; Sipe & Ghiso, 2004). As I studied the most prominent codes, I saw commonalities of participant experiences that set the foundation to develop themes. For example, within the "pattern of experience" entitled "Mentoring," there was one recurring idea from participants, an absolute need for mentoring in order to access the superintendency. Excerpts from the coding of patterns of experience included ideas like:

"intentional mentoring," "somebody who sees something in you before you see it," "there are people who are the reason I have gotten to where I have gotten," "it was still something like bringing me up to their level," "the superintendent came to me and said I want you to be Director of HR," "so I have no mentor to move me into a superintendency," "he [my mentor] was going to make sure I got this." These ideas of mentors bringing participants "up to their level" and "mak[ing] sure [participants] got this" happened over and over again. Participants felt the necessity of mentors to vouch for them in order to access the position of superintendent. Another component of the participant responses focused on this idea of superintendents doing even more than "mentoring" for candidates. In the first and second round interviews, participants pointed out mentors had to "open doors" for them. This idea evolved into the thematic development of "sponsorship." Eventually, the theme became "female administrators need sponsors to access the superintendency." Sponsorship as defined by Hewlett, Peraino, Sherbin, and Sumberg (2010) in *The Sponsor Effect: Breaking Through the Last Glass Ceiling* better identified the ideas as described by participants in the interviews. The first round interview yielded five themes. These five themes were used as the foundation for the second round interview questions. The first theme was the perception of participants of a hindered attainability of the superintendency emerged as a combination of two categories of "patterns of experience" which included "Barriers" and "Domination of Male Culture." The second theme was a belief in participants that mentors were necessary to have a chance at obtaining a superintendent position which emerged as a heavily repeated pattern of experience coded as "Mentors." The third

theme was the reality that participants felt a very real pressure to perform and experienced a fear of failure at work which emerged from two "patterns of experience" which included "Working Hard" and "Fear of Failure." The fourth theme was the identification of navigating very real obstacles in pursuit of the superintendency which emerged from the "pattern of experience" labeled "Obstacles." Finally, the fifth theme identified was a silence regarding bias that emerged from a lack of participant responses to an overt question about bias in round one which I labeled as a "pattern of experience" naming it "Struggling to Identify Bias" coupled with an abundance of additional "patterns of experience" labeled as "Bias." These five themes remained throughout the study with an additional theme concentrating on participants' concern with politics as a key aspect of the position impacting the desirability of the role. This sixth theme emerged in the first round interviews but was reiterated with great conviction in several second round interviews and was identified as the code under the label "Politics" in round one and "2Politics" in round two. The reiteration in round two made it important to include as an additional sixth theme in the research findings.

It is important to note it was through my own researcher lens that I selected areas and themes of importance from the data. It is not the data that emerged on its own; it was the theory and themes I discovered within the interview data. It is through this logical analysis I interpreted and analyzed the data (Hatch, 2002; Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Saldana, 2009). It was essential to establish trustworthiness in the research to ensure the data was true to transcript and consistent with the participants intended voice and content.

Trustworthiness

In order to establish trustworthiness in the data and research reporting, I utilized four separate components of validity procedures as defined by Creswell and Creswell (2018). First, I used member checking to "determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200). I shared the themes developed from the first round interview with participants as a means to ground and direct the second round interviews. All interview transcripts were made available to participants for an additional member check. Next, I attempted to use "rich, thick description" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200) throughout this study particularly within the participants' personal, narrative stories as they related to the research questions. Additionally, in attempting to ground my own biases, a reflexivity section follows below. Finally, I was able to utilize a peer debriefer by garnering feedback from several peer debriefers and members of my doctoral committee as I engaged in the process of analyzing data and grounding this data in the literature.

Credibility

In order to establish credibility in the research study, it was important to carefully select participants and ensure the research was meticulously gathered and analyzed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 67). I carefully selected each participant through purposeful and snowball sampling (Patton, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This carefully structured selection helped establish credibility. I kept a record of notes from each interview throughout the research process. Each participant was allowed an opportunity for

member checking both in their transcripted interview as well as in my thematic analysis. I asked participants if they wanted to read over the transcripted interviews to ensure the content of the interviews was an accurate representation of their thoughts and beliefs. Only one participant asked for copies of the interview audiotape which were shared with her via email. She did not wish to see the transcripts of the interviews. After finishing a preliminary thematic analysis of the first round data, I allowed participants an opportunity to respond to the emerging themes from the first round interviews during separate semi-structured second round interviews.

I utilized several steps to support trustworthiness in the data. First, I offered participants the opportunity to member check the interview transcripts. It was important for participants to believe the transcripts accurately represented both their words and intended meaning. While this first member check may have helped to better define participant meaning and clarify any innocuous data, none of the participants chose to member check the transcripts. So, I personally listened to the audio and checked transcripts against the tapes several times to better ensure accuracy in content and participant intent. Additionally, I used the second round interviews to clarify points and delve deeper within themes that emerged from the first round interviews. This step of delving deeper within emerging themes from the first round interviews allowed participants the opportunity to verify and respond to generated themes from first round transcripts. In doing so, participants helped to provide a member check of the emerging themes identified (Aronson, 1995; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Associates 2002). At this follow-up interview, I collected a second data point from each participant,

a narrative response to the emerging themes identified from the original transcripted interviews. The follow-up interview followed the same methodology as the first. This second round interview was a semi-structured interview consisting of several questions and/or observations seeking participants' responses to emerging themes. This second data point allowed me to verify first round data and provided participants an opportunity to react to the thoughts and stories of other participants while maintaining the confidentiality of all participants. I was anxious to hear their thoughts and reactions to the emerging data while still ensuring confidentiality for my participants as some of the material from the transcripted interviews was extremely personal and potentially sensitive in nature. There was a third data point collection which included any additional documents related to my participants in the workplace such as: resumes, cover letters, letters of rejections, previous job interview questions, job evaluations, and so forth. Following the interviews, five of the seven participants had participated in at least one superintendent search process. The documents collected within this study related to their experiences of these superintendent search processes and included: emails, documents, job postings and relevant newspaper articles. Participants shared them with me in order to help me better understand their experiences as they related to the genesis of this research study, the perception of the attainability of the superintendency for these qualified female participants.

Reflexivity

Creswell and Creswell (2018) reminded us "qualitative research is interpretive research; the inquirer is typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with

participants" (p. 183). This "intensive experience" was particularly so for this research study. I studied the perceptions and experiences of my peers and colleagues. Because this research was very much aligned to my own experiences, I continuously worked on building my efforts of reflexivity throughout the research in order to question my own experiences, thoughts about their experiences, and interaction with participants to ensure I kept the participants' stories their own.

I needed to understand and compartmentalize my own personal biases, experiences, and beliefs I have developed as a female central office and high school administrator. Patton (1990) talked about the importance of an evaluator's ability to be impartial and maintain a semblance of neutrality (pp. 475-476). I worked to do this throughout the course of the research project. Reflections about my thoughts, ideas, concerns and observations throughout the data collection and analysis allowed me to consider how my own experiences and biases may affect the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 184).

There were so many elements of the interviews with which I could understand, could empathize, have experienced myself, and/or have witnessed peers in similar situations. During the research, it was necessary to simply listen. The participant stories were not my own stories. My job as researcher was to accurately relay the information participants shared and interpret that information within the parameters of the literature on the topics studied. I worked hard to stay true to the participants and share their stories, separately from my own experiences living within the educational administration field as a female leader.

I utilized three third party (peer debriefers) to provide a sounding board throughout the research process. My three peer debriefers included two males (one educator, one non-educator) and one female educator. These peer debriefers allowed me to share my concerns and issues with the data collection and coding processes which often helped me to clarify issues and problem solve moving forward. I met with my peer debriefers either in person or through telephone conversations continuously throughout the research project. At times, my peer debriefers listened to my concerns with the analysis of the data, extrapolating and interpreting themes from coded data and some of my own astonishment regarding some of the insights participants shared during the interviews. Peer debriefers offered an outlet to check my own coding processes and interpretations of data as I worked to interpret and extrapolate themes and accurately identify my own biases (reflexivity) staying true to the words of my participants. Their input helped to ensure interpretation validity throughout the data analysis.

Interpretation

In order to accurately interpret the data, I used the participants themselves to help "member check" the themes I extrapolated from the first round interviews. This methodology reiterated the accuracy of my initial thematic interpretations. Additionally, I spent much time throughout this study tying the themes back to the literature in order to ground my interpretations of the research data. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) defined interpretation as several procedures including summarizing the findings, comparing the findings to the literature, discussing a personal view of the findings, and stating

limitations and future research (p. 198). These elements of interpretation are included in this research study throughout Chapters 4 and 5.

Connection/Reconciliation of the Findings

There are several personal connections I have to these findings. Primarily, as a female educational leader, I feel connected to the themes personally and professionally. While some of these themes were not shocking to me, others certainly were. I learned a great deal in studying the experiences of these participants. I am changed by this work and feel I have been awakened to many aspects of the problem statement I had never considered before this endeavor.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study explored how females in the pathway to the position of superintendent perceive the superintendency as attainable and desirable. Participants agreed to two interviews: one face to face or via phone call and a follow up interview handled either face to face or via phone call. Also, the participants agreed to share existing documentation to further provide evidence of their experience in the ascension of and/ desirability of the superintendent position. Each first round interview was transcribed and coded to elicit common themes that acted as the foundation for the structure of the follow up interview. I used the general themes and the specific transcription of the first interview to cut out redundant questions and to help probe for more information for each participant in round two. A collection of documents yielded a third data point.

Participants

This study was conducted with seven participants. Each participant currently served in a role within the pathway to the superintendent position as established through the research of Brunner and Kim (2010). These participants were assigned a pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality and protect their identities. The seven participants held one of the following titles: Assistant Superintendent, Director, or High School Principal. The participants represented a variety of school districts which included urban, suburban, large, small, diverse, and homogenous. Table 1 identifies the variance of the participants' personal characteristics and school districts:

Table 1

Participants' Characteristics

	District Type	District Size	Participant Age/Ethnicity
A: Anna Brown	Suburban	1,800	51-White
E: Lillian Sollars	Suburban	4,500	47-White
B: Aileen Black	Suburban	1,800	49-White
L: Linda Zimmerman	Suburban	4,000	61-White
M: Jane Sullivan	Urban	1,700	57-Black
D: Donna Lemen	Urban	9,000	54-Black
K: Kathy Rudicel	Suburban	2,000	54-Woman of Color

The Interviews

The participants were identified by two methods: purposive and snowball sampling. First, the participants had to meet two specific qualifications: each participant had to serve in a position in the superintendent pathway as identified by Brunner and Kim (2010) and each participant had to identify as female. Also, it was important due to the sometimes personal nature of the interview questions, to establish trust with the participants. Purposive sampling allowed for an already established trust between interviewer and participant. Snowball sampling allowed for trust via the introduction and common participant knowledge. Four participants were identified via purposive sampling, three from snowball sampling.

Interview 1: Anna Brown

Anna Brown, a district leader in a small suburban school district, has served in a variety of capacities from classroom aide and teacher to general educator, intervention

specialist, and eventually central office supervisor. She has had a great deal of experience by wearing such an array of hats in the K12 educational world. Her rise in the pathway has, by her own account, been through several opportunities granted to her by others. She originally was asked to interview for a supervisory position but she did not interview because she was living on the other side of town and did not have child care at the time. At that time, she opted to stay home and delay or potentially halt her entry into administration.

Anna noted in response to her interest in the superintendency she had not even considered it until her former boss, the superintendent, encouraged her to think about it. It was this boss that encouraged her to get the superintendent licensure. She noted, "I had not even thought about doing it previous to that." Anna's hesitation is interesting against the landscape of the variety of positions she has held over the course of her career. She did not speak of any hesitation along her career pathway until she got to the position of superintendent. Here, it seemed, was a limit she imposed on herself. When prompted for more information, Anna continued to note that when she pursued the licensure, it was with a directorship in mind. She limited it to that position in her own mind. de Beauvoir (1949) discussed this leveling of ambition by noting due to a "defeatist attitude, the woman easily settles for a mediocre success; she does not dare to aim higher" (p. 739). But, Anna's mentor encouraged her to think beyond her position and aspirations which she did. However, when another "mentor" discouraged Anna from this pursuit, it had a strong impact on her ambitions and desire for the role of superintendent. Anna understood this mentor did not see her "as someone who would be part of that senior

cabinet" when he told his administrative team he was unable to find someone qualified to serve in the current vacant role of Assistant Superintendent, a position for which Anna had interviewed. This "discouragement" had a strong impact on Anna. She described her reaction in these terms:

> I was horrified. I was super hurt. My mouth almost hit the floor and then the principal sitting next to me said, "you interviewed for that and you're qualified." So it bothered me for so long that I made an appointment and went and met with him.

Anna was able to articulate her upset. When, in response, this "mentor" ascribed a different pathway he deemed appropriate for Anna, she was grateful. She noted, "he was very mentorly about encouraging me to become" a lesser role in the organization than the one for which she initially interviewed. Anna also spoke about her gratitude for the opportunity and pay. "I was appreciative for that position. I was offered a salary that was at least equal or more than my own because the previous job he had offered I was asked to take a pay cut." Again, she felt gratitude in accepting a job with more responsibility for the same pay. Anna did not discuss the job opportunity, for the same pay, as a lesser position in any other way except for the opportunity. Before she accepted this position, she had been offered a different central office position with a pay cut. Anna described feeling insulted by the offer and pay cut. Additionally, after Anna was not offered the position in the organization and she met with the superintendent to discuss it, he told her he would offer her a special project to work on because "it would be good for me to work on a special project." This special project ended up being an incredible

increase in both workload and responsibility which Anna accepted without a change in title or pay.

Anna also talked about this mentor and his influence in detail when she discussed leaving the district for another (better) opportunity. She noted he tried to "force [her] to stay" by meeting with her and offering her the chance to report directly to him instead of her current supervisor. They did not counter with an offer of more money or better title which the new opportunity granted her. Instead, he wanted to discuss with her how they could make this look good to the community because it didn't look good Anna was leaving. In her meeting with the superintendent, Anna reported feeling very guilty and pressured by them (he was also joined by another high ranking male supervisor during these conversations).

School districts tend to have their own cultures and rules. Leaders are able to successfully navigate these rules to survive and thrive. Anna talked often about the culture of the district in which she served for the majority of her career both as a classroom educator and district leader. She was able to articulate instances when she opted to remain, in her own words, "a pleaser" rather than create issues. Seemingly, her success in the organization depended somewhat on her ability to remain non-controversial. Silence and perpetuating her role as pleaser helped her navigate this district. In one work instance, she described a co-worker making an inappropriate physical advance and asking her to spend time with him outside of school. She recalled this experience as one that positioned her in a role of pleaser. She did not report the incident and worried about her own culpability even though the actions of her colleague

were uninvited and unwelcome. Rather than risk upset, Anna chose not to pursue the incident, namely because her colleague was a minority which may have caused a great deal of backlash in her district. Instead, she told her administrator she had a problem but didn't need his help at that time. If the problem persisted, she might need his help. The "problem" did not persist; the incident was left unreported and unaddressed. Anna described this incident as one where her desire to be a pleaser reigned. Years later, Anna witnessed an inappropriate embrace given to a district leader by her male supervisor. Her colleague, in embarrassment, asked her not to tell anyone about it. Anna did not report the incident.

What makes this pleasing more complicated is Anna's increasing leadership role both in her former district and in her most recent district. Anna noted sometimes she feels her bosses have difficulty being critical with her because she is a woman. She sometimes has to figure out if individuals are being direct or if they are being careful with her. She once had a colleague tell her teachers were mad at her but he was reticent to tell her because he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

Anna also noted when situations dictated a need for her to be direct, people could be put off by that quality in her. She noted, "sometimes you don't have the time to encase [the message] in a big bunch of wonderfulness because it's a time-bound emergency. You have to be quick and sometimes curt at times;" as a result feelings were hurt. Eagly and Carli (2007) distinguished this quality in female leaders as a double bind: "the belief that leaders should be assertive and should confidently display their competence, coupled with disapproval of such behavior in women, produces half of the

double bind for female leaders" (p. 110). The double bind leaves women like Anna navigating the knowledge females should be delivering "wonderfulness," but as leaders must often be direct, these two qualities act as a continual conflict for the female leader.

There are additional internal conflicts Anna mitigates as a district leader which include tempering her strong work ethic and a fear of failure. She talked about her commitment to her colleagues and not wanting to let anyone down. These fears create internal pressure to perform.

Interview 2: Lillian Sollars

Lillian is an education professional with over 20 years of administrative experience. She has served in several mid-size suburban districts as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Lillian has no desire to be a superintendent as she "likes working with kids too much." But, she has been able to work with a strong superintendent for many years and, in doing so, has learned much about the role.

Several of Lillian's staff held preconceived notions regarding gender and leadership that Lillian encountered when she began as a building leader. Many of the secretaries and other administrators seemed to prefer working for men. Brunner and Grogan (2007) attributed this to the larger number of male leaders "because educational administrative roles have been most often filled by men, a male model of leadership has evolved" (p. 43). In Lillian's words, "I was shocked but my experience with other administrators (not teachers so much) and secretaries was that they liked working for men." Eagly and Carli (2007) stated, "to the extent that leadership itself connotes male, it can 'feel right' to choose a man as leader" (p. 86). The labyrinth is set. Lillian's hire as a

female building leader is already creating an obstacle for her among her staff who she perceives prefer working for the typical male leader. Lillian talked about navigating this hurdle by slowly winning their trust which she has done over time. She also noted some of her building employees were standoffish with her. She described her encounter with a new male maintenance staff member as "initially it was 'oh honey' and I was like 'I'm not your honey.'" He "caught on quickly" and in doing so treated her differently. Female associates were also lukewarm to her hire. One female teacher who was not selected for the assistant principal role said to her: "you are only 27, you could be my child. You were given the job over me so you better know what you are doing." So, there were obstacles for Lillian along the way; she responded by choosing to lead in her own style. In doing so, she has won over her staff and in her own way. As Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) stated, "women do not want to lead the way their male role models lead" (p. 41). Lillian's leadership took some getting used to in her staff but she has eventually won them over.

In terms of the superintendency, Lillian does not want to pursue the role. She believes if she was interested, she would have a great deal of support and mentoring for the position from her current superintendent. She stated, "never once [has she] felt that [her] career path was impeded by being a woman." Lillian described a "typical" superintendent as "a man in his 60s, who worked his way up, taught in a classroom, probably taught business or social studies . . . a good old boy, nice person, smooth politician feel with a little grey hair." When asked if her desire for the superintendency

might have been impacted by her perception of the "typical" superintendent, Lillian responded she is unsure. She noted, "she never thought of it in that way."

When asked about her desire for the superintendency, Lillian was clear in her lack of any. She believed if she was interested, her superintendent would mentor her for the role. She did not see gender as any type of impediment. She noted she "has never felt limited by her sex." In a study conducted by Brunner and Grogan (2007) females who were aspirants to the superintendency felt the acquisition of the position was difficult and the barriers great. However, according to Brunner and Grogan, "nonaspirants just did not believe the barriers to be as important" (p. 60). Perhaps, Lillian's dismissal of her gender as a limitation comes more from her position as a nonaspirant than she may feel as a potential candidate for the position. According to Lillian, gender has never had an impact on her career advancement.

While gender has not limited Lillian in her current workplace, there were situations she dreaded including athletic conference meetings. She identified this particular instance as a clear "good old boys" club. Lillian was comfortable talking about athletics. She herself had a vast knowledge of sports both as a high school varsity athlete and a Division I college athlete. But, as she described the scene of the athletic director meetings, "it's like they are ogling the women." She believed these athletic directors "are not inclusive of the females." When asked why she perceived them as not inclusive, Lillian said, "because there are not enough women in the room . . . sports have been a guys' thing." Lillian positioned the problem as one of number and tradition.

Lillian acknowledged herself as a minority in number in the athletic director realm; she also recognized a personal drive that pushes her to work hard and to succeed despite her minority status. She talked about "an incredible amount of pressure" she feels to succeed which, in turn, leads to a constant fear of failure. Eagly and Carli (2007) talked about a general existence of the "concerns about women's agency" which they noted, "place additional demands on women to perform exceptionally well" (p. 110). Lillian attributed these high demands to pressures felt from district level personnel rather than an expectation she suffered as a female leader in a highly male position. She worried about "not providing [her] kids with the best educational experience." Lillian also acknowledged this "failure" is different for every child she serves. The role itself comes with a great deal of pressure to ensure hundreds of students "succeed." Lillian described coping with this pressure as "some days it's a struggle." She noted every day she thinks about and worries about failure. She copes by working harder. Eagly and Carli (2007) made this point: "because leadership is usually perceived as a masculine activity, women are also vulnerable to having their successes ascribed to their hard work rather than their ability, and their failures to their being overwhelmed by the difficulty of the work" (p. 79). Lillian herself admitted this constant fear of failure is "why I'm the first person to the office every day." Lillian ascribed hard work as the coping mechanism to guard against failure. She did not presume the quality of her work would be enough to combat failure. Lillian talked about how today she is much more able to admit failure and "diffuse it" than she was 10 to 20 years ago.

Interview 3: Aileen Black

Aileen Black has served as a teacher, building principal, and central office administrator. She comes from a family of educators where her siblings and one parent served as building principals too. Administration is in her family's blood so to speak, and she has been able to serve in all levels of education from the classroom, building, and district levels.

Aileen has been interested in the superintendency but is cognizant of the commitment and the implications the role could have on her family. As she described it, she feels "as ready as [she's] ever been but also very cautious about the balance of [her] family." The time factor as well as the stress factor clearly influenced Aileen as she thinks about the position. She continually referred to her family throughout the interview, emphasizing her personal belief of "family first."

Previously, Aileen went through a superintendent search process that ended with the selection of another candidate. She felt like the board really was in her corner but at the end of the process chose another candidate that had an internal male supporter. While she wondered if the process was decided before it began, she was grateful to have had the opportunity. She felt through the process she built confidence and an understanding she could fill the superintendent role. Aileen commented, "that was the first time I think I had ever been where politics had superseded the interview." Now, as she considers other positions she noted, "it's not something that just because the opportunity presents itself, I go running."

It has been Aileen's work experience to be classified as an "easy female." Others describe her as one who they don't worry about hurting feelings. These traits which included not getting one's feelings hurt and being somewhat easy going seem to be assigned typically to males. The fact that Aileen is an "easy female" seemed a compliment. She finds her atypically female behavior a benefit in the workplace. Lorber and Farrell (1991) defined the difference between sex and gender as:

> Sex is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males . . . Gender, in contrast, is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category. Gender emerge from and bolster claims to membership in a sex category. (pp. 14-15).

Aileen herself sees this "easy female" description as one where she "gets to the facts quickly." This trait is one she's had to learn where "you don't always know the bullet points in between." Again, this trait of getting to the point is one ascribed to males. Aileen is "better than" other females because she is able to get straight to the point. Eagly and Carli (2007) stated, "many leadership roles still retain strongly masculine images, especially in male-dominated organizations" (p. 92). This strong masculine trait of getting to the facts quickly sets Aileen apart from her female colleagues and makes her a good leader. Interestingly, Aileen noted she had historically been mentored by men. Aileen doesn't feel different around males. As she put it, "we are all in this together."

Aileen understands there occasionally exists a dominance of the male lens in the world of education administration. She talked about how workplace conversations

centered on sports which is not an interest among all of her colleagues. Additionally, the two highest administrators in her district make time every day to have lunch together. A lot of business is attended to at these lunch meetings. Aileen is not excluded from these lunches. Instead, she often works through lunch and wonders if she is missing out on important conversations and networking opportunities. It seemed Aileen's lifestyle of wanting to get home to her family and thus using lunch as a quiet work time hindered her ability to network. Aileen talked about these lunches as opportunities for the two male administrators to talk about board meetings, agendas, and often salaries. In prioritizing her family, she often lost out on this opportunity to connect with her male colleagues. Additionally, Aileen did not feel she has "mastered the art of being very forceful during those conversations" related to salary and was quick to point out she is "paid really well." Aileen was quick to show genuine appreciation for her current compensation but also recognized how difficult salary negotiations were for her. Perhaps Aileen felt what research supports that females who ask for more are seen as "overly demanding" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 103). Beyond salary, Aileen was also "very sensitive to the fact that some men don't want to go to lunch alone with a woman." So, working lunches and the opportunities they provide were difficult to juggle. Aileen also struggled with feeling she has got it "good enough." She noted the males that she works with are typically the breadwinners. She understood in her own home life, she has two decent breadwinners. For her sole breadwinner colleagues the idea "masculinity and men's caring is affirmed in moneymaking, whereas women's isn't" is an idea Aileen understood as one that may be at work in her colleagues' world. But, with that understanding, Aileen pointed out "I

am probably just as worthy as the one that has a stay at home wife." She stated she is also competitive. Aileen noted, "I think if you've got it, I want it too." The idea of seeking additional compensation or rewards versus having gratitude for her generous salary was a struggle for Aileen.

Aileen did not see any additional pressure to perform as a female administrator. She saw the pressure as "the same for all." But, she did see a very real difference in how administrators address one another. She described this phenomenon as "when we get to a room and we greet each other as fellow administrators . . . I get there and get a hug, my male counterparts get the handshake." Just what this means, Aileen was not certain. She conceded "maybe that is me reading too deeply into what the hug means versus the handshake." She described it as "I always think the handshake is equal, partnership and maybe the hug means the same exact thing endearing or not." Regardless, Aileen did see bias in the room of high level school administrators.

In terms of the superintendency, Aileen saw the role as one that requires someone "highly communicative, relationship oriented, networker." Traditionally, Aileen felt superintendents were men in suits with a "my way or the highway" mentality. In her current work, she sees a humility in her superintendent she finds as a positive trait. When asked about the stereotype, Aileen described those that served as "go getter[s], savvy, males from a good old boys network that got them there." She didn't see the same push from female superintendents. Specifically, she didn't "see that women create a good girl network to push other women to these spots."

There was a desire in Aileen to become a superintendent. She described this desire as it "comes from a place of wanting to disrupt" the stereotype. She sees her own eventual superintendency as one that supports the idea that:

> We are all greater when we collectively can bring up a village . . . I will be my best in a superintendency where I have the gratitude and the understanding of where the talent is around me and utilize those pieces to the best of the district ability.

As she thought about becoming a superintendent, she still wonders about whether or not she should have applied earlier for the position when she did not get the offer. She worries about the impression it leaves on others "when you are not the one selected." There is an inherent risk in applying for the position due to the public nature of the search process. Ultimately, the first search process left Aileen feeling grateful for the opportunity. She is able to move forward without bitterness knowing many people in her current role of Assistant Superintendent have applied for the superintendency and were not selected. She is clear in knowing she is "not the type out looking for this position . . . it would have to be something that speaks to [her] . . . where if not [her] than who."

Interview 4: Linda Zimmerman

Linda Zimmerman began her career as a coach and continued building upon her coaching career as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, and principal. While teaching, she was urged to pursue administration by a network of male colleagues who she identified as her mentors and dear friends. These administrators "were on [her] every day about getting into administration and [she was determined that she was] not going to

do it." After working for a principal she felt was particularly weak, Linda felt she "should put her money where [her] mouth was." She went back to school to obtain her administrator licensure and soon after began her career in administration.

These mentors did more for Linda than simply encouraging her to enter administration. They acted as a "funnel of leadership," finding talent and moving talent throughout the large city school district in which they worked. Sylvia Ann Hewlett et al. (2010) acknowledged the need females have of what they termed as "sponsors" in "The sponsor effect: Breaking through the last glass ceiling" and defined these sponsors as "powerful backers who, when they discern talent, anoint it with their attention and support" (p. 4). These mentors chose Linda as a leader and then gave her a lot of responsibilities because, as she stated, "they were good guys and good mentors." She knows how important their endorsement was for her own career "looking back on it, probably, I'm just lucky. If it wasn't me, somebody else was going to be that person. I was going to be left out." She also understands "if you were going to come through [that pathway] . . . you were going to move up." Move up she did, first as an assistant principal and then as a building principal. She understands her mentors fast tracked her career. As she put it, "long story short, I absolutely believe that I think I would have got there [into positions of administration] but I don't think I would have gotten there that fast." Mentoring was, in many ways, a key ingredient to Linda's rise in the administration ranks.

Now, she is in a position in a different district where she does not have the same level of mentoring. She described it as "work in isolation." It has been a difficult

transition for Linda. She thinks her current boss would be "irritated" by the idea Linda may want to pursue the superintendency. Her previous mentors "didn't care that I was going to be the same job as them. They didn't care. They were happy." She noted her previous mentors were boastful when they supported a mentee who achieved success. Currently, Linda does not have that kind of career support, and it appears a difficult burden for her.

This burden she described lies within the leadership she believes is lacking in the district. She sees this as an obstacle in serving children. Linda, in serving in a district outside of this one, sees this lack of mentoring in the leadership as a serious detriment to the individuals who work within it. But, not everyone sees it in this way. This lack of mentoring and support:

> Is an obstacle to every single person in it moving forward. Not just me. But for me what makes it more difficult is I have lived a much different experience than anybody here has and so I'm like do you not see this is toxic like can you not see this is killing off good leadership. They see it but they don't know what to do.

The negative impacts of poor mentoring and leadership was a particular hardship for Linda because she has experienced positive mentors throughout her career. These positive experiences have shaped her career and her ideas about leadership.

Beyond a current mentoring issue, Linda felt ready to tackle the superintendency. In her former district, she alone was in charge of 200 teachers, hiring, budget, purchase orders, facilities, and so forth. The size of her building is the size of many smaller suburban districts throughout the state. Linda believes the skills and knowledge she

developed there would translate. Linda also sees areas where she does not have experience. She doesn't have direct middle school or elementary experience. She thinks there "would be a learning curve." Ultimately, she sees educational leadership as having kids as the main focus. She declared, "I don't care what position you are in education, in a district it's still about the kids whether it's about a 5th grader or 9th grader you are still talking what is good for kids." She noted her last district provided her with an abundance of professional development opportunities and high levels of responsibilities. In her words, "I think I'm probably more prepared than even some people coming out of central office going into the superintendency because I've done HR, I've fired people, I've gone to due process. I've done all of that stuff" which is the "stuff" of the superintendency. Linda was confident in her extensive background. She defined the superintendent as the person who "is in charge of the brand." In leading a district, a superintendent are "those people who allow big thinking to happen, [they] are big thinkers, connect big thinkers, are connectors." Linda had this type of experience in building leadership as well as in her role leading a national non-profit organization. In her role, Linda spent a great deal of time connecting separate, warring factions within her organization. She accomplished this work by "gain[ing] their trust and respect." Through her hard work and determination, she saw a great deal accomplished during her time as Board President. She likened this organizational work to the superintendency. However, there is more to the successful acquisition of the superintendency than even experience and hard work can garner.

While Linda has had a great deal of success as her national organization president and she sees this work as a pathway for attaining the superintendency; this pathway was not one without obstacles. She was quick to point out she does not have a strong network here which she saw as an enormous impediment in garnering the role. Linda characterized herself as "the new girl." Her perception was "nobody knows me and nobody really wants to take a chance on me. I probably haven't, if I'm honest with myself, navigated [the obstacles] very well." Linda believes someone must "take a chance on her" in order for her to fill the role. Because Linda believes her background and work experience will not be enough, she realizes "someone" must vouch for her. Additionally, Linda felt her current boss will not act on her behalf. For Linda, whose career has been self-identified as made through the support and advocacy of her mentors, this obstacle was perhaps the most difficult for her. She realized "this is the first real time [she is] coming up against a wall. No one has ever been in [her] way before." Linda was trying to work through what overcoming this particular obstacle might look like. But, she struggled to know what to do.

In terms of dealing with gender bias, Linda identified gender bias as something that "exists all the time." She described bias as something that's "out there with jobs and stuff. But, it's never really that overt." However, she was able to point out some instances that she attributed to gender bias, for instance, when people leave the "Dr." off of her title. She noticed:

> Because [she's] older, they all call me Mrs. [Zimmerman]. They would not call a man who had a doctorate Mr. [Zimmerman] . . . at the end of the day, I don't care.

> But, there will be times when I'm saying, "you're going to put the doctor in front of it.". . . . It happens all the time. They don't think that a woman would have had her doctorate yet.

She also noted people "are much quicker to call you by your first name then a title." In these instances, it was harder to correct people particularly when "it's parents and it's PR." It was much more a fine line in expecting and demanding people use the title. Linda also said her previous work experience in a male dominated field helped her build career credibility. She noticed:

> Once they find out I was an engineer, I immediately lose a little bit of that gender bias. But, if I wasn't an engineer I think they would think I was just a teacher. So, they think men are engineers, they don't think women are engineers. The fact, that I was an engineer, that's kind of worked in my favor, I would say, to get rid of some gender bias.

Linda understands the male dominated field of engineering gives her credibility. Chemaly (2018) discussed male dominated fields in terms of both value and wage. She stated, "the more 'feminized' a job, the less people will pay for someone to do it. Comparable pay for qualitatively different but comparable work remains elusive, with female-dominated occupations remaining chronically undervalued" (p. 84). Linda experienced this undervaluation of education and overvaluation of the male dominated engineering vocation. Linda also identified bias in the reticence of some to use her title. But, she was hesitant to attribute even this to gender bias. She peppered this portion of the interview with "I guess that's gender bias . . . right?" and "Here, I don't think it's

about gender so much as it's about small town or you know," and "I'd have to think about that." Her continued reticence to categorize or define her experiences in terms of gender bias were pronounced during the interview even when the situations she described seemed clearly linked to gender bias. In one instance, she noted the head of a search firm told her she "would never get an interview there." Her response: "I was like, wow?! I thought that was pretty explicit." When asked specifics about this experience, Linda remembered the head of the search firm saying, "a man's going to get it." She commented other than in that moment, she doesn't know if she has ever experienced "that." While Linda may not have ever had "that" experience in terms of gender bias, she said in reference to a superintendent position she is "considering not applying for a year." She feels like she is getting nowhere, and thinks perhaps she just needs a year or two. Maybe, she wondered, she should apply for central office jobs. This wonder in Linda seemed to point to her self-admitted lack of a network.

Interview 5: Jane Sullivan

Jane Sullivan has worked in education for over 30 years. She has served as an administrator in two states and in diverse districts in terms of size, affluence, and population diversity. She has served as a classroom teacher and administrator. She has been heavily involved in leading several educational areas including: human resources, the supervision of building administrators, and curriculum and instruction.

Jane has a complex relationship with the idea of the superintendency. On one hand, she is ready for the responsibility. When asked about her preparation to be a superintendent, Jane responded she is "totally prepared. Full, 100% . . . 150% prepared."

In this response, Jane's confidence is clear. But, on the other hand, she is unsure if she really desires the position. She rhetorically asked, "Do I really want to be in a job where I need to be a politician?" Jane understands this about herself—she is "not a politician." Later in the interview, Jane again struggled outwardly with the political nature of the position and in that understanding stated, "I don't want to be superintendent. I can't do political." The role of superintendent itself seemed to be one that did not necessarily appeal to Jane, although there have been instances where she threw her hat in the ring. In one case, she met with the board and she felt "[they] didn't jive." So, she took her name out of the running. Jane talked about needing the superintendent role to be the perfect fit. She noted this perfect fit was particularly important as a female. She said:

> As a woman, you have to succeed, so you have to find the right fit. You don't feel like the world is your oyster. What chance of fit do you have as a woman and of color? It's like a cycle.

Jane believed this cycle impeded the attainability. Jane determined "as a woman, you *have* to succeed." For female superintendents, there is no room for error which makes the position fraught with potential pitfalls or factions where females could lose support from the board, the community, teachers, administrators, and/or parents. Jane indicated the stakes are even higher for female leaders. Eagly and Carli (2007) stated, "given doubts about female competence, it is not surprising that women executives often report that having an extraordinary track record was important to their career success" (p. 116). The position intimates a great deal of pressure, particularly for females.

Jane viewed the attainability of the superintendency as one in which "being a woman and of color, I had to get [the doctorate] no matter." For other superintendent candidates, there was not a need for this particular qualification in order to get nor be successful in the role of superintendent. However, Jane saw a "societal structure" that dictated the need for the doctorate. She went on to say "if a job description said master's required but doctorate preferred, I felt that while someone else would get the nod, I would not without the doctorate. I could not rely on that bit of gray space to be able to help me get somewhere." The gray space, for Jane, was aspiring to a role more typically reserved for the White and the male. Eagly and Carli (2007) asserted "women of color can face even greater challenges than white women in gaining social capital. Because both their gender and their race set them apart from the typical white male power holders" (p. 146).

Jane also noted the relevance of appearance for female leaders in her interview. Jane noticed people have a lot to say about her height. She pointed out "you never hear someone say to a man 'oh, you're so tall' but I hear it all the time." This was an important point to note. Females still answer for their physical characteristics. When preparing for a new job opportunity, Jane had help from someone who knew her new district. This colleague asked Jane how tall she was and how heavy she was because the new boss was a short man "and he never looked up to anybody." She really never thought much of it but on reflection realized how much emphasis her new district placed on appearances. Jane reinforced this emphasis on appearance as "a whole other aspect" to the topic of females and the superintendency. Jane identified the stereotypical

superintendent as "male, metropolitan, could be a person of color. You think of a white man in a split second." She is not those things. Jane also discussed her direct approach as a potential impediment. She noted, "other colleagues don't truly understand [her] . . . they are intimidate[d], not comfortable with [her] being fierce. They need to see me as a fierce supporter." Jane described herself as "fierce"—she is so in both approach and in her support of her co-workers. Her comments seemed to intimate her confusion about why colleagues see a fierceness within her but not her fierce support. Additionally, she admitted she can be "a little rough." Eagly and Carli (2007) noted, "a dominant manner places women at risk of being disliked and can undermine their ability to wield influence" (p. 103). Jane embraced her dominance: "I'm not playing. Do your job, don't be unethical." Jane intimated another element of Eagly and Carli's "double bind"—people want both the feminine traits of caring and the directness most assigned to males. Jane believes "people say they want directness but they don't." Jane doesn't "feel a need to put people at comfort" and in doing so rejects the double bind. In Jane's own words: "I'm not going to kiss your butt."

Jane knew she doesn't ascribe to the female stereotype and was at ease in that fact. She understood there are very real differences for females and males in the role and in the pursuit of the role. When asked if the stereotype of the "white male superintendent" impacted her desire to fulfill the role, Jane answered that "it does not . . . but I know what I'm up against." She realized the districts most likely to seriously consider a female woman of color for the superintendency are districts that are poor and urban. Jane stated this is "unfair" and went on to say "we have to wait until a district

goes downhill before we can get the position." In this case, "a miracle worker to resolve urban problems is often where a person of color is chosen." She said this is "not the white man's fault. It's just America. It is what it is."

Interview 6: Donna Lemen

Donna Lemen has served as a classroom teacher, building and central office administrator in her hometown district for over 27 years. She is deeply committed to the students, staff, and community in which she serves. When Donna spoke about her work, there was a true determination to serve that comes through as she detailed her experiences and background. She believed she has moved up the ranks within the district as a result of her work ethic and her determination to do what is best for the students of the district.

Donna was quick to give others credit for her administrative career. She noted she "was pushed to" become an administrator by others in the district. When she described her first administrative role as the youngest administrator in school district history, she was quick to point out she was like "wow, why did they pick me." This reaction was typical in Donna. She was both humble and straightforward in her description of her career and her work. Donna knows her strengths as an administrator but seemed perpetually surprised when others valued her or promoted her based on her skills. Hewlett et al. (2010) said women "don't intentionally cultivate [sponsors]" (p. 6). This seemed true in Donna's case. Even though she didn't necessarily cultivate sponsors, these sponsors have been there for her willing her along her career pathway. In further describing her ascension to the administrative ranks Donna described it in this way:

> They [administrators] all saw the same thing. They were all men. It was like 'wow.' It was still something like bringing me up to their level. It took all of them especially being an African American female. It was very interesting.

Donna worked her way up in the building administrative ranks becoming the first female and African American female head building administrator. At the end of this position, the superintendent "noticed [her] leadership . . . and wanted [her] in central office." She has served in that capacity since her appointment. When talking about her initial foray into administration, Donna said, "it took all of them" when referring to her male administrative team. She went on to say the following about that experience:

> Administration back then was all about discipline more so than instructional leadership. I became that person. I did not threaten my male counterparts . . . They were willing to bring me on. I thought it was amazing . . . these gentlemen wanted me as the building principal. They became very fond of my leadership style. They were very non threatened. I was surprised. They were white males that I developed serious relationship, bonds with . . . I thought that was a very profound statement even today . . . They were not interested in the lead role but they certainly wanted to make sure that the right person was in that role and they thought I was the right person.

The all-male building administrative team backed Donna, and, in doing so, vouched for her and helped select her for this role. Without them, she may not have had that opportunity. Donna immediately began separating herself from others in her field by, very early on, dissecting data and using the data to help better serve students. When she

began presenting data to her team about individual teachers and students, she described their response. "They all looked at me like 'Oh.' They'd never really looked at the data like that before. I became the instructional component piece . . . When that came about, they admired me even more." Donna spoke about this data analysis as a separating factor in her leadership capabilities. She was known for her work and admired for it.

Donna continued gaining respect and admiration through her good old fashioned hard work ethic. When talking about her transition to central office, Donna assigned it to the superintendent seeing her hard work and rewarding her. She said:

> The superintendent at the time started following up on me. One summer I got called down to the office and I was like "what did I do?" Then, [the superintendent said] I watched you, I know what time you come in . . . and what time you leave. You are the first one there and last to leave. I just admire what you are doing.

She went on to say this superintendent pulled her into central office. Donna in her humility noted, "we had no idea why we were the chosen ones at the time. It was our work ethic and the depth of the work we tackled." So, it would appear, Donna did know why—she assigned her advancement to her hard work. This assignment is not unusual for females. Hewlett et al. (2010) contended women are rewarded for being unassertive and industrious. So, over time, women ascribe achievement to hard work. Hewlett et al. stated upon "entering the workforce, young women understandably imagine that applying the work ethic that won them top honors in school will garner them the plum assignments, the lockstep promotions, and the fast track to power" (p. 18). Donna did not

work hard in order to garner work promotions, but she did see it as the cause of her upward mobility.

According to Donna, there are three primary elements a leader exhibits. First, leaders exhibit knowledge and capacity. Second, leaders are "able to design and develop plans around what it is that needs to happen to move a district forward." Third, "a great leader has to have the ability to discern priorities and know what needs to come first, second and third." Donna knows great leadership and has spent her career exhibiting these elements. She said she "know[s] what it would take for a superintendent to be successful." She has watched several come and go over the course of her career. A superintendent she really admires was "very charismatic and very involved, very attentive and listening to the needs of the teacher, the student in the district." Donna believed if she can "do that part like he did it" she has "all the necessary components to be the superintendent." Three years ago, the superintendent asked the administrative team to answer three questions. The third question was "what are your aspirations." She recalled, "I put it in writing. I want to be superintendent." When the superintendent called her in and asked her about this particular aspiration, he pointed out she had never exhibited a desire for the role before that moment. Donna was hesitant about putting her desires in writing worrying about how it might look or be perceived by others. During this conversation, Donna stated, "you know, I can do this job and I can do it well. I will throw my hat in the ring." At the point, Donna had her resume professionally done for the first time and began to seriously contemplate serving in the role.

But, that doesn't mean Donna was without misgivings regarding the superintendency. There were aspects of the role that gave her grave doubt. She identified the role as one highly entrenched in politics which could, at times, come at the cost of what was best for students. She described the work of a superintendent negotiating the political landscape in this way:

> So, I have to go home every night to have to figure out how to finesse, finagle, back door lie, cheat, steal and whatever to get the right plan in place. You know. How am I going to . . . that's too much work. In my role I want to do what's best for kids. When I have to leave the room, knowing that decisions were made and kids are going to suffer . . . because I couldn't convince a five member board. Wow. I would feel like I had failed the kids cause I couldn't figure out the skill . . . figure out the art of war. The tentacles, the art of war, to deal with them.

Donna has thought a lot about this particular component of the job. Her straight forward leadership style has served her well throughout her career. She saw this straight forward quality as one that would not necessarily best serve her in the superintendent role. Donna also noted:

> I'm not a good . . . I don't want to say liar . . . I'm not good at it. I mean what I say and I say what I mean. Sometimes I say too much and I think "oh boy I've just killed that relationship." I have to be really cognizant of keeping those connections and being impeccable with my word.

Donna realized the role of superintendent would take a different skill set than one she ascribed to herself to be successful. It is not necessarily to one's benefit to "tell it like it

is" in every moment in this role. There is a need for finesse and politics. Knowing these things, Donna was still confident in her ability to successfully navigate the role, but it is the politics of the spot that gave her pause and make her worry the politics may at times come at the cost of serving children. That cost was one Donna cannot tolerate.

Additionally, Donna struggled with the one superintendent search in which she participated. She was an internal candidate with a wealth of historical knowledge, credibility, and success to offer the board. Donna was surprised to receive neither a call nor an interview. In her words, "it is still mind boggling." The search firm did not reach out to Donna during the process. Donna described this lack of communication as "still a little unsettling." Eventually, the superintendent at that time addressed a couple of board members and asked if somebody had at least given Donna a call to let her know they weren't considering her because she lacked superintendent experience. The board members were supposedly taken aback the search firm had not been in contact. Eventually, Donna received a letter from the firm stating another candidate had gotten the job. All Donna wanted was some information. In her words: "a thank you for your application and we are looking for a candidate that has previous superintendent experience to operate this role." She did not get that and was shocked by that lack of communication. When she reflected on her own training and experience, she said she "can't imagine what [she's] missing." Donna was quick to point out she doesn't take anything personally. In her own words, Donna admitted: "I'm a realist, I don't hold grudges. I just thought that it was not professional."

Donna is a realist. She understands there are certain obstacles she has due to her gender and her race. She classified them herself:

> So, you know, sometimes I got into that "what's wrong with me." Sometimes I think . . . you're [of color], you're female, you have to prove yourself that many times over before you even get a good look, before they even look at me.

While Donna acknowledged her color and gender as obstacles, she was also quick to offer what she sees as the antidote—education. She has throughout her career continually pursued her education. Donna went forward and got her principal licensure and immediately began to work on the superintendent licensure. She talked about a male colleague saying to her "if I had your credentials, then I could be on my way." Donna's male colleague might be onto something. Eagly and Carli (2007) determined "to convince her colleagues that she is worthy of advancement, a woman is often held to standards that are set higher" (p. 139). A male with these credentials would likely be further up the career ladder. Donna sees education as an essential part of her current resume. Now, however, it appears a lack of superintendent experience is her new obstacle to overcome. In her own words:

> I just kept getting the most education that I could . . . [now] I'm trying to figure out . . . now, it's experience. You need superintendency experience to be considered for the superintendency in this district. Now let's see . . . [a previous superintendent] didn't have it, the lady after her didn't have it, [another superintendent] didn't have it . . . so I'm like "huh, what is it?"

While Donna struggled with what seems to be unknown obstacles, she still held onto the idea "if you want something at a high level, you have to work for it." Hewlett et al. (2010) and the "Myth of the Meritocracy" is at work again. If Donna can just work harder, get more education, do more, then she can succeed. Donna herself ascribed her inability to get an interview or the job as perhaps she just wasn't ready for it. Eagly and Carli (2007) posed "women often underestimate how well they actually perform, and men more often overestimate their performance" (p. 169). While others in the district felt she was ready, Donna "thought I'm not ready yet." This thought helped Donna focus on her current work and ways she can garner additional experience she felt may later help her in the superintendent role.

Donna does have an eternally optimistic approach in her career. She was charismatic and kind. It was difficult for her to ascribe blame for any opportunity she didn't receive on anything other than the fact that maybe she just wasn't ready. It was hard for Donna to identify any type of male dominance in her career pathway. But, when pressed, she could admit that at times she has worked for male dominant leaders who would rather she not speak up. She described one such experience this way:

> [I] have felt the dominance in the room to where . . . you know the right answer or solution to the problem or situation, you feel compelled not to speak up because the male is dominant and he'd rather you not because he felt you knew more than he. You were basically being, not insubordinate, you were just quiet. I have talked to other colleagues, females, in the room that were [also quiet] because you

> would get scolded one way or another. [Instead,] you just sit back because the male needed to be the dominant voice in the room.

Donna continued to talk about knowing "when to speak, just how much to say, what not to say" as a coping mechanism with this particular male boss. Donna was able to yield her voice as a weapon and coping mechanism, a political strength, but doesn't believe she has any strength in the area of politics for the superintendent role. In a district leadership team meeting, she remembered offering a solution to a district problem where she was discounted and ignored. She stated, "the plan failed because they didn't do the recommendation I had given." In that moment Donna understood all she "can do is sit there and let it play out because of the dominance in the room." So, she did. But, she also understood the consequences of this game. She said, "it's not hurting me, I don't take it personal. I just don't want our kids to suffer." Steele (1997) might not agree with Donna. He discussed "stereotype threat" as a "situational threat— threat in the air—that in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists" (p. 614). Further, Steele pointed out:

> Negative stereotypes about women and [persons of color] bear on important academic abilities. Thus, for members of these groups who are identified with domains in which these stereotypes apply, the threat of these stereotypes can be sharply felt and, in several ways, hamper their achievement. (p. 614)

Donna identified there was a dominance of the male experience in the room. Her voice was ignored. Rather than making this issue a personal one, she worried about the kids. This situational threat had consequences both for her and for students.

Beyond ignoring her ideas, at other times, Donna has suffered cheap shots from district leaders. In district leadership meetings, it would be publicly pointed out "someone" in the room would not be happy because there was no agenda set before the start of the meeting. That "someone" was Donna. It happened often enough Donna wondered "how many times is he going to do that or say that?" Donna's take on not having an agenda set for district leadership meetings was simple:

> It's not that I'm not going to be happy, it's that I know it is a wasteful time. There [are] a lot of people in the room, it's a lot of money in there. We don't have an agenda and we [have grave academic decline].

Donna understood this to be, at times, gender bias at play. She talked about leading a heavily sports focused upper school:

> But, still there were people who felt, she should not be in that role, no matter how good she is, she shouldn't be in that role. I know that bothered folks . . . I know she [led] that flagship school, we know she executed a lot of things well BUT she's female. I do believe in my heart that that's some of what is going on.

While Donna was able to identify some instances of gender bias in her work, she ultimately noted she didn't pay much attention. Chemaly (2018) pointed out:

> The worst thing a woman can do is speak up for herself and spread ideas that are not "appropriate," like saying that misogyny exists in her professional field. It's always better to stay quiet and just let the abuser have his way. (p. 273)

Donna was not sensitive in response to any ill treatment or ignoring of her own ideas which she believed had served her well throughout her career. She certainly wouldn't

speak out about any injustices towards herself. Instead, Donna felt hard work was the answer. She said, "that's just who [she's] been [her] whole life." She wanted to get a position and do it well. Donna was "not going to fake anything." Donna realized her strength in her hard work and dedication. She personally valued the work and the contribution she is able to make in her role.

Interview 7: Kathy Rudicel

Kathy Rudicel is an educational director at a relatively small, suburban school district. She has spent over 14 years in a central office leadership position. Kathy has spent time in both urban and suburban school districts where she has spent a career serving students. When thinking about the superintendent role, Kathy identified particular qualities essential in a candidate. First, superintendents need to have what she calls "a panoramic lens." Leaders need to listen to all sides and have an open mind. In other words, superintendents need to "get the whole picture" when dealing with daily issues. Second, a leader must "build a circle of trusting people." Third, superintendents need to develop a vision with the leadership team in mind. Kathy talked about her own experience in watching district leaders. "Honestly, I've seen people not be able to sustain their vision because they are trying to do it by themselves." Kathy has spent a great deal of time serving several different superintendents. She has seen superintendents "ousted" from their job as well as others struggle with the role by not exhibiting these qualities. This time has allowed Kathy to develop a clear sense of the qualities inherent in strong leadership and reflect on her own leadership experiences with these in mind.

Throughout her career, Kathy hadn't spent much time thinking about the role of superintendent in terms of her own interest in the position. It was only six or seven years ago a female superintendent hired her to join her district leadership team. In that moment, Kathy thought "she's able to do this, I'm able to do this" which began her consideration of the superintendent role. Steele (2010) stated, "if no powerful people in a setting have your identity, it tells you something" (p. 141). This moment was an important one for Kathy. In seeing one female superintendent in the role, Kathy began immediately to feel she, too, could be successful as a superintendent. When she described the stereotype of a superintendent Kathy identified "they should be a white man. Baby kisser, hand shaker, good guy." Kathy thought about this description and said, "that's what I think that people like." Current state superintendent data bears out these thoughts.

When asked about the biggest challenge in becoming a superintendent, Kathy answered, "getting the position." In Kathy's mind she has a lot of hurdles to overcome. "I'm [of color], I'm a woman and my background isn't as a high school principal and a coach." Kathy viewed these attributes as impediments for her in seeking a superintendent position. Eagly and Carli (2007) stated, "men have a clearer, straighter path to leadership than women. Men, more often than women, can succeed merely by 'being themselves' because they match other people's concepts of what leaders are like" (p. 173). Kathy identified this straight line in the typical pathway to the superintendency—first as coach, then high school principal as a White male. Regardless of these perceived impediments, she felt ready for the job. Kathy spoke about the superintendency in this way: "I feel

really confident that I could be a great superintendent. I don't say that in a bragging, boastful way. I think that if you've spent enough time in central office . . . you get to see everything." Kathy truly does have a great deal of relevant experience in central office and in other district leadership roles even though she was reticent to promote them.

Kathy has also had great mentors help her to learn and grow. The female superintendent that hired her into a district leadership position encouraged her to get the superintendent licensure. Other mentors, have been

> Fantastic people who are in my circle still who are men who say "Gosh, you really ought to do this." They are writing letters of recommendation, they are really championing you and inventorying your strengths and really being honest too about the areas where you need to bone up.

Kathy recognized the importance of these crucial mentors in both teaching her and encouraging her. She said, "once you find them, you cling onto them and hold them really really tight." These mentors were also sponsors. Kathy saw their value in the willingness they had to speak on her behalf and "champion you." Hewlett et al. (2010) defined sponsors as those whose "authority allows them to speak to your strengths, make a case for your advancement, and be heard in your absence" (p. 5). But, not all district leaders have been supportive and nurturing. Kathy described them as "deliberately sidelining you." These leaders have compartmentalized and diminished Kathy. Perhaps, Kathy conjectured "they are feeling threatened."

Kathy has experienced bias throughout her career. She stated, "I feel gender bias all the time. I think that I have become tolerant to it where I just ignore it to the point

where it's just irrelevant." Kathy continued by describing her own reaction to the gender bias she faces: "I can feel it is happening and then it doesn't prick anymore." She accepted this perceived bias as part of her own career labyrinth, obstacles to tolerate and move past in order to continue the work. In one instance, Kathy described her district leadership team meetings as "always very much directed at the males in the room." Kathy remembered one female colleague who dressed and flirted in the image of a more sexualized female in order to fit in which seemed to work. Hewlett (2010) denoted, "everyone judges women on their appearance, yet no one steps forward to offer guidance" (p. 31). This colleague highlighted her femininity through dress and mannerisms. By highlighting these more stereotypical female characteristics, Kathy remembered "she was much more easily accepted into that cabinet group than I was." Instead, Kathy felt she was largely ignored and discounted by the superintendent at district team meetings which in turn led her to stay quiet. In her words "I never wanted to speak . . . even though things were going on in the district that I was working on." As Kathy felt dismissed by the male dominated leadership cabinet, Chemaly (2018) stated, "women are supposed to be quieter and, when they speak, apologetic. Being closemouthed is a feminine quality" (p. 161). Kathy's quiet took away from the quality of the work and the team. Both sides lost out. Kathy did not have the advantage of team feedback and the chance to showcase her work. The team lost out on a smart lens and willing partner.

Kathy continued by speaking of another job in which she "was tasked to do a lot of the heavy lifting." She was expected to mine data, research this data, develop a plan of

action, and figure out a roll-out strategy. Then, her job was to "feed that information" to a male colleague who, as Kathy put it, "would take credit for the heavy lifting I had done." This continued to happen to Kathy. She was able to solve a significant and high profile district issue through this work, "but the credit that it got . . . went to people and they weren't me." She noticed. Kramer and Harris (2016) spoke about the issue in terms of "idea theft" and cautioned women to think through both sides of confronting this issue:

> You cannot depend on others to protect your ideas from theft. It is your responsibility to ensure you receive credit for your ideas. When someone attempts to steal your idea, you have a choice: you can claim ownership or remain silent. Either way has risks. Staying silent is safe in the short term, but it is the first step down a slippery slope away from career advancement. Claiming ownership of your contributions, however, risks hostility and criticism, but it also displays confidence and competence, two key traits that are necessary for career advancement. (p. 138)

For Kathy, it was important to kindly, in a non-overt way, "make it clear that this was your thing, your work, your project." Kathy believes credit stealing can be an issue. She knows this is a difficult issue to bring up and confront because "you want to get along with other people on your team and you want to be valuable to the team."

As Kathy remains interested in the superintendency, it is important to her to be noted for her own contributions and value to the team in order to build her experience and resume particularly when she experiences individuals who seem to discourage her

ambition. One of her former supervisors discouraged her interest in the superintendency directly:

> When I talked to him about my aspirations to the superintendency, he said I don't think you should do it. I think it's better if you just think about being a college professor or something . . . Okay, thanks for letting me know.

Kathy identified this interaction as an explicit example of gender bias. As she reflected on the exchange she thought out loud about it: "He said you're too intellectual, you're a little too cerebral for this job. Am I? I think it would be good to be cerebral. Do you want a stupid person as a superintendent? I don't know." Kathy described her supervisor's resistance to her success or climbing of the administrative ladder. Eagly and Carli (2007) noted, "male resistance to female influence also affects the hiring of women for traditionally masculine jobs" (p. 107). Perhaps, this influence does make the superintendency more difficult for females to attain. Kathy did not perceive the difficulty in this way:

> It is a very hard thing to get into and [people] continue to sign to that refrain. This is so hard, this is so tough. I don't know that it's really so hard. I just think that it's like a country club that has its membership dues and seeks out certain members. Because if you see who gets superintendency jobs, it's really like a game of musical chairs. People just sorta move from one district to the next. I suppose what keeps that whole thing going is that they have experience as a superintendent to get into that club. That's a piece of it.

This “country club” membership is exclusive. Kathy knew this and she doesn’t fit the bill in a myriad of ways including her gender, ethnicity, typical career pathway. It is more difficult for females to move up as Kathy noticed. Kathy also noticed female colleagues are not given opportunities to grow. When speaking about one particularly gifted female colleague who Kathy described as not having the same opportunities as several of her male colleagues to learn and grow, Kathy stated,

> I don’t know whether she’s not asking. You know, the men ask. They go right to the superintendent. I want to go to this conference, this is my path. They feel entitled, the women feel like they have to ask permission.

While Kathy was confident in her abilities to tackle the role of superintendent, she knows there is no room for error and worries about this potential for failure. Kathy talked about feeling extra pressure to perform. For Kathy, this additional pressure to perform has “become so normal. It has become such a way of being.” This “way of being” for Kathy is to continually try to achieve more. She thinks she always has to be better and she can’t just sit around. She noted she doesn’t know why she feels this way, but “I just feel like that’s what I have to do.” This pressure is constant and time consuming. Kathy talked about if something at work goes badly:

> I take a lot of personal responsibility. I feel bad. I have a lot of investment and ownership in the work that I do. If something didn’t go well or a meeting didn’t really turn out like I wanted it to. I go back and ruminate about it, what I could have done differently, what was my part in this? But, I see my male colleagues

> all the time things bomb, and they don't seem to care at all. They seem to have a lot of forgiveness paid forward for their mistakes.

Kathy attributed this differing treatment of male and female mistakes to society. She said, "maybe society is more forgiving of mistakes of men? Women maybe have to act like they're perfect so there are higher expectations that we create for ourselves that other people hold us to." Perhaps, these higher expectations whether real or perceived lead to the higher demands Kathy places on herself. Kathy was not alone in demanding much of herself. Several participants discussed this personal drive. Eagly and Carli (2007) said, "one way women respond to such pressures is to perform extremely well and to recognize that others may underestimate their work" (p. 115).

Earlier in her career, Kathy felt a very real fear of failure as she started in a new central office role. She talked about feeling "like a fraud quite often." Although Kathy was qualified and clearly bright enough to take on the role, she "felt like a phony . . . [like she] was not really meant to be [in the position]." So, Kathy did what she knew to do which was to over prepare. She spent a massive amount of time reading and looking things up on the internet what successful school districts were doing. In her words research was her "new way of being . . . to keep up—surrounding [her]self with a tribe of mentors who were not real people. They were all these people on the internet." This work was time consuming and difficult furthered by an intensity to perform Kathy felt within herself. Kathy talked about the difficulty in finding a balance in this work and her family. She feels like "there's a lot of guilt that goes with that." Kathy was not alone in that feeling. But, Kathy has managed to raise children and create a home while holding

high stakes leadership positions throughout her career. When thinking about the impact family has had on the trajectory of her career, Kathy mentioned family has impacted "the speed of it that certainly has had to slow down." Hewlett (2010) talked about the family impact on sponsorship by saying:

> In short, women for whom sponsorship could make a key difference are caught in an intractable bind; if they have children they'll be invited to networking opportunities but won't be able to attend, and if they don't have children, they'll be able to attend but won't be invited. (p. 22).

Regardless of the timing, Kathy feels ready for the superintendent position. She was a finalist in one search process. The search firm was adamant she was the perfect pick for the school board and district. She was not selected. In reflecting on this experience, Kathy talked about the hours she spent researching to prepare for the interviews. She "put all that effort forward and [to] not get the job felt sort of deflating." She felt shame about it and duped by the search firm. One of her most trusted mentors told her, "It's hard to get into. Chin up." He warned her to be wary of the search firms and their encouragement. He was upset for her and offered her great advice. In turn, Kathy felt like "I had let him down by not getting the job." The search firm did not offer her much in the way of feedback following the search. These situations are discouraging. Kathy now no longer wants to seek out a superintendency. She "[doesn't] want to be a superintendent unless someone asks [her] to please be their superintendent."

Additional Data From Document Review

Five of the seven participants have participated in at least one superintendent search. After studying both a compilation of participant documents as well as the transcripts of the interviews, the following data were compiled. Five of these participants have applied for at least 12 superintendent searches. Two of the other participants have not applied for any superintendency, one of whom will never do so because she was not interested in ever serving in the role of superintendent. Of the five participants who have applied for the position, four participants have made it past the application phase of the process to the initial interview rounds of the superintendency search. One participant was not granted an interview after the application period. In at least one other case, a participant officially withdrew before the end of the search process.

In several of these superintendent applications and search processes, the participants felt disenfranchised by the process. In their own words, the experience was "so traumatic" and "it made me wonder if I should have even put my name in because you worry about the impression it leaves others when you are the one not selected." Other participants described their emotional response to the rejection: "I did feel shame about it . . . I felt duped by the search firm." Still others recognized issues during the process: "I met with the board and we didn't jibe." Many of the five regretted the decision to apply: "I would never have put in my name . . . it's a big step to put your name into something." These participant experiences in applying for the superintendency were all unique experiences within a diverse range of public school districts. Sometimes, participants were recruited by search firms and made promises of being front runner

candidates which did not pan out. Other times, participants experienced searches that resulted in particular stakeholders influencing the board toward different (male) candidates. Participants discussed the implications of these search processes as negative because they were public and "traumatic" when they did not secure the position. As a result, at least two of the participants were clear they would not actively seek a superintendent position moving forward. Other participants would still consider a superintendent position if the conditions were just right. Regardless, the application process and the highly public nature of not getting the position, left lasting, negative impressions on the participants.

Themes

At the conclusion of the interviews, six themes emerged. These themes developed from participants' responses to questions that sought to understand their ideas and beliefs as they pertain to the attainability and desirability of the superintendency. The emerging themes included: attainability impediments, mentorship importance, pressure to perform, difficulty identifying obstacles in bias, the politics of the position and the desirability of the superintendent role. Within these themes, each participant described her own experiences and the meaning these experiences has had on her career.

Attainability Impediments

Participants' belief in the attainability of the position was varied. Throughout the interviews, participants noted the role and stereotype of the position was highly male, White, political, and exclusive. There did not appear to necessarily be a seat at the table for females, although most had considered and/or applied for the position at some point.

Lillian, who had no interest in the role, strongly believed in the attainability of the superintendency. She described the attainability of the superintendent as a matter of "going for it." It had been her experience "if there is something I want, I go get it." But, the other participants questioned this attainability through their own perceptions and experiences. Anna believed "the knowledge base is super challenging . . . [not having that knowledge] would make me nervous unless I was surrounded by really good people." It is the position and the knowledge required that give her pause. Many other participants did not question their preparedness. Jane "feel[s] totally prepared. Fully, 100%, 150% prepared." Others agreed. Aileen noted she "get[s] to practice the superintendency every day," and Donna knows "I can do this job and I can do it well." Kathy was amused at the fact her supervisor noted in her review "she would make an excellent mentor for the new superintendent." She found a certain irony in the statement because her district did not consider her a candidate yet thought her perfect for training the new hire.

Participants feel prepared. But, preparation alone was not the issue participants talked about during the interviews. Many participants discussed the actual attainability in terms of navigating the process itself. Between search firms and school boards, it seemed an elusive process for candidates. Kathy described the attainment in this way:

> I think that people say repeatedly that it is a very hard thing to get into and they continue to sign that refrain. This is so hard, this is so tough. I don't know that it's really so tough. I don't know that it's really so hard. I just think that it's like a country club that has its membership dues and seeks out certain members.

So, in her mind there is a perceived "desirable" candidate insiders let into "the club." Other participants recognized this "club." Linda talked about having "no network" which is an impediment to membership. She felt the support of a network was essential in order to move into the role.

Many participants have been discouraged by outside agencies, bosses, and/or colleagues from pursuing administrative promotions and at times, the superintendency. Linda talked about working with a search firm who "flat out told [her] they [the school district board] are really conservative and they're probably not going to look at you." She was stunned to hear it stated so bluntly from the search firm. She was not the only one who has come upon obstacles in her career path. Anna talked about her supervisor reporting in a staff meeting no one that had been interviewed for a certain high profile central office position had been hired because "he did not find someone who was qualified." However, she had interviewed for the position and was qualified both by licensure and experience. When she met with him to discuss his comment, he stumbled through an apology and assigned her an extensive, additional administrative responsibility because "it would be good for [her] to work on a special project." She also noted, while she was given more work, her salary was not adjusted. She felt this particular supervisor viewed her as "someone that would go into [a different central office area] and kind of stop there." Several participants ran into supervisors ascribing a career path for them regardless of their input. Kathy stated when she spoke with her former superintendent about her aspirations for the superintendency, he told her he didn't think of her as a superintendent. Instead, he said, "you should be a college professor."

He claimed she was too cerebral for the job. Anna described people questioning her about why she was taking coursework in order to get the superintendent licensure. They viewed the job as one that had too much pressure for her.

The participants who have gone through at least one superintendent search process seemed additionally discouraged. Jane attributed this to a general belief that she felt people were "still onto [this idea that] 'women can't lead' that we're bitchy . . . There's a feeling that a woman can't lead and a woman can't cry in the workplace." These perceptions make the process of acquiring a superintendency particularly challenging for females. Immediately, female candidates have to overcome the stereotypical male superintendent. It can be a challenge.

There was also the worry of the highly public aspect of the superintendent search process. Aileen discussed her own misgivings after not being selected: "It made me wonder if I should have even put my name in because you worry about the impression it leaves others when you are not the one selected." Other participants shared similar concerns. Kathy described the process and her ensuing failure to get the job: "It's so traumatic that you don't want to do it." Jane withdrew her name from one superintendent search when she thought she did not connect well with the Board. She remarked "as a woman you have to succeed, so you have to find the right fit. You don't feel like the world is your oyster." Jane hits on an important point. The highly public search for a school superintendent she perceived to be particularly hard for a woman to endure and overcome because "the world is not your oyster." So, there was no room for error. Rather than risk failure, she withdrew her name.

Mentorship Importance

Participants discussed the importance and/or necessity of mentors in order to attain the position. Again, the perceived exclusivity of the position of superintendent elicited participant responses which detailed the role mentors had played in their current and/or future career trajectories. Kathy noted she has a circle of people who are "intentional mentors" to her. These people "are writing you letters of recommendation, they are really championing you and inventorying your strengths and really being honest too about the areas where you need to bone up." She talked about the importance of these mentors and their investment in her. She said, "once you find them, you cling onto them and hold them really really tight and meet with them now and again." Other participants agreed. Mentors, to them, have had a significant impact on their careers. Anna described the benefit in this way:

> I have had amazing mentors, I have people I feel that I can call any day of the week about a variety of different topics who are trusted, who are smart, who care deeply about me and I feel like that has been one of the most crucial pieces for me.

Linda ascribed her success to her mentors and noted the reason she has gotten to where she is now is through the recognition of others that see her for "being female and being good." Linda also talked about beginning a new position and the importance of her male supervisor: "He vouched for me, so I came in learning." He afforded her the opportunity to learn and try without fearing any misstep and ensuing backlash.

Not all participants have had positive mentoring experiences. When mentoring is gone or nonexistent, it is difficult for participants to consider promotion. Linda, currently without a mentor and lacking supervisor support, was worried: "I would probably think the most I've felt worried about failure is this year . . . I don't know what success looks like to [my supervisor]. So, because I can't define success, I'm afraid of failure every minute." As the interview continued, Linda noted mentors were "absolutely" necessary to vouch for females looking for a promotion. Mentors seemed to provide all of the participants with a sense of support and guidance. When this support is lacking, some of the participants described feeling alone. When a mentor is working for another candidate, it can be a hindrance. One participant noted in a superintendent search, an outsider was influencing the board on behalf of "his boy." It worked in favor of that male candidate. In terms of the search for a superintendency, mentors can yield a powerful voice and influence.

Pressure to Perform

Participants felt a very real pressure to perform and fear of failure which often drove them in their sense of work ethic and their dedication. Failure was a consistent theme across the participant interviews and several of the participants referenced their perception there was no room for female failure in this highly male world of K12 administration. Kathy talked about this fear being particularly strong early in her career. She stated:

> I felt like a fraud quite often. I was very, very new into leadership . . . I had just come from being [in a building]. I always felt a little bit like a phony. I was not really meant to be here. I'm not really prepared for this.

To counter these feelings, she read and researched on the internet. Surrounding herself with digital mentors to support her work. This participant also denoted this fear and worry as a primarily female one:

> I take a lot of personal responsibility. I feel bad. I have a lot of investment and ownership in the work that I do. If something didn't go well or a meeting didn't really turn out like I wanted it to, I go back and ruminate about it. What could I have done differently? . . . But, I see my male colleagues all the time, things bomb and they don't seem to care at all. They seem to have a lot of forgiveness paid forward for their mistakes.

Anna noted an intense sense of pressure to perform. She talked about this pressure and identified she is personally "always worried about failure." Several participants talked about fearing failure in terms of failing children. Donna said: "I perceive failure as when I fail the kids. When I don't ensure the kids have everything they need to be successful." Others agreed. Anna stated, "on this job, I think it comes down to . . . have you ever hurt the kids or if you allow someone else to hurt kids." Linda noted, "my greatest fear of failure is I'm failing my kids."

Jane spoke about an extra pressure to perform based on color and gender. She noted she feels this extra pressure:

> Totally. 100% Black, 50% female. It feels like pressure but you get used to it. There are pressures you accept and those you don't. Do I really want to be in a job where I need to be a politician but I'm not a politician? In a district struggling but I can't fail. Where can my gifts bear the most fruit? If I'm a white guy, I may give it a go and if I don't like it, I can do something else.

Jane labeled these as separate sets of pressures that impacted and implicated her perception of failure. Also, Jane prioritized these pressures. Black outranked female. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) said, "each group identifies the type of oppression with which it feels most comfortable as being fundamental and classifies all other types as being of lesser importance" (p. 72). Jane talked about being African American as well as female throughout the interview. Both of these identifications defined her "otherness." Jane denoted she felt pressure as "100% Black, 50% female" identifying more primarily with being Black. These identifications play out in the field of educational administration. While approximately 24% of superintendents in the nation are female, even fewer (less than 6%) are men and/or women of color (Kowalski et al., 2010). Jane tied these minority identifications together as polarizing forces by noting "she can't fail" which she elaborated by saying women, particularly Black women, don't have the option of failure. Anna blamed her birth order: "I'm a first child . . . I have a healthy dose of the fear of failure but never more so than in this job because I think also I am more invested." Lillian echoed the gravity of failure: "Some days it's a struggle. Every day I think about failure. That's why I'm the first person to the office every day." This participant found the antidote to failure—hard work. As participants talked about fearing failure and extra

pressure, these feelings seemed to go hand in hand with a labor intensive work ethic. They believe in the myth of meritocracy. The harder they work, the more success they will have.

Bias

Participants spoke freely in narrative detail about the difficulties they experienced being female in a highly male professional pathway. However, collectively, participants struggled to identify specific instances of gender bias they had seen or experienced—even when the participants spent time earlier in the interview detailing clear instances of overt gender bias as they identified and explained them. Kathy described bias as "I feel it all the time. It doesn't prick anymore." The notion the participants were operating in a landscape permeated with bias was echoed throughout the interviews. Donna identified it in this way: "[The males in the community] dislike seeing me on the microphone as the one in charge." This was interesting to note. Her positional authority absolutely placed her as "the one in charge" but she had a sense males in the community were intolerant of that fact. She continued by talking about a certain organization's meeting she had to attend, she was the only female present. The leader of the organization told her "they will cast whatever at you because you're female but they will never disrespect you in this room." This support from the male leader helped her and she described the male reaction: "they were like what the hell? She's professional, she's this and she's that and then the [leader] loves her. It was like you guys got to get over it. I had to prove myself in that role too." Prove herself she did. Echoing this dominance of the male perspective, another participant noted school districts who most often employ female women of color

are urban districts. She commented, “we have to wait until a district goes downhill before we can get the position. That’s not across the board but often is what it is.” Others described instances of, at its worst sexual harassment, at its best highly unprofessional and inappropriate. Male colleagues have put their hands on participants and been told to stop. Lillian described a female colleague telling her upon her hire “you are only 27, you could be my child, you were given the job over me and you better know what you’re doing.” Donna talked about a former supervisor picking her out to needle her about her need for meeting agendas. Lillian also talked about a classified employee who insisted on calling her “honey” until he learned that “she was not his ‘honey.’”

Most participants were able to pinpoint instances they identified as bias, but not without specific prompting. All of the participants struggled with the topic throughout both sets of interviews. When explicitly asked about instances of bias, all participants stopped to think it over. Most said they couldn’t think of anything specifically. Some noted moments they had already discussed previously in the interview.

Politics

Participants struggled with the political nature of the role and the attainment of the role. Some talked about politics as an impediment in the desirability of the position. Some participants talked about politics as an impediment in the attainability of the position. Both the attainment and position itself are described by participants as highly political and many participants struggled with that political piece.

Several participants discussed the highly political nature of the superintendency as a desirability impediment. These participants do not want to spend their time engaging

school boards (many who are not educators) to convince them of best practices for children. One described it this way:

> I perceive failure as when I fail the kids. When I don't ensure the kids have everything they need to be successful. If I am going into this position and I can't convince a board that we need iPads or new curriculum . . . the kids are going to fail. I can't convince the board to finance it. Then, I've failed. When I've failed the kids, I've failed as their leader. That's when I would start to be thinking . . . this is not what I am supposed to be doing.

Donna struggled with the idea of the position itself. When she said, "this is not what I am supposed to be doing," it defined the superintendency as a position that doesn't serve children; instead it is political work. The direct line of service looked different to participants within the superintendency. Many participants struggled with the idea of serving children in this highly political way. Donna captured the struggle in these words: "I have already stayed back from [the superintendency] because of the political things and nature . . . I'm not good at it. I mean what I say and I say what I mean." The politics are perceived as negative to all but one of the participants. This participant discussed politics as a matter of course. Just one component of the highly complex job of superintendent. But, most of these female leaders saw the politics getting in the way of the work of helping children. Some thought about the politics of working with a board in terms of how to cope with that work. Aileen stated, "I think it's so good to . . . not be shy to pull the board together with a moderator or a school attorney. Someone who can just be mindful with a board who has been together for a number of years." Aileen has

started the process of problem solving this particular and often undesirable aspect of the job.

Other participants struggled with the idea of fitting into the political stereotype of the "typical" glad-handling superintendent. Anna talked about the plausibility of the superintendency:

> I'm not saying I couldn't. It's just, if that really is the stereotype of the superintendent then, you know, I am not going to be a glad-handling cigar smoking . . . you know that's not who I am. How do you penetrate that inner circle? How do they accept me?

This component of the stereotype of a traditional superintendent seems to give several participants pause in terms of the position's desirability.

Desirability

Some participants were very clear in their lack of desire for the position. Kathy, who has been burned by the political, public nature of the search process and selection said, "I'm at a place now where I don't want to be a superintendent unless someone asks me to please be their superintendent. Seriously." It seems, while willing and able, the process of acquiring the position makes it an undesirable one. Several participants talked about the process. Aileen thought about it as a reflection; "it made me wonder if I should have even put my name in because you worry about the impression it leaves others when you are not the one selected." The process is one that seems particularly risky for females who as previously noted feel they have little room for error.

Sometimes, it was not the process that made participants balk at the role; the role itself was perceived as political and often undesirable. Several participants wondered if this political role was one they really wanted. Some participants didn't want to go through the selection process; some didn't want the job. Also, affecting the desirability was the isolation of the job. Anna put it this way:

> [The superintendency is] challenging because again it's a hard job, it's a lonely job and then you know . . . who do you have to go to? Them . . . I think that if you were in that position where you were possibly the singleton female—how are you going to pick who you can trust from them? Who is that going to be?

Participants enter the position knowing they are a minority and the landscape of the position is an interconnected one. As one participant put it the superintendency is like "a country club membership." Knowing this, several participants worried it would be isolating and difficult to establish a support system. As this participant also stated, "If that's going to be my peer group . . . bummer."

But, even with these clearly established drawbacks, several participants did hope to attain a superintendency. Aileen, who does desire the role, does so only if the "fit" is right. She stated,

> I have had headhunters call. I have just said no before going to any interviews. I am not the type out looking for this position. I was enticed because that particular district spoke to me. It would have to be something that speaks to me and that I see myself, "If not me, then who" and I really felt that way in [a different district]. It's not something that just because the opportunity presents itself, I go running.

These participants had varied opinions about the desirability and attainability of the superintendency. The position itself is complicated by the political nature of both the application, process of interviewing, and elite membership of the position. It often seemed elusive to the participants who ranged from having zero desire for the position to a desire that "comes from a place of wanting to disrupt that."

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), 76.6% of the educational workforce is currently filled by females. This traditionally female vocation has remained so over time. While the vocation itself is heavily female, the top leadership role of public school systems, the superintendency, remains systemically male. Currently, 24% of national superintendents are female (Kowalski et al., 2010). In the state of Ohio, that further decreases to less than 17%. This fact sets up a patriarchal system of leadership that affects every child who is a product of public education. The numbers themselves have increased over time but still continue to lag well below the numbers of females in the vocation.

The purpose of this study was to more fully understand why the number of female superintendents may be lacking from the lens of female administrators who are in the pipeline for the position. Primarily, this study attempted to understand whether or not female administrators qualified for the role thought the position to be attainable and/or desirable. Along the way, the study participants discussed many issues associated with the culture of educational leadership and females in leadership positions as well as perceived impediments these female leaders face.

Discussion of Findings

The study consisted of seven participants. Each participant served in a position in the career pathway to the superintendency as defined by Brunner and Kim (2010). All first round interviews, but one, were conducted in person in an attempt to build trust and

spend time with each participant in a more intimate setting. These first round interviews lasted between 90–120 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured led by a series of questions with each individual interview taking different pathways of focus and interest as dictated by the participant responses. I transcribed each interview using voice recorder software. When all of the first round interviews were transcribed, I utilized Dedoose software as a platform to organize the transcriptions, coded each individual interview, and analyzed results. I followed the Aronson (1995) model as outlined in her "Pragmatic View of Thematic Analysis" coupled with the Creswell and Creswell (2018) processes of coding and data analysis. After uploading all first round transcriptions into the Dedoose software, I identified "patterns of experience" as found in commonalities between individual responses and then individually coded these common ideas. These codes set the foundation for themes which formed the second round of interview questions. These themes were reinforced throughout round two interviews. Often, participants had time to think about elements of the first round interview and spent time during the second round interview clarifying and building upon the themes from round one. After a review of the interview data and collected documents obtained from the participants, I was able to elicit one additional theme in round two.

Attainability Impediments

Participants varied on their perception of the attainability of the superintendent position. All but one of the participants were interested in filling the role of superintendent. Five participants had gone through the application process for the

position at least once. These application processes took a toll on the participants. Most were deeply impacted by the experience. Kathy described the experience in this way:

> I think that something that really challenges one's personal beliefs in their ability to get the job are experiences like this . . . their board attorney reached out to me and said these are the things we heard about you. We think you'd be a great fit for our district. I can't speak for the board but we would really like for you to apply. So, they invited me to apply . . . it narrowed to two finalists, me and the internal guy. So, I'm thinking it must be because I am so damn good . . . I, only later, felt like really toward the very end all along it really was all those sorts of things like we interviewed a high qualified, minority female but we gave this job to our internal candidate because he knows the district better, he's a better fit. You know, whatever. That's always the answer.

This particular experience was similar to experiences several participants described. The actual process of interviewing for the superintendency had many inherent hurdles for leaders, particularly female leaders including the search firm, the dynamics of a board, and often rounds of interviews to stakeholder groups (administrators, teachers, students, and community members). These hurdles seemed insurmountable to many of the participants. One described the process of attaining the position as "a game." Donna wondered what else she could possibly do to strengthen her resume other than obtain a Ph.D. due to the strength in the leadership positions where she has served over the last 20 years. She felt the process was one in which districts can use "any excuse they want." In previous instances, it was because she hadn't previously served as a superintendent or an

assistant superintendent. She wondered if it could be because "She's female. You know we want a male in this role." This description points to the perception participants had that there will always be a way for boards and search firms to easily dismiss female candidates. This perception of the search process and the difficulty in the attainment ultimately impacted the participants' interest in the position.

Lillian talked about society as another obstacle to the position attainment. She pointed out:

> It's difficult because of the societal views on the role that women should play . . . Women have to answer the question, "well, how can you balance being a mom and a superintendent." I would doubt that any board of education would ever say how can you balance being a dad.

Lillian pointed out a work family balance and expectation that several participants assigned to boards of education, search firms, and the general public. These expectations are cultural ones. Deal and Peterson (2016) described culture as "unstated, often hidden, assumptions and expectations [that] are embedded in cultural patterns and drive what people focus on and ultimately what they do" (p. 15). Lillian described the "unstated assumption" that women are assigned the responsibility of the family. The balance of family and career is one that is historically culturally assigned primarily to females. Several participants felt that females have to answer questions about balance in order to access the superintendency.

Regardless of the cultural perception of balance, participants were cognizant of the impact the role of superintendent may have on their families. Aileen watched a close

family member serve as superintendent. "I watched what it did to her family . . . she's paid some pretty big prices for being away so many late hours at night." Aileen expressed a concern throughout the interviews of many working moms which was the difficulty in work life balance. Eagly and Carli (2007) stated, "domestic responsibilities create time pressures that challenge women seeking advancement in their paid jobs. Employed mothers are particularly time stressed and put in considerable time fulfilling their employment and domestic duties" (p. 55). Aileen described her current happiness in choosing not to seek the position in this way: "I'm okay to let some things happen in my family and enjoy that and not be in such a rush." Participants equated the superintendent role with prioritization over children and family, thus impacting the desirability of the role for many of them. Not only did family and work life balance impact the desirability of superintendent role, participants discussed family as an inhibitor to the position. Lillian pointed out "women [are] still feeling in 2020 almost that they can't do both. They can't balance work and life . . . can you really do both?" Kramer and Harris (2016) stipulated "many mothers have a deep feeling of guilt or selfishness when they are working and raising children . . . this is often the result of the stereotype that mothers should be available to their children twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week" (pp. 169-170). The difficulty of the balance is described succinctly by Jane: "Of course women have different consequences in their family life." Jane described a female colleague without children this way: "She had no family in the area so balance was nothing. We didn't have balance." Most participants talked about the need to learn to balance work and life over time.

While they discussed the impact of the role on family, what was also clear was that the family factor had already been mitigated by these participants. These participants have spent years working their way up through the administrative ranks as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters. They have served both their districts and their families for years. Many did so with the help of extended families, friends and neighbors. Donna described the help:

> My mother was still living and she was centrally located. They would pick the kids up and bring them home if I was still at school. You know, it just worked out . . . I hate to be cliché, but it does take a village. My next door neighbors were awesome.

Most of the participants, particularly those with children, talked about navigating children and running a household. Participants were able to articulate the impact children had on their own careers both positive and negative. Kathy described the impact children had on her career as one of speed. She furthered,

> Maybe the speed of [my career] has had to slow down. With certain things like going to school and to what extent I was going to carve out time for furthering my education and still be able to take care of my own children and my home situation.

The speed factor was issued as a matter of fact, not laced with regret nor anxiousness. Participants were cognizant of the impact family had on their careers and made decisions that afforded them the ability to raise families and work in administration regardless of any impediment it might have had on their career trajectory. Participants viewed raising

a family as a balancing act but one with a shelf life. As children grow and leave, female administrators are afforded more time for their work which participants realized. All but two participants waited until after their children left home to apply for a superintendent position. They also noted how they managed to raise children with the help of spouses, extended families, and even neighbors throughout their careers. But, what proved interesting, these female leaders have already navigated this obstacle in their career pathway. Many participants are finished with raising children so this impediment to the superintendency is no longer present. The perception family was a very real impediment to the attainment and desirability of the position for participants seemed a false one. Participants, many who have already applied for a superintendency, have addressed the complexities of working and raising families and were cognizant of how they would be able to manage the position and family.

Sponsorship: Females Need Sponsors

While family impeding the work trajectory of female administrative leaders seemed perhaps inaccurate, participants' perception of the absolute need to have a mentor was very real. This theme was present throughout interviews again and again. Kathy told me:

> I really appreciate you captured in your theme the fact that mentors have to vouch for you or admit you into the club because their vouching makes there be an okayness about you. So, sometimes it's not even about your credentials, but the fact that another respected glad handling white male said that she's good.

This sentiment was shared among the participants. Kathy described the superintendent experience as a "club" membership; others have said mentors are absolutely, undeniably necessary to help female administrators secure jobs in the "old boys network." This highly masculinized culture is an ingrained one, set in the history of the numbers of males serving in the superintendent role. Schein (2004) illuminated the impact culture has "one can see clearly how culture is created, embedded, evolved, and ultimately manipulated, and, at the same time, how culture constrains, stabilizes, and provides structure and meaning to the group members" (p. 1). The superintendent "club" is composed of an overwhelmingly large number of men setting a male culture that "constrains" females in the career trajectory. Kathy continued, "the people that get into these roles [the superintendency] are groomed by people who are in those roles when they are in, when the people [applicants] are in subordinate positions." According to Kathy, these superintendents select subordinates and then help to groom them to take over the role. In this way, this highly male superintendency pool flourishes as male superintendents often pick other males to mentor and promote. Kathy put it this way,

> This does not appear to be the case for women who are hard-working and in subordinate roles. They are highly valued for their hard work as long as you are going to do the hard work and the behind the scenes operation . . . it's rare for me to find women naturally being promoted and pushed forward.

Another participant, Anna, concurred citing a personal experience. Following Anna's interview for a promotion within her district, her mentor did not support her for that position. Instead, he assigned her additional responsibilities to take on in the current role

she served. Anna's mentor selected a role that he felt was more suitable reinforcing in Anna the subordinate level was appropriate for her although her background, experience and licensure all qualified her for the role she interviewed for and roles even higher in the educational administration hierarchy. This mentor couched additional work as a way to add to her resume. Anna was grateful for the additional work and "opportunity" which came with no additional pay. After the mentor imposed a glass ceiling, Anna felt grateful to her mentor and ascribed her additional workload as his "support" and responded with gratitude, even though there was no additional pay or upward mobility rewarded her. Researchers Eagly and Carli (2007) pointed out:

> In general, studies show that women are more satisfied with lower levels of reward than men are. Also, female and male managers in comparable positions indicate equal satisfaction with the conditions of their jobs even when men have higher salaries. (p. 170)

Anna, too, was satisfied and as she terms it "grateful" for a position with more responsibility at the same pay rate. de Beauvoir (1949) noted, "it must be emphasized that in economic terms men and women constitute two castes" (p. 154). During the interviews, participants struggled with issues of pay. Aileen discussed her discomfort with conversations around salary. "I haven't practiced with the art of those conversations. I bet there is one. If you tell me no, I am like okay." It seemed Anna never thought about her pay when receiving additional work responsibilities; she was pleased by her mentor's support. de Beauvoir (1949) wrote this about females in the workforce: "If she wants to get ahead, it is useful for a woman to make sure she has a

man's support. Men are the ones who take the best places, who hold the most important jobs" (p. 154). So, the position of the superintendency is built on a candidate's ability to network and have others individuals, primarily current male superintendents, speak on their behalf which forces females who aspire to the position a dependency on male superintendent sponsorship and support.

In terms of mentoring, Hewlett et al. (2010) drew a distinction between mentoring and sponsoring. Mentors can help mentees improve their performance or give them advice in difficult situations. Sponsors, on the other hand, have political clout and often stick their necks out to help promote and advance the careers of those they sponsor. In a mentoring relationship, mentors are not impacted nor implicated by the strengths or weaknesses of their mentees. Sponsors often help to open opportunities for those individuals they sponsor (p. 5). Participants in this study did not distinguish between these two terms but when they discussed the necessity of "mentors," they were actually describing Hewlett's definition of sponsors. Linda actually described the differentiation and necessity of sponsorship this way:

> Do I need a mentor to open the door for me to get into that role . . . I don't know if mentor is the right term at this point. While I think once you become a superintendent, you need a mentor to make sure you don't screw it up. I think that in some cases, it does open doors.

Linda knew something more was necessary as she wondered "if mentor is the right term at this point." Participants understood the need for other individuals to help open doors due to the "exclusive" nature of the position particularly one that is "so white and so

male." Kathy suggested "sometimes it's not even about your credentials, but the fact than another respected glad handling white male said that she's good." Hewlett et al. (2010) would agree. In Hewlett et al.'s research, sponsors have the authority which "allows them to speak to your strengths, make a case for your advancement and be heard in your absence. Where a mentor might help you envision your next position, a sponsor will lever open that position for you" (p. 5). But, many participants weren't sure what sponsorship might look like.

While participants shared understandings of the importance of sponsorship, none of the participants mentioned networking or the importance of networking in concert with sponsorship. Eagly and Carli (2007) discussed the complexity of networking and sponsorship: "The perceptions that women are not as effectively networked as men is often accurate but mainly reflects causes other than women's lack of understanding of how organization's really work" (p. 145). Participants struggled with mitigating the educational administration organization that embodies added complexities of the highly male superintendent cohort. Eagly and Carli (2007) discussed how "men's success also likely reflects women's reluctance to promote themselves and [women's] underestimation of their value. And as we have noted, women are penalized for self-promotion more than men are, and negotiation requires some degree of self-promotion" (p. 170). Participants did not recognize self-advocacy or networking as an option or a means to access the superintendency. Eagly and Carli (2007) stated:

> When women are a small minority [as they would be in the network of educational administrators], most networks, especially influential networks, are

> composed entirely or almost entirely of men. In these male-dominated networks, women usually have less legitimacy and influence and thus may benefit less than men from participation. (p. 145)

Perhaps, because female participants didn't benefit from networking in the same way as their male counterparts did, participants did not see any value in participating in a "male dominated network."

These participants' beliefs are important to note. If self-promotion nor networking are access points to the superintendency, female leaders are dependent upon the male establishment for promotion. While participants may believe the superintendency is attainable to them, it is certainly predicated on the influence of others . . . meaning, the desirability for the position in female leaders is not enough, others must promote female leaders, vouch for female leaders, and support female leaders' ascension to the position of superintendent. These unwritten rules for female educational administrators also set a culture within the establishment. Deal and Peterson (2016) talked about how these "unofficial patterns seem to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about or consider taboo, whether they seek out colleagues or isolate themselves, whether they work together" (p. 7). Participants exist within the larger context of predominantly male educational administrators, a culture which taught them the importance of sponsorship not self-promotion. Participants also felt mentoring or sponsorship was necessary for both males and females. Jane described the attainability this way: "I don't think it's attainable without that [mentoring]. But, I think the same, to a lesser degree, but to some degree for men as well." She was not

alone in this view. Many participants talked about an absolute need for sponsorship to attain the superintendency, regardless of gender.

Participants acknowledged the necessity of sponsorship in seeking the superintendency. However, the sponsorship relationship can have more complications for female professionals seeking aid from male superintendents. Hewlett et al. (2010) acknowledged this difficulty as "sexual peril" and stated, "the road to the top is fraught with sexual peril: securing the ongoing interest of a senior man as a sponsor can provoke gossip, ignite passions, and destroy careers" (p. 19). If males are reticent to eat lunch alone with females, it makes pursuing a high powered position more difficult for females, particularly if sponsorship is inherently crucial to promotion.

The Pressure to Perform: A Myth of Meritocracy

Female participants tended to talk about "working hard" as a cure-all to combat a very real pressure to perform in high levels of educational leadership throughout the interviews. Lillian talked about "an incredible amount of pressure" she felt to succeed which, in turn, led her to a pervasive fear of failure. Eagly and Carli (2007) discussed a general existence of the "concerns about women's agency" which they noted "place additional demands on women to perform exceptionally well" (p. 110). Collectively, these participants saw work ethic as their mode of getting ahead and garnering notice. This hard work in participants' minds led to promotions or additional work responsibilities, but by statistics did not seem to translate into securing the superintendency. Since five participants have at least put their names in an interview pool for the position without success, it seemed hard work as a singleton resources was

not enough. Hewlett et al. (2010) said, "the myth of meritocracy dies hard among female talent—very hard" (p. 17). In this research study, Hewlett et al. maintained "fully 77 percent of female employees believe that what drives promotion at their firm is a combination of hard work, long hours, and education credentials" (p. 18). Like Hewlett et al.'s research suggested, study participants, too, favored hard work, education and experience as the pathway to the superintendency and promotion. Chemaly (2018) made the point "to overcome . . . [gender] wage gaps, many women seek out high education, meaning that they incur more student loan debt" (p. 85). Chemaly made an interesting point. Females equate education and hard work with promotion. Although females seek more education, they spend more and get less in the way of the superintendent position. Researchers call this phenomena a belief in meritocracy and assign this as a belief that is stereotypically female (Hewlett et al., 2010; Kramer & Harris, 2016). Several of the participants echoed these sentiments throughout the interviews.

Donna claimed "if you want something at a high level you have to work for it. That's just who I've been my whole life. That's just what [I've] always said out there." This participant talked about her years of service for her school district. When she threw her hat in the ring for the top position, she did not get an interview. This participant received several promotions within the district, taking on more and more responsibility throughout her career. This hard work was, simply put, not enough. Participants talked about hard working female peers who also ascribed to the myth of meritocracy. Lillian made more general comments about the work product of high ranking female school administrators "[in] my experience . . . the women always outwork the males on my

team." Linda described a current female superintendent she personally knows in this way: "She's got to hold her own amongst the testosterone. Nobody outworks her. She works all the time." Jane described a former female boss saying, "she had no family in the area so balance was nothing. We didn't have balance." Participants not only identified this belief in the meritocracy in their peers; they also exhibited it in their own careers.

Several participants talked about their personal experience with hard word. Donna noted she "was tasked to do a lot of the heavy lifting [within her team]." She talked about her work ethic and her commitment to getting work done. She noted, "I do those extra things all the time. I think that I always have to be better than my last speech. I can't just sit around on my laurels shooting the breeze." This is a sentiment echoed by all the participants. The drive within these participants is one to stand out or to prove themselves worthy of their positions within their organizations. One participant talked about her desire to prove her worth in comparison to her male colleagues "to make sure that [she and another female colleague] were more than [the males] could ever be." Donna talked about how she was known for her work effort. A superintendent she served told her "I know what time you come in . . . and what time you leave. You are the first one here and the last one to leave." She served her district throughout her career and, in the end, that diligence was not enough to get her an interview for the top spot. There seemed a need in these participants to constantly prove themselves which may be a result of being females in a highly male population of central office administrators or high school principals.

While they worked as if they believed in a meritocracy, participants also saw the reality that hard work was not enough. Kathy stated outright educational administration "is not a meritocracy no matter what people want to believe." So, where does this hope in a meritocracy go when the reality of the highly male superintendency stared participants in the face? They did not know. It left many participants wondering if the superintendency is right for them, all the while taking on a great burden of the work themselves.

Often, participants talked about additional workload as a "reward." Anna spoke about being rejected for a position within her organization. When she was disappointed, the superintendent offered her "a special project to work on because it would be good for [her]." This project translated into an increased workload with no parallel wage increase. Linda spoke about "going until I hit the wall." As a result her supervisors gave her more work and more responsibility. Two participants took on additional departments because they were so capable in their roles. Each of these participants welcomed additional chores, additional responsibility. None expected promotion, salary raises, or better titles. They were happy for more work. The additional work did not translate into more pay or more opportunity in the area of promotion.

Perhaps female leaders have to believe in promotion as a reward for hard work because they have traditionally been penalized for self-promotion. Eagly and Carli (2007) stated, "women are penalized for self-promotion more than men are, and negotiation requires some degree of self-promotion" (p. 170). If female leaders are hurt by self-promotion, then they must rely on others (men) to promote them. The only

vehicle for their own promotion, then, is the notice of the leaders around them. Kathy spoke about it in this way: "I feel really confident that I could be a great superintendent. I don't say that in a bragging, boastful way. I think that if you've spent enough time in central office . . . you get to see everything." Kathy immediately said that she "doesn't mean it in a bragging way"— that would be very un-female. Hewlett et al. (2010) discussed women's "pronounced aversion to self-promotion" (p. 18). Kathy was confident in her abilities but truly wary to appear self-aggrandizing. This "aversion" may hinder female promotion and compensation in that both negotiation and job promotion typically require some form of self-promotion.

Bias: Belonging and the Critical Mass

Participants felt the lack of gender representation both in the pathway and in the position of superintendent. Jane noted, "even if you're not the primary bread-winner, you may be the only one or one of the few. You walk into a room and you're the only one. I think it's huge." What becomes "huge" is this lack of what Claude Steele (2010) termed a "critical mass." Steele talked about individuals looking for critical mass cues. These cues help individuals understand their sense of belonging and when cues don't accumulate, people can develop a sense of identity threat (p. 140). Participants talked about feelings of isolation when these critical mass cues were absent. Jane described a convention she attended in this way:

> It's like when I went to the school convention, I went to that just for one day and I was like 'Oh my God' Where is the diversity? There were so few people of color and none of the others, like Indians or anyone else. So many white people, so

> many rural, so many flannel shirts. Let me get to [my district]. It was crazy . . . It's like a sorting exercise . . . I just refuse to be sorted.

Jane identified the lack of critical mass cue of Steele (2010). Steele defined the term "critical mass" as "the point at which there are enough minorities in a setting, like a school or a workplace, that individual minorities no longer feel uncomfortable there because they are minorities" (p. 135). Jane looked around the conference and saw a lack of critical mass in both gender and race. Jane "refuses to be sorted" but by the nature of the numbers, there seemed an automatic sorting of White, rural males versus everyone else. Additionally, Donna has asked herself as a Black leader "what's wrong with me" because as she looks around her in central office and particularly in the superintendent seat, there are not individuals who look like her. She too has been lacking Steele's (2010) "critical mass cue"—there are not "other people in the same setting with the same identity" (p. 140). For Jane and Donna, who categorize themselves as Black and female, the critical mass cues of difference come to them in the field of educational administration in both gender and race. Collins (2004) stated, "racism, sexism and elitism all have concrete institutional locations" (p. 74). These "institutional locations" are particularly felt in both race, ethnicity, and gender by Jane, Kathy, and Donna in educational administration. All participants noticed what others looked like around them particularly as they did not fit the traditional mold. Other White participants, including Lillian, positioned the problem as one of number and tradition particularly felt by some participants among athletic directors and athletics. This feeling of exclusion from athletics may also be a factor or inadvertent result of an "authority of experience." bell

hooks (1994) spoke of this "authority of experience" as one exhibited by White male students in her classroom who assumed that what they had to say was "worth hearing, that indeed their ideas and experience should be the central focus of classroom discussion" (p. 81). The athletic directors shared a version of the "authority of experience" through their number and traditional stronghold in athletics. Both Lillian and Linda described a feeling of exclusion in the athletic director setting as being outside this "authority" regardless of both of their vast athletic experience and history.

This exclusion was very real to participants. Anna described feeling "helpless" when "you're in your silo and you don't know what to do about it." Participants talked about feelings of "dread" when they knew they had to attend meetings where there existed, in Lillian's words, a pervasive "meathead" mentality. Schein (2004) talked about culture as "a mechanism for social control" (p. 19). The culture of highly masculinized meetings had participants identifying both an exclusion they felt and an irritation by it. Lillian further noted, "they annoy the hell out of me because it's the good old boy's network." Linda described this good old boy's network and its ensuing lack of critical mass: "It's really isolating." Kathy said, "I felt extremely isolated and alone." These feelings of isolation speak to a certain marginality. Steele (2010) stated, "if no powerful people in a setting have your identity, it tells you something" (p. 141). These females have been hearing that "something" through their own experiences. They did not define it as much as react to it with internalized feelings of loneliness, frustration, and isolation.

When female participants did sit in circles where the powerful people/majority were male, they reacted in many ways. Kathy described a type of gratitude in female administrators that resulted in being allowed "in the club." She described this gratitude:

> I think a lot of times we are feeling very fortunate, opposite from men. Many women in high positions of leadership feel very fortunate. I hear words like blessed and lucky—you know I'm really in a great place to have this job. It's really different from men. They feel entitled. They feel they've earned it. They feel they've come to this place. So, when you're sort of like a crumb taker in your mind . . . you don't want to rock the boat very much. You don't want to offend.

Being a "crumb taker" has several implications for high profile females. Skrla (2003) wrote about women in "highly placed career paths" to the superintendency being content in the role they are in and described this contentment as "the normalized feminine virtue of modesty" (p. 256). Anna described being conditioned to act like she does not want to be superintendent. It sounded better to her to say she would like to be an assistant superintendent. As she described, "it sounds better in my mind to say it that way." Females in this study seemed conditioned to want less for themselves. Jane commented, "even now I'm saying I could be superintendent of a bad district. Wow . . . I haven't yet said I could be a superintendent of a good district. So, we're getting better."

Bias: Staying Silent

Linda Skrla (2003) wrote, "thus, to be feminine is to suffer uncomplainingly in silence. To do otherwise is to risk censure for being labeled a complainer, someone who

expects special treatment, or perhaps the most pejorative of all—a feminist" (p. 255). The themes of bias and silence often went hand in hand throughout the participant interviews. Frequently, participants detailed facing instances of bias alongside their quiet acceptance of the bias. Bias was difficult for participants to both identify and discuss. Every participant was reticent to define their personal experiences by the term "bias" yet participants were aware gender bias existed within the vocation of educational administration. Belenky et al. (1986) described acceptance in women of inequity and bias in this way:

> Because the women see themselves as slated to lose, they focus their efforts on assuring their own continued existence during a losing battle . . . it is a stacked game waged against men who seem to be bigger, men who think they have the right to be the winner, to be right no matter what the circumstances. (p. 30)

Participants shared several experiences they had with keeping quiet in this "stacked game" of bias. Chemaly (2018) stated, "women are supposed to be quieter and, when they speak, apologetic. Being closemouthed is a feminine quality" (p. 161). Often, in varying circumstances, participants described keeping quiet rather than creating waves. Kathy talked about her experiences with idea stealing: "My job then was to feed that information to the curriculum director who would take credit for the heavy lifting I had done." Kramer and Harris (2016) spoke about the issue in terms of "idea theft" and cautioned women to think through both sides of confronting this issue:

> You cannot depend on others to protect your ideas from theft. It is your responsibility to ensure you receive credit for your ideas. When someone

> attempts to steal your idea, you have a choice: you can claim ownership or remain silent. Either way has risks. Staying silent is safe in the short term, but it is the first step down a slippery slope away from career advancement. Claiming ownership of your contributions, however, risks hostility and criticism, but it also displays confidence and competence, two key traits that are necessary for career advancement. (p. 138)

Kathy, too, felt confronting idea theft was a "risk." She noted:

> It's a fine line. You want to get along with the other people on your team and you want to be valuable to the team . . . The fine line is how can you make them look good and you look good at the same time.

Eventually, Kathy left the district knowing in staying put, she would have continued in "making them look good" without growing herself.

When Anna was given additional job responsibilities with no additional salary or job title in her district, she said nothing. Eagly and Carli (2007) stated

> Women risk not getting a job or promotion when they are too direct . . . research has established that people regard women who ask for a raise in salary as overly demanding and therefore less hirable than women who do not make those demands. (p. 103)

Anna seemed to know better than to make an issue of the pay and instead chose to see the increase in workload as an opportunity. Eagly and Carli (2007) discussed gender bias and women's often denial of it in terms of the wage gap:

> It appears that women base their judgements of fair compensation on people like themselves—namely, on other women, who in general are less well compensated than men. Women therefore feel less entitled to high pay than men do. As a result, women often fail to recognize that they are personally discriminated against when they receive lower pay and fewer other benefits than comparable men. Despite this failure to perceive personal discrimination, women often recognize that women in general are discriminated against. (p. 170)

This failure to perceive personal discrimination occurred throughout these interviews. Time and again, participants described situations that seemed laden with gender bias but rarely did participants assign the circumstances the label of bias. Even when participants did assign occurrences to bias, there were exceptions. Linda, in describing how she "had to prove" herself in a national non-profit organization she was elected to lead, originally ascribed this proving herself as "gender bias" but was quick to self-correct the term and change it to "experience bias." Because she lacked experience specifically to half of the organization, she preferred terming it "experience bias." Her reluctance to prescribe gender as an element or factor she personally was navigating was relevant particularly when noting the highly gender-defined issues she described in the interview.

At times participants described more overt instances of gender bias; at other times they described more covert bias. In one instance, Anna described a perceived fragility simply by being female. Anna's supervisor, at the time, did not tell her about a very real issue he had with her leadership style. Instead, he "protected" her by not providing her the necessary feedback because, as he eventually disclosed to Anna, he didn't want to

hurt her feelings. This perceived "fragility" is a symptom of what Soraya Chemaly (2018) titled "benevolent sexism" (p. 169). She contended "benevolent sexists put women on pedestals, perpetuating the idea of dependency and the need for protection" (p. 169). Anna needed to be protected from hurt, so her supervisor didn't share important and valuable criticism she needed in order to better lead.

Participants had a complicated relationship with experiencing bias on their personal career pathways. Over and over again, participants talked about instances or experiences they had as female educational administrators entrenched in bias. Often, they would tell stories about their own experiences with bias and how they dealt with them. Participants had very real lived experiences of gender bias within their educational careers. At times, participants talked about bias as they recognized it as such. Other times, bias was a thread woven by them within the context of their stories—sometimes recognized by participants as bias; sometimes seemingly the background music to a repeated refrain. One said of the bias female administrators face "I think because it's so prevalent that you just keep moving." Most participants agreed. They discussed working harder, pushing ahead as ways to deal with instances where they felt the presence of bias. Throughout the interviews, participants shared experiences where they faced and worked through the bias of colleagues, board members, parents, supervisors. When participants were asked to name any particular instances of bias they had seen or experienced first or second hand, none of the seven participants were able to answer that question. None. Even when participants had earlier in the interview talked about specific stories involving bias, none were able or willing to identify experiences they have faced as bias.

In the second round interview, I asked participants to reflect on their inability to answer the question of "bias." Participants had much to say. Anna commented on the hassle of it all: "When you do lash out [against bias]. it becomes a big hairy deal . . . it's not worth it." Jane offered this idea: "I think we're kind of trained to not even look at it." These answers spoke to a silence that exists for these participants. Eagly and Carli (2007) indicated "victims of discrimination often minimize the actual discrimination . . . many women now doubt the presence of the types of barriers symbolized by the glass ceiling" (p. 6). Participants often chose to minimize the bias by their silence or ignoring it. Why? One, because as Anna offered, "it's not worth it." By identifying or making the claim of bias, females get mired in the accusation and the repercussions that follow the accusation. Second, as Jane said, "we're trained to not even look at it." There is an expectation of female silence that exists in the workplace. As Chemaly (2018) suggested, "growing up, we are encouraged to actively ignore sexism" (p. 180). Jane said:

> There's a thing about being able to call a thing a thing. And so sometimes it can be scary to call a thing a thing. You just pretend that this is not there . . . If you really name it then it's really there. That's why [females] have trouble because it happens all the time. I mean all the time.

The prevalence of bias coupled with the reticence of participants to identify and respond to bias was consistent.

Participants also felt an aversion to identify bias due to a worry they might be reading the situation wrong. Lillian suggested that "we, as women, don't necessarily

want to accuse people of being outright biased because we want to see the good in people." She went on to point out:

> He could just be ignorant. Sometimes, they're just not educated, they just don't know. They don't think before they speak . . . It's so difficult to prove so that's why the long silence. We know it's there but we can't prove it.

So in participants' efforts to be fair and unbiased, instances of bias can often be overlooked or ignored. Additionally, some participants discussed how identifying bias seemed like a weakness in them. Linda described the sentiment in this way: "If you articulate it, you are admitting a certain type of weakness or an inability to handle the bias. If you can't remember it, it must not have been big enough and you overcame it." She responded to this bias with the following "I'm not having it." Linda "wasn't having it" and by responding in that way, she in her mind, overcame that bias. She put it this way:

> Bias, the word, is an implied weakness. If people are biased against you and you can't overcome that through hard work and effort or proof. Then, you've got a problem and that's society's definition. If you articulate it, you've got a problem. Well, I don't want that problem, I want to be superintendent. I don't want to be sad and soft and weak. So, I don't have that problem.

When I asked Linda whether or not she felt her reluctance to name and address bias was perpetuating bias, she said, "if you were to ask a man that . . . the man would say but I got what I wanted and nobody would think twice about that. Why are women responsible for making sure things don't get perpetuated." This response was critical to note. Why

would anyone hold responsible the aggrieved party to facilitate change, yet they do. In the words of bell hooks (1994) in reference to the desegregation of her high school: "yet, once again, the burden of this transition was placed on us" (p. 24). Linda's response felt very much aligned with hooks' statement which bears the question why should the aggrieved be responsible for changing the system perpetuating the affliction?

These participants pointed out the normalization of gender bias in educational administration. Kathy used an analogy to better describe it:

> [It's] the fish in the water. When fish are swimming in the environment and it's so natural to them. They internalize those rules and the climate feels completely natural . . . It's sort of like an expectation . . . Well, today, somehow [you are going to be diminished] because you're female. If you're good at your job, you've already found ways around that diminishment.

This analogy was a commentary on the bias participants faced and in the resolve of their "silent" responses.

Bias: The Double Bind

Participants in this study often discussed elements of trying to fit into a particular role whether it be through their dress, their level of assertiveness, or their warmth and caring as measured against invisible yet powerful societal gender norms. Researchers Eagly and Carli (2007) discussed what was termed a "double bind" requiring women to be "communal" rather than "agentic" even though leadership positions often require both (pp. 101-107). Participants struggled with this double bind in their current positions, and they worried about this double bind as it impacted their potential as superintendents.

Jane felt people "still hold onto [the notion] that women can't lead, that [women] are bitchy." Jane alluded to the age old adage of strong female archetypes. Female leadership was associated with a woman being the "Queen Bee"—bitchy, controlling, domineering, unfeeling. Eagly and Carli (2007) described it as "masculine domains often call for highly dominant and aggressive behavior, and so people suspect that women who succeed in such domains probably are not very communal" (p. 105). Herein may lie the assignment of "bitchiness" to female leaders. But, it is not only personality characteristics that act as an impediment for females; Jane also noted the relevance of appearance and personality.

Jane talked about not having "the most warm and fuzzy personality." She said, "women are supposed to be warm" and asked, "Do I have to do that?" Jane added an invisible, societal expectation "permeates how you dress, your body image, just everything. You know, all of the things that attack us as women in society are just more so when we're a minority in a particular role." Collins (2004) pointed out, "it is important to see how the symbolic images applied to different race, class and gender groups interact in maintaining systems of domination and subordination" (p. 75). Jane noted that race and gender play a role in society's expectations for her behavior. These societal expectations come largely from the cultural cues within the setting of educational leadership. Geertz (1973) said, "we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically systems of meanings of terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction in our lives" (p. 52). The participants described the importance of their dress, their warmth, their leadership style, and their personality traits throughout the

interviews. They seemed more aware of these elements of leadership exacerbated by the fact they were gender minorities in the field. Females still answer for their physical and personal characteristics. de Beauvoir (1949) said, "the woman, on the other hand, knows when people look at her, they do not distinguish her from her appearance: she is judged, she is respected, or desired in relation to how she looks" (p. 724). The judgment is hard to escape. Deborah Rhode (2010) asserted in her book *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law* the existence of the beauty double bind: "They can lose by being either too attractive or not attractive enough" (p. 31). Women who are too attractive suffer, particularly those who are voluptuous, they are considered less intelligent and less competent in male dominated fields. Women who are not attractive are penalized in female dominated professions (p. 31). It would appear females can't win.

Participants were highly cognizant of being the minority in educational administration and what that means as they navigate their own career labyrinths. They discussed this navigation in terms of the way they looked, the way they acted, and the way they were perceived as female leaders. Jane told a story about someone asking her how tall she was before she accepted a position at a different school district. When she asked "Why?" this person told her that the superintendent was short and wouldn't look up to a woman. Jane discussed changes she made in her hairstyle to conform to a more traditional look by no longing straightening her hair:

> Some people probably see it as militant. Some people probably say what does that mean and it was not an easy decision to stop straightening my hair . . . Yeah,

> it was crazy. It's the game we're taught to play and I don't regret any of the choices.

These types of decisions involving hair, clothes, and make-up are particularly relevant to female leaders and exacerbated by the lack of females in these educational leadership roles. Anna commented, "I would pay much more attention to what I wore [as a superintendent], what I did, what I said. Every word has to be measured very carefully." For most participants, there was an understanding "you just can't put on a grey suit. Everything you do will be scrutinized and political." The political atmosphere of the position brought participants even more misgivings about the superintendency.

Some participants discussed gender consciousness within the confines of the daily work of educational administration. In one work instance, Anna described a co-worker making an inappropriate physical advance and asking her to spend time with him outside of school. She recalled this experience as one that positioned her in a role of pleaser. She did not report the incident and worried about her own culpability even though the actions of her colleague were uninvited and unwelcome. In that moment, Anna found herself in the Eagly and Carli (2007) "double bind [which] requires women to be communal and to avoid directive and assertive behavior" (p. 103). Rather than risk upset, Anna chose not to pursue the incident namely because her colleague was a minority which may have caused a great deal of backlash in her district. Instead, she told her administrator she had a problem but didn't need his help at that time. If the problem persisted, she might need his help. The "problem" did not persist; the incident was left unreported and unaddressed. Anna described this incident as one where her desire to be a

pleaser reigned. Perhaps, too, Anna acquiesced to a culture and society she knew existed but was wary to take on. As de Beauvoir (1949) described women in a patriarchal society:

> Either you agree or you don't; she has to agree in the name of the whole system of accepted principles; in refusing to agree, she rejects the whole system; she cannot allow herself such a dramatic move; she does not have the means to create another society; yet she does not agree with this one. (p. 651)

Anna, could not afford the dramatic move of reporting the incident and disrupting the entire district culture, although she knew it was wrong. This incident was not a singular one. Years later, Anna witnessed an inappropriate embrace given to a district leader by her male supervisor. Her colleague, in embarrassment, asked her not to tell anyone about it. Again, Anna did not report the incident. Perhaps because Anna "[did] not have the means to create another society," she chose to accept that one as it was. In *Leadership on the Line*, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) contended "silence is a form of action" (p. 142). This form of action (inaction) creates a culture of silence and perpetuates the double bind. Silence here enabled Anna to continue her work without upset. She could accept the role of pleaser to continue her work. Her silence and the perpetuation of the double bind was the price.

Participants' societal cues developed from the predominately male perspective sending persistent male messaging to female minorities in the world of educational leadership. Participants described this minority status as a disadvantage and reported feeling isolated and alone. Linda described what it must be like for a female

superintendent: “I know it’s hard . . . you must feel something when you’re the only female in the room.” Lillian described her own experiences at all male athletic director meetings: “They are not inclusive of females. They would never say anything to me without an introduction.” Lillian’s experience mirrored others in being ignored and often discounted particularly in the world of athletics. Donna stated the men in the room needed to adjust their thinking to allow her access: “it was like you guys gotta get over it. I had to prove myself in that role too.” Eagly and Carli (2007) stated:

> Women are also at a particular disadvantage when they are in the minority or are the sole woman in a group of men, as shown in several studies. Under such circumstances, the women’s ideas tend to be ignored by the men. Women are at less of a disadvantage in integrated groups, where the present of other women helps ease their way through the labyrinth. (p. 108)

Eagly and Carli (2007) spoke about the disadvantage of women in large groups of men. Many participants noted how they worked to fit into this masculinized group in terms of their dress, their behavior, and in “just everything.”

Politics

One of the major concerns participants discussed was the political nature of the role of the superintendency and the impact politics have on the desirability of the position. The political nature of the role clearly implicated participants’ desire to serve as superintendent. Hewlett et al. (2010) described this type of politicking as “the relationship capital game” and denoted “so averse are women to playing politics that, according to one study of Wall Street professionals, they’d rather switch jobs than have

to engage in the relationship capital game" (p. 19). The political nature of the job was a deterrent for many of this study's participants. They viewed the "politics" as something they either did not "do" or were not good at doing. Many participants saw the politics at times as being at odds with the job of serving children. Jane wondered "where can my gifts bear the most fruit?" If her gifts could better serve children rather than playing politics outside of the role of superintendent, Jane was satisfied with that fact.

Participants identified politics as an inherent negativity associated with the role of superintendent. Donna described the politics as "I have to finesse, finagle, back door, lie, cheat, steal and whatever." Most saw the politics of the position as highly toxic and dishonest. Others talked about the necessity of it, like taking your medicine. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) connected the important of politics to leadership: "Nobody is smart enough or fast enough to engage alone the political complexity of an organization or community when it is facing and reacting to adaptive pressures" (p. 100). Donna understood this fact but worried about her prowess in the political arena. Jane described the political nature of the role in this way:

> I think I could jump through the hoops and politics to get it, I don't think I would be happy in the role because you have to continue to politic. It's one thing to get through the threshold of the doorway but if you have to live it . . . that's the part that would make me say no.

The "living it" piece had many layers. First, there was the politics of obtaining the role. Those politics rely on a candidate's ability to make connections and network with search firms and school board members. Linda described it as an access problem: "I'm pretty

political. I'm pretty savvy. But, I don't have access to who I need to be savvy with. So . . . it's the access that's the issue." Anna described the politics of getting and successfully maintaining the job as a by-product of strong networking. She identified her understanding of networking as something that happened but not something considered a necessity. Anna described her lens: "I view [the position] as deeply political in terms of the networking piece and the work product. It doesn't bother me that part of it. I just didn't see networking as necessary, it was just something I did." Anna went on to talk about her own personal networking as "something she did" but not a means to an end. She identified how networking was, in her mind, more a social component of administration not a direct avenue to promotion nor better opportunities. This perception might cost her opportunities as she noted "that you have to be constantly thinking I might need this person, this person could be a reference for me in a good way or a negative way." This belief of networking in terms of future possibilities was ill-fitting for several participants.

Participants didn't care to spend their time networking nor engaging in politics. Anna noted to be a superintendent, "you have to go be political in a district where you don't know what the rules are and there are different rules for you as a woman." Politics may be further complicating for females because as Eagly and Carli (2007) stated, "leadership is perceived as a masculine activity" (p. 79). The masculinized leadership perception coupled with the participants' discomfort with politics and networking left female participants in a lurch. Aileen pointed out she is "always wondering should I try to get myself into those lunchtime meetings [between the superintendent and the

treasurer]. Is that a networking piece that I should be more aware of?" There was networking happening around Aileen, but her preference as she described it would be to work through lunch and get home to her family.

Several participants described the political layer of working for a multi-person board. No participant seemed particularly excited about that prospect. Jane said:

> It's such a lonely position, it's so political, with five to seven bosses. It's hard for me to think in a parallel universe about that . . . it's such a hard job. This board loves you, they hire you. The next board doesn't and you're gone. It's so unpredictable.

The unpredictable nature of the position coupled with the average short tenure of the position is highly undesirable for participants. The fact the position itself is based upon the hiring of a board that "loves you" and then potentially at risk by a new board where one falls out of favor makes that political work difficult. Jane pointed out, "I don't want to be superintendent, I don't do political." She made a strong point. One cannot possibly survive in the current role of superintendent and not "do political." Donna noted, "[politics] definitely has significant impact on my desirability of wanting the role . . . and it has had significant impact on my attainability of getting the role."

Jane also talked about the importance of finding the right fit for the superintendency to be successful. She worried about having seven bosses when she does well with one boss. She suggested "maybe it's thinking about the perfect match for me. Maybe if there was a place that was totally aligned with the way I think, then maybe I'd be willing to take the risk." Participants talked about the "risk" of the superintendency

which has a great deal to do with the role itself. According to the AASA 2006 State of the Superintendency Study, the average superintendent tenure in the role is 5–6 years. The precarious nature of the position tends to make it risky, perhaps, as participants discussed, even more risky for females. Jane described having "no room for grey space." In this case, the grey space would be any mistakes made while in the position. Being a minority in both race and gender in the position of superintendent adds additional pressure to the role. Kathy also talked about feeling extra pressure to perform because she is a woman of color and female. She said, "I feel it every day. I feel it all of the time." Collins (2004) stated, "each of us lives with an allotted portion of institutionalized privilege and penalty, and with varying levels of rejection and seduction inherent in the symbolic images applied to us" (p. 75). For both Kathy and Jane, their "institutionalized penalties" of being female and women of color added to their own pressure to succeed and drive to perform.

Additional pressures occur after attaining the superintendent position due to the precarious nature of the role. In Jane's mind, there was no room for failure. In thinking about applying for the superintendency, she discussed "as a woman, [she] really ha[s] to slice and dice all the dynamics to make sure that [she] ha[s] a decent chance of being successful because it can go south so fast . . . That's a challenge." Eagly and Carli (2007) pointed out:

> Women in leadership roles may have to overcome hostile reactions to their exertion of authority over others. While women follow this detour in the

> labyrinth, doubts are often raised about their competence as leaders, requiring them to outperform men to be seen as equally competent. (p. 101)

While women strive for the label of "competent," there exists little to no room for error. Jane observed

> There's a feeling that a woman can't lead and a woman can't cry in the workplace. No matter how good you are, it's there. Race is another layer for me, not only are you a woman but a Black woman or stereotype of an angry Black woman.

Collins (2004) instructed, "it is important to see how the symbolic images applied to different race, class and gender groups interact in maintaining systems of domination and subordination" (p. 74). Jane pointed out the symbolic image of the "angry Black woman" as a means to dismiss and oppress her voice. Additional symbolic images Jane denoted also apply to White women, particularly the notion women must not cry in the workplace. Eagly and Carli (2007) agreed: "The paradox for women in roles usually occupied by men is that they may be condemned for crying or otherwise seeming not tough enough, but also disliked for any toughness they do show" (p. 168).

Sometimes, even if females are willing to serve as a superintendent and engage in the political nature of the job, it's not enough. One participant talked about the political nature of the choice of superintendent. These politics are board and community politics and more often outside of an administrator's control. Donna described a search she applied for in her district:

> You know I definitely have all the skill sets, the credentials and you know, laying me side by side by the person who got the job, I basically had the same references . . . And I believe that the winner of the job was . . . what politically . . . the community or should I say the board wanted to see . . . They wanted to see a white man in the seat.

Donna stated she was okay with the board decision because the politics of wanting to see a White man in the position is what she disliked about the position—the political nature of the role. She wondered about the politics of the position: "What does that have to do with educating children best?" This sentiment is one raised over and over again by participants who prefer to serve children rather than engage in the politics of running a school district.

With all of the obstacles inherent in the search for the position, some participants still want to serve as a district superintendent. Donna talked about her desire to be a leader for other women. "I know that it would empower more women to want to follow in my footsteps and those are the reasons why I would take on the leadership role." For her, politics would not get in the way. She stated she knows she "could play the game . . . and make the right decisions." Ultimately, for her, it is about "being a role model for those who will follow me" that would be her reason for going to "the next level." Donna also noted:

> If I wanted to attain the role of the superintendency, it would be strictly to be a trailblazer to empower females that really aspire to do this work. I can tell them it

can happen. If I want it, I still have time in my life and my career to still go for it. I would do it to empower women and women of color to just keep plugging for it.

Five participants had applied for a superintendency at some point in their careers which indicated they desired the superintendency at some point. However, the participants' discussions of the impediments to the position and the negative qualities of the position far outweighed their admitted desire for the position. In fact, most participants outwardly did not desire the position during the interviews. Hewlett et al. (2010) discussed women's ambition as being completely different than men's ambition. For men, money and power are the top two motivators. Women see the "intellectual quality of the team" and job security as the top two career motivations (p. 28). Hewlett et al. also stated:

> Women are just as hungry as men, just as driven to succeed, just as eager to be rewarded for their hard work . . . And success as they define it is not about money and power. Women's value proposition looks nothing like men's. (p. 28)

Interestingly enough, the participants noted the superintendency as highly "risky" and insecure, certainly not the top of the career pyramid.

Desirability

The participants had several ideas about the desirability of the position of superintendent. For many, the position is not desirable. But, ironically, many participants who talked about the position as undesirable had applied for the position previously. While these female leaders were willing to serve in the top spot, there were components of the position they did not find attractive. Anna talked about the extroverted nature of the superintendency. She pointed out "you really have to be an

extrovert. That's tiring for me. I could be a beautiful extrovert but I don't love it all the time." She went on to talk about the position as one that the same reasons that limit the attainability, implicate the desirability of the superintendency. Jane had this to say:

> All those things that made it difficult to attain would make me feel limited in the position. Knowing I'm one of only a few females, that's not attractive to me . . . Knowing I'm only one of a few of color would make me feel limited. . . . It's a double edged sword . . . it's not just about getting there and everything's okay, even if you get there, it's going to be limiting.

Jane identified in herself a twofold minority in gender and race. Deborah Rhode (2004) commented, "gender is only one of the characteristics, and not always the most important one, that disadvantages women. Race, ethnicity, class, disability, and sexual orientation often overshadow or interact with gender" (p. 56). This comment speaks to several participants' lens. Jane, Donna, and Kathy experienced educational administration through the lens of gender and color. Both identities influenced their experiences of difference.

The participants perceived it is nearly impossible to become a female superintendent and incredibly challenging to be a female superintendent which greatly impacted their perceived desirability of the role. Participants often cited the idea of working for a board as particularly challenging. Jane pointed out, "you have seven bosses. I do well when I have one. Thinking about seven people that don't know education. They're elected by the community." Several participants talked about their discomfort in working with non-educator board members.

Not only did participants worry about working for a board, some talked about the position itself as undesirable. Jane commented she doesn't want to pursue the superintendency at this point because she is "looking for better balance." She realized that the superintendency wouldn't allow this balance. Ultimately, Jane wondered about the "potential for genuine job satisfaction" as being the main inhibitor to the role.

For other participants, the job of superintendent is highly undesirable because of the work involved. These participants see the superintendency as work that does not have all that much to do with working for children. Aileen described the superintendency, "for those that are truly invested and inspired by the work [of educating children], the superintendency is a disappointment for them." Jane also talked about her irritation with this fact:

> Especially because it seems like the last thing you're allowed to do as superintendent (fight for kids). You have 1,001 things you have to do before you get to do that. It should be switched, it should be the first thing. That part for me, I mean, it's so far down the list of things you get to think about. I'm better with kids. Adults kind of tick me off.

The fact the role of superintendent is one additional, and very important, step removed from children and from the actual job of educating children is difficult for many participants. Kathy stated

> That fact that your contribution and your ability to reach a very large number of children from your role in central office is not diminished because you don't have the role [of superintendent]. In fact, you may have a stronger influence as a

> central office staff member than as a superintendent. [Those positions] are the actual job of teaching and learning.

These female leaders want to serve children, not spend their time politicking with adults.

Recommendations

> Leadership matters . . . The best leadership is found by choosing leaders from the largest pool of talent, and that includes women. Opening doors for women fosters equal opportunity and can help a society to allocate its human resources optimally. With excellence in leadership in short supply, no group, organization, or nation should tolerate the losses that follow from unfairly restricting women's access to leadership roles. (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 11)

Eagly and Carli said it best, "the best leadership is found by choosing leaders from the largest pool of talent." This belief grounded this study. The current number of female superintendents, 24% nationally, versus the 76% female population in the education vocation, is important. We must care about this number, if we care about public education. It more important now than ever to place our most talented leaders into the highest levels of influence if we are to continue to improve and keep our public schools strong. The study I conducted first asked participants whether high level, female educational leaders found the position of the superintendency attainable. The next question asked participants to think about whether or not they found the superintendency desirable.

The results of these qualitative interviews elicited several prominent themes. First, female administrators feel the position of the superintendency can be attainable if

candidates have sponsors. In isolation, female administrators struggle with the perceived exclusivity of the position. In order to overcome the hurdle of exclusivity, participants talked about the importance of mentors and/or sponsors.

Sponsors

Participants talked at length about having sponsors (mentors), needing sponsors, and wanting sponsors. They were clear in their belief the superintendency was not attainable without the right sponsors. Hewlett (2010) men and women who have powerful allies from above advance in ways that their unsponsored peers do not. But women have fewer sponsors, in part because they don't intentionally cultivate them" (p. 6). The role of superintendent does not have any formalized entry training or preparation apart from an academic superintendent licensure program. The elements of these programs concentrate on preparing potential candidates in subjects like: curriculum, funding, facilities, and leadership. These programs do not help candidates cultivate relationships that could turn into sponsorships nor do these programs educate potential applicants to the culture of the superintendency. The culture as described by participants is on the surface a seeming "country club membership" which mandates a sponsor for membership. Schein (2004) stated, to learn the socialization process, "one must observe and interview regular members or 'old timers' to get an accurate sense of the deeper level assumptions [of the culture]" (p. 18). If an educational leader is interested in aspiring to the superintendency, they would have little access to individuals serving as superintendents unless they had served or are currently serving a superintendent who garners them access. Because many aspiring superintendents don't personally know an

extensive number of superintendents, the potential for sponsorship is already difficult. Without access to superintendents, potential female candidates are held at bay outside the culture of the male superintendency without sponsorship for admittance.

Also, women do not necessarily understand nor feel comfortable with sponsorship and the traditional role that sponsorship can play. Hewlett (2010) pointed out: "women's aversion to this kind of naked quid pro quo translates into a wealth of supportive peers but a dearth of relationship capital" (p. 6). This can be a problem for females who, in their aversion, miss out on the opportunity that sponsorship may offer. Eagly and Carli (2007) noted, "those who create social capital through good relationships with colleagues, both within and outside their organizations are more likely to rise to positions of authority" (p. 173). It is necessary female leaders interested in the superintendency seek out sponsorships regardless of their aversion to them.

Additionally, it should be incumbent upon professional organizations that support male and female superintendents to also encourage candidates interested in the superintendency in an effort to create networking opportunities. Several local and statewide leadership and membership organizations like the Buckeye Association of School Administrators, Educational Service Centers, Greater School Superintendents' Association, and/or superintendent search firms would benefit by providing more formalized access to sponsorship. This access might come in the way of programming for administrators in the pathway (central office administrators and school principals) or opportunities to attend programming alongside current superintendents. Hewlett (2010) talked about the importance of engaging those at the top of the organization, "Engaging

the C-Suite is a critical success factor. Visible and active support from a company's most senior leaders—women and men—often signals the difference between good intent and real outcomes" (p. 54). In order to increase access to sponsorships, it is important to engage potential sponsors in the dialogue.

Educate Boards and Search Firms

> Still, tapping into the best instincts of our society, schools can make at least a small difference in changing society for the better. (Noddings, 2013, p. 105)

However, as Hewlett et al. (2010) pointed out "sponsorship in isolation may not work" (p. 54). Why would it not be enough? Hewlett et al. (2010) answered the question in pointing out:

> Most organizations today don't represent a level playing field and often still reflect men's values and life situations. These gender inequities are subtle but nonetheless pervasive, since they are embedded in work norms and practices that appear gender neutral on the surface, but affect men and women differently and can inhibit women's achievements of career success. (p. 58)

There is a need to educate those who will have an important impact on selecting educational talent . . . search firms and school boards. These two organizations act as the pipeline and the selection committee for the superintendency. It is important those faced with making the decision for the position are aware of the difficulties in what Eagly and Carli (2007) deemed "the labyrinth" of the female experience. Search firms should work to establish equity in their pipelines and school boards should be aware of the candidates

both in terms of experience and qualifications but also of gender and race. The top leadership position should look more like the diversity of the constituents they serve.

Re-Examine the Role: Forego a Singleton Power Player to Lessen the "Risk"

> Women do not want to lead the way their male role models lead. Within the traditional leadership literature, the "great man" scholarship offers profiles of charismatic, heroic leaders. In contrast, women's leadership often has been described as collaborative, creating a context that promotes shared meaning-making within a community of practice grappling with issues of equity and diversity. (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, p. 41)

The role of superintendent has evolved into one that closely resembles a traditional Chief Executive Officer. This leadership role has made the position less desirable for the participants in this study. Inherent in the framing of the role in a highly masculinized, glad-handling, White male stereotype, is a discouragement in the messaging to talented female administrators. The message is simply, "you don't belong here." Perhaps, the need for this isolated "top" leadership position is antiquated. There are ways the bulk of the work can be shared by several members of an organizational team that together collegially lead districts. It appears female administrators would be able to contribute to a collective leadership team without having to navigate the barriers they seem to face to the superintendency.

De-Politicize the Role

The most pervasive theme throughout participant responses was the politics associated with the role of the superintendency. Politics had a direct negative impact on

participants' desire for the role of superintendent. Jane pointed out "if you're really not there for kids, you have to manage adults, manage politics, you have to worry about the financing for your district." This work in managing the adults is not the work this participant values. She goes on to say "I like to work. I don't want to be the public facade. That's not my thing. I'm a worker." These sentiments were echoed time and again by participants. These female leaders want to work directly on behalf of children. Participants see the superintendency as a public figure mired in politics and managing people. Again, to make the position more desirable, it may require changing the political nature of the position. This de-politicizing the superintendency may also have added benefit in diminishing the risks involved. The position is such a public one, participants talked about the risks involved in serving a district as superintendent. Many participants worried about risking their reputation in the public discourse that is a foundational piece of the role.

Future Research

The findings of this study point out the need for further research on the desirability and attainability of the superintendency for female leaders to better understand the obstacles facing female administrators. A quantitative research study on the themes would verify statistically these concerns regarding the attainability and the desirability are accurate within this study. Additionally, this same study with males in the pathway would allow researchers to look at the position both within the lens of gender as well as outside the lens of gender. It would be interesting to see how males in the pathway perceive both the attainability and desirability while paying special attention to

the concerns male participants would identify in comparison to this study of female pathway educational administrators. Also, a study of these themes in a pool of currently serving female superintendents would allow researchers to study these themes as obstacles already overcome by females serving in the role. A study of the qualitative stories of female superintendents as they dealt with sponsors and politics along their career labyrinth may help to provide more data regarding the attainability of the position.

Perhaps, most importantly, is the need to further research additional marginalized groups that are, based in number, excluded from the role of superintendent. These marginalized groups may include variances in gender identity, race, religion, LGBTQ community members. As the superintendent role evolves

Conclusion: Internal Factors Versus External Factors

Charol Shakeshaft (1986) stated:

> The reality is that excellence cannot be achieved without equity. Although an equitable system might not be an excellent one, true excellence in education cannot exist without equity. The two are not at odds; rather, they are dependent on each other. (pp. 499-500)

As I think about the compilation of data from this research study of seven qualified participants and their current difficulties in navigating superintendent searches and/or the desirability of the role, I worry about the equity within the institution we have been tasked to improve and uphold. While equity is the goal for of public education and educators, there is failure in equal representation at the top. This research project identified a number of both external and internal factors at play in this failure.

Internal Factors

Ultimately, there are several major internal factors participants still struggle with when it comes to the superintendency. One is the actual job of superintendent. Many participants wondered along the way—do I even want the position? For many the answer was yes and no. Yes, participants want to lead districts and feel they are capable of the challenge. No, participants do not want their work to be entirely mired in politics and managing adults which is primarily the work of the role. Where does this dilemma leave us? Kathy put it this way:

> What one needs to ask themselves is how much do I value the title? At first, I make [minimally] less than my superintendent cause I have been here a really long time. I would make less being a superintendent somewhere else. So, it's not about money. At the end of the day, it is about title. Title is about ego sometimes. But, I guess that is the kind of dialogue that one has to have with one's self.

Participants and any other female leaders considering the position need to consider the politics of the job against the opportunity to lead the district. Female administrators need to understand the work of that position and decide whether or not it is for them. Aileen felt "for those that are truly invested and inspired by the work, I think the superintendency is a disappointment for them. I do know they love the money and . . . it's good for their families." The internal factors seem more relevant to female leaders who potentially may want to pursue a superintendency.

Another internal factor impacting participants' desirability is the belief the job of superintendent is a career risk. Jane talked about the internal dilemma of weighing the potential risks of the position against her own perceptions of the rewards:

> I see [the superintendency] as a huge career risk because of all the things we talked about. Then . . . also huge is the potential for genuine job satisfaction. That's bigger than the second one, that's the main one for me. That's probably why I will never be a superintendent not because I don't think I can get one or I can't do it but I'm of the age that I'm not willing to do it for [less] money . . . It's truly about what would make me feel more satisfied professionally and personally and to feel like I'm working to my mission and purpose. I'm not sure the superintendency aligns with that.

She spoke for many when she wondered about whether or not the superintendency aligned with her personal mission and professional satisfaction. All participants shared varied doubts they had about the ability of the superintendency to provide them professional satisfaction. However, I wonder if the position became more attainable to females and more females served in the position, might the perception of the superintendency evolve. Perhaps, as more females would fill the role, the perception of the superintendency may shift away from one that serves as a political figurehead into the reality of a top leadership position that is directly responsible for serving students. Might more female superintendents in the role create an evolution in the position itself?

Skrla (2003) wrote about several recurrent themes within this research study. Female participants were "silent" on matters of bias identification; they spoke about

"stumbling" onto promotions rather than an ambition to climb the educational administrative ladder. In her essay, Skrla further suggested "women's ambition (or lack thereof) to be superintendents (whether articulated by the women themselves or reified by power voices in the field) is another area of research findings in the study of women in the superintendency that requires reexamination" (p. 257). This research study attempted to reexamine female's ambition by asking participants whether or not they found the position attainable and/or desirable. Participants, in identifying a masculinized version of the superintendency which in their estimation is a highly political position structured toward a business management/CEO model, struggled with their desire for this type of leadership position in the absence of educating children. Furthermore, participants did not necessarily see the position as attainable without the explicit help of male sponsors embedded in the institution itself.

External Factors

The prevalence of bias in our society and in our school districts impede a culture of equity and equal access. Participants experienced these biases and continue to do so. But, this doesn't mean participants are willing to sit on the sidelines while it happens. Participants know they can have an impact. Linda stated:

> If you become a leader, you have the ability to impact further biases. My deal is . . . I empower women leaders here all the time because I am a woman leader . . . that's how you don't perpetuate [the bias] by becoming the person that is in change and not allowing or changing the culture that allowed that bias to exist.

This participant sees the role of the superintendent as a vehicle for promoting change and eliminating bias. Many participants talk about applying and getting the superintendency as a way to encourage other women to pursue the role. These female leaders believe they can do it, even though they may have reservations about the position, and they want to inspire other females in the same pursuit. While they may be encouraged by their ability to inspire, the participants have a reticence about the prevalence of bias in educational administration and leadership. As we parted from the second interview, Donna pointed out:

> All of that racial bias, gender . . . bias all of it is definitely still alive. Some people think we are better off where we have been. But, we are still not there, Nancy, we are still not there.

Post Script

This research work has been a great journey. Without doubt, I have addressed many of my own blindspots along the way and have yet to address others in my journey ahead. There is a humility that comes from being entrusted with the shared experiences of these participants and with my own knowledge that I can only attempt to serve them best by accurately reflecting their own words, stories, and lived experiences as best as I can at this point in my research journey. I have learned a great deal as a scholar and a practitioner in this endeavor. I hope that through this work, I have represented my participants' experiences and perspectives with the truth and respect they deserve.

There is still much to be learned within the topic of educational administration. The scope of this study limited my participants to female gendered identity and the

superintendency, however, there are additional marginalized populations within the system of public education that warrant study and investigation against the backdrop of school leadership. There is more to research in terms of the educational leader's impact and obligation to support social justice and equity work within and outside of the superintendent role. My hope is that this work, while focusing on the role of the superintendency, might serve as one point of data in the need for additional study. As Carolyn Shields (2017) pointed out in her study of transformational school leadership, "it is possible for educational leaders at a system level to balance the technical demands of standards and accountability with concerns for social justice and transformation for the benefit of all" (p. 18). Ultimately, it is incumbent upon leaders in education to promote social justice and combat systemic inequity and biases regardless of the roles they fill within public schools.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

EMAIL SOLICITATION

Appendix A

Email Solicitation

(*Date*)

Re: Ascension to the Superintendency: How Female Administrators Experience the Career Labyrinth

Dear: Participant Name

I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a voluntary research study about the way qualified female candidates perceive the attainability and desirability of the school superintendent position. This study is being conducted by Rosemary Gornik and Nancy Benincasa at Kent State University.

Participation includes an initial face to face interview that will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. Additionally, there will be a short follow-up phone or face to face interview audio recorded for transcription purposes in which participants will react to the emerging themes of the research project.

You are eligible to participate in this research study because you meet the two eligibility criteria of the study:

- *Participants must currently serve in a role considered a part of the traditional pathway to the superintendency (i.e. a high school principal, a central office role)*
- *Participants must identify their gender as female*

If you would be willing to participate in this study, please contact Nancy Benincasa at nbeninca@kent.edu or via phone at (216) 854-0439.

If you would like additional information about this study, please contact us at nbeninca@kent.edu.

Thank you for your consideration, and once again, please do not hesitate to contact us if you are interested in learning more about our project.

Rosemary Gornik
Principal Investigator
Director, Professional Development and Outreach
Educational Leadership K-12
Kent State University

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Appendix B

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Study Title:
Ascension to the Superintendency: How Female Administrators Experience the Career Labyrinth

Principal Investigator: Rosemary Gornik, Ph.D.

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form will provide you with information on the research project, what you will need to do, and the associated risks and benefits of the research. Your participation is voluntary. Please read this form carefully. It is important that you ask questions and fully understand the research in order to make an informed decision. You will receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Purpose
Currently, less than 16% of school superintendents in the state of Ohio are women. While the number is surprising, what is more surprising is that number in light of the fact that 85% of the educational workforce is made up of females. The purpose of this qualitative narrative study will be to examine female educational leaders, qualified for the school superintendency, interest in and perceptions of the superintendent role. Because the public school system seems to in some way prohibit female leaders' attainment of this highest district leadership position, the researcher is interested in hearing participant stories and perceptions of this role and the challenges participants perceive to their ascension to the role.

Procedures
If I volunteer to take part in this study, I will be asked to participate in a one on one, audio recorded interview that may last 2-3 hours about my experiences as a female educational administrator who is qualified to serve as a superintendent. I may end the interview at any point and may decline to answer any questions I do not feel comfortable answering. Breaks will be provided during the interview if needed. Following the interview, I will have the opportunity to read through a transcript of the interview to ensure accuracy in the answers I gave and the content of the interview. Finally, I will be asked to participate in a follow up interview to respond and react to the emerging themes of the research project.

Audio and Video Recording and Photography
The initial interview and the follow up interview will be recorded using audio tape and then transcribed for coding and analysis. The audio tape will be kept in a locked storage space and only used in the transcription process.

Benefits

The potential benefits of participating in this study include the opportunity to have my voice heard as a female K12 educational administrator. The researcher hopes to find themes in the research that will inform the issue of gender inequality in school superintendents in the state of Ohio.

Risks and Discomforts

There are no anticipated risks beyond those encountered in everyday life. However, some of the questions that you will be asked are of a personal nature and may cause you embarrassment or stress. You may ask to see the questions before deciding whether or not to participate in the study.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Your study related information will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. Any identifying information will be kept in a secure location and only the researchers will have access to the data. Research participants will not be identified in any publication or presentation of research results; only aggregate data will be used.

Compensation

There will be no compensation for the interview.

Voluntary Participation

Taking part in this research study is entirely up to you. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Rosemary Gornik at (330) 672-0630. This project has been approved by the Kent State University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330.672.2704.

Consent Statement and Signature

I have read this consent form and have had the opportunity to have my questions answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that a copy of this consent will be provided to me for future reference.

_____ _____

Participant Signature **Date**

I have witnessed the consent process and believe that the participants listed above have been fully informed, understand the project and what they will have to do, and have voluntarily agreed to participate.

APPENDIX C

AUDIOTAPE/VIDEO CONSENT FORM

Appendix C

Audiotape/Video Consent Form

NAME OF STUDY: Ascension to the Superintendency: How Female Administrators Experience the Career Labyrinth

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Rosemary Gornik, Ph.D.
I agree to participate in two audio-taped/video-taped interviews about the attainability and desirability of the school superintendency as part of this project and for the purposes of data analysis. I agree that Nancy Benincasa may audio-tape/video tape this interview. The date, time and place of the interview will be mutually agreed upon.

_____ _____
Signature Date

I have been told that I have the right to listen to the recording of the interview before it is used. I have decided that I:

____want to listen to the recording ____do not want to listen to the recording

Sign now below if you do not want to listen to the recording. If you want to listen to the recording, you will be asked to sign after listening to them.
Rosie Gornik and/or Nancy Benincasa may / may not (circle one) use the audio-tapes/video tapes made of me. The original tapes or copies may be used for:

____this research project _____publication _____presentation at professional meetings

_____ _____
Signature Date

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: INITIAL INTERVIEW

Appendix D

Interview Protocol: Initial Interview

This interview will focus on the participants' perceptions of the attainability and desirability of the superintendency. Further, the study seeks to understand how female administrators experience leadership in a highly masculinized career pathway.

If you are comfortable with the purpose of the study, I will ask you to sign a copy of the informed consent form before we begin. There is not a set time limit to the interview but I intend to respect your time and willingness to participate. Feel free to ask any questions you have as we continue. Do you have any questions before we begin? Are you ready?
Collect Basic Interview Information:

Time/Date/Location:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Length of Interview:
Interview File Title :

Interview Content Questions (with probes)

Tell me about your professional background? What led you into administration?

To what extent do you feel that you have been prepared to be a superintendent?

What personal experiences do you deem essential in becoming a superintendent?

What do you believe to be the most challenging aspects of becoming a superintendent?

The Career Labyrinth

To what extent have you encountered any career obstacles throughout your career and how did you navigate this/these challenges?

The Silence of the Female Leader

To what extent have you experienced/observed a situation where there seemed to exist gender bias in some way . . . a parent meeting, a conversation with a colleague, conversations between colleagues, etc.? How did you respond to this situation?

To what extent have you observed a dominance of the male perspective or a situation where the males in the room seemed to dominate either the conversation or the power . . . in a meeting, at a conference, in a professional development class, etc.? Can you describe that situation?

Patriarchy and Women as "The Other"

Describe any experience(s) where you felt like an outsider based on the fact that you are a female? At work, at home?

High Achievers and Stereotype Threat

Describe a typical public school superintendent. What is the stereotype of a school superintendent? Does this stereotype impact your desire to become a superintendent? How might your ascension to the superintendency impact the stereotype you described?

To what extent, if any, do you feel "extra pressure" to perform because you are a female? What did that look like, feel like, etc.? Tell me more about that.

To what extent have you ever felt worried, afraid or concerned with failure in your leadership position? Tell me how you perceive failure as it relates to your career? Share how you have failed along the way? If so, how did you respond? How do you feel about the failure in retrospect? To what extent have you been afraid of failure as you have pursued this career path? Describe how failure may or may not play a role in your plans or hopes for future promotion?

Family Gender Roles

Describe your family situation throughout your career promotions in K-12 education.

School Culture and Leadership

To what extent have you experienced implicit or explicit messages sent to women leaders discouraging them from pursuing a superintendency?

Share any experiences you have experienced with bias in serving as a building or district leader? Do you know of others that have experienced bias? How did you react when you saw/experienced bias in the workplace?

To what extent have you ever considered applying for a superintendency. Can you share your hesitation or concerns in applying for that position? Tell me more, I need more detail.

Closing Instructions:

- Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this interview. This interview will remain confidential.
- Would you mind if I would follow up with you later on if I find a need to clarify any points from today's interview?
- I will contact you once again to look at the emerging themes and ask you some follow up questions. Would that be okay?

Interview Protocol: Follow-up Interview

This interview will focus on the participants' reactions to the coded themes that were identified from the initial participant interviews.

If you are comfortable with the purpose of this secondary interview, I ask you to read (or listen to me read) the coded themes as identified from the initial participant interviews. There is not a set time limit to the interview but I intend to respect your time and willingness to participate. Feel free to ask any questions you have as we continue. Do you have any questions before we begin? Are you ready?

Collect Basic Interview Information:

Time/Date/Location:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Length of Interview:
Interview File Title :

Interview Content Questions (with potential probes)

First, since our initial interview, please share any follow-up thoughts, reactions, recollections or feedback you may have or have had since we last sat down.

I am going to read to you a list of emerging themes that I have developed from related patterns in the first round interviews. I would like for you to be able to respond to this emerging themes and give me feedback related to each theme.

> Theme #1: Attainability: Descriptions of "the role of superintendent" included "highly white, male, political (glad-handling, baby-kissing), exclusive membership and difficult to attain. Do these seem accurate to you? How do these attributes/characterizations impact or influence your desire to be a superintendent? How do these attributes/characterizations impact or influence your belied in the attainability of the role?
>
> Theme #2: Mentors: Do you perceive the superintendency as an attainable position for women without proper mentors?
>
> Theme #3: Pressure to Perform/Fear of Failure: Participants talked about a very real pressure to perform. Failure is a constant worry/concern. How do you perceive this pressure in regard to your position and work? How do you perceive the fear of failure against the backdrop of your work?
>
> Theme #4: Navigating Obstacles: What do you perceive as the biggest obstacle to your attainment of the superintendency?
>
> Theme #5: Silence/Bias: Participants have consistently identified instances of bias either explicit or implicit in being female in a highly male profession throughout interviews. However, all participants, when asked to directly identify instances of gender bias they have either witnessed or experiences, have not been able to answer this question. Participants either answered with extended silence, some simply answered that they couldn't think of any. Why do you think participants struggled with answering this particular question?

Now that you have read over (or listened to) the initial themes as coded from the primary participant interviews, please share your initial reaction to these data themes.

Share how you relate or don't relate to the emerging data themes.

Describe any particular experiences you have had that are pertinent or connected to any of these themes.

Explain what seems to be missing from these themes.

Closing Instructions:

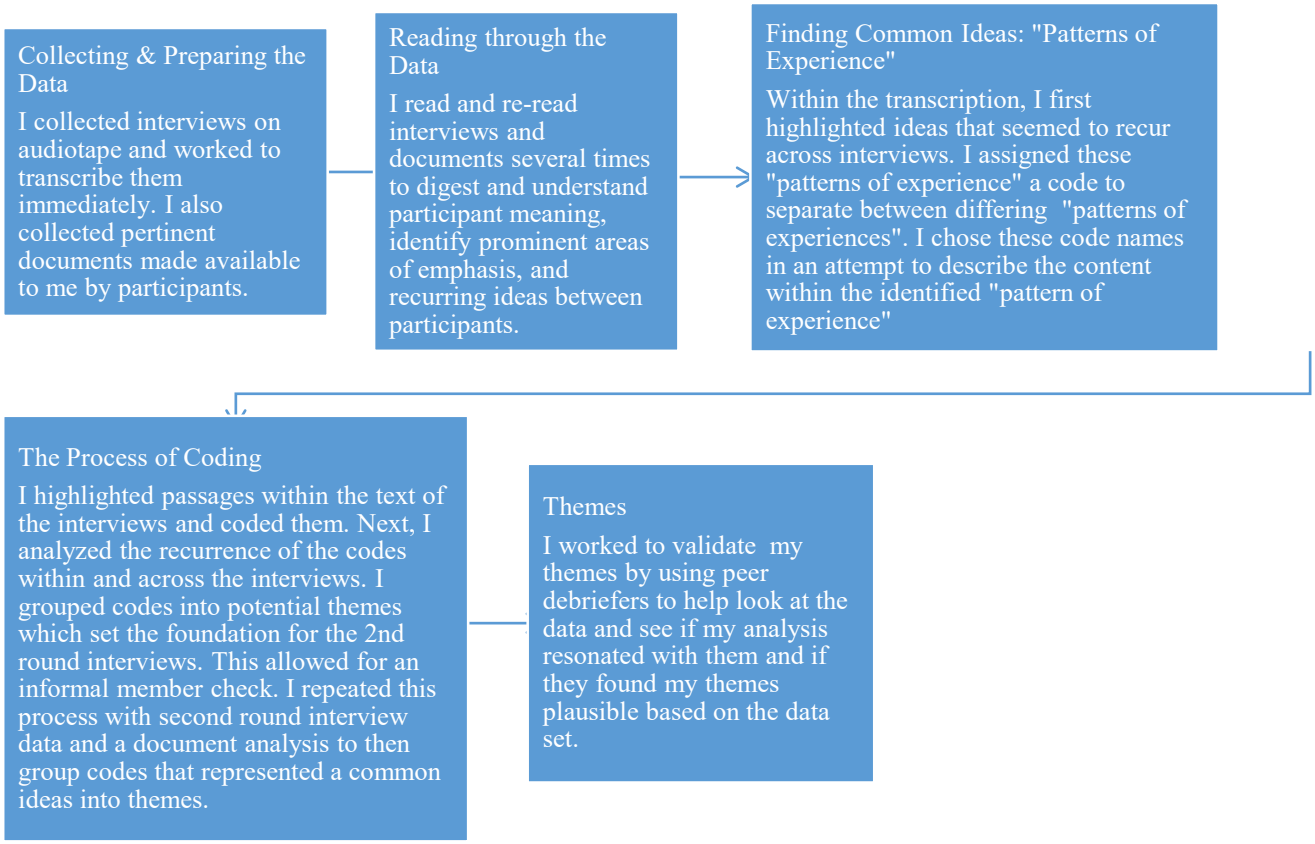
- Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this follow-up interview. This interview will remain confidential.
- Would you mind if I would follow up with you later on if I find a need to clarify any points from today's interview?
- Again, thank you so much for your time and willingness to participate in this process.

APPENDIX E

THE PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Appendix E

The Process of the Data Collection and Analysis



APPENDIX F

IDENTIFIED CODE PREVALENCE

Appendix F

Identified Code Prevalence

	2 Attainability	2 Being a Female	2 Bias	2 Career Pathway	2 Conditioned to Want Less	2 Consideration of the Role	2 Desir-ability of the Superintendency	2 Didn't Consider the Job Viable	2 Discouragement	2 Double Standard	2 Family Impact	2 Fear
September 24 Round 2.docx	0	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0
September 20 Round 2 .docx	2	1	2	4	1	0	2	1	1	0	0	1
September 19 Round 2.docx	2	0	1	2	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	1
September 11 Round 2.docx	2	4	4	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	1	0
May 6 interview.docx	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
May 31 interview .docx	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
May 22 Interview.docx	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
May 2 Interview.docx	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
May 10 Interview.docx	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
June 19 Interview .docx	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
August 29 Round 2.docx	0	0	5	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1
August 22nd Round 2.docx	2	0	2	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	3	0
August 17 Round 2.docx	5	0	5	3	2	4	1	3	2	3	1	2
April 30 Interview 1.docx	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	13	6	21	13	4	5	13	5	4	3	7	5

2 Females in the Role	2 Issues of Being Female	2 Mentoring	2 Mystique of the Superintendency	2 Politics	2 Pressure to Perform	2 Silence	2 Superintendent Stereotype	2 The Bitch Factor	Barriers to the Pathway/Superintendent Position	Others/Supervisors Not Seeing You in that Role	Desire for the Superintendency	Embarrassment in Not Getting Position	Experiencing Bias	Inequity in Pay or Treatment
0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	1	4	0	3	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	4	2	4
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	3	1	5	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	4	1	4	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	9	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	2	0	0	5	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	3	2	11	0
0	0	2	0	2	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	0	4	2	3	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	0	4	9	3
3	1	14	2	13	3	2	2	5	18	17	10	12	45	7

Experiencing Isolation	Fear of Failure	Female Supporters	Gender Stereotypes How Women Should Behave	Difficult Women	Fragile Treatment of Women	Perceptions of Females	Male Dominance/Culture	Mentoring	Navigating Obstacles	Not Seeing Yourself in That Role	Observing Gender Harassment or Bullying Behavior	Others Seeing You As Viable Candidate	Readiness for the Superintendency	Silence as a Choice
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	0	1	4	1	0	2	5	9	1	0	0	2	3	0
2	2	0	1	0	0	1	4	3	5	3	1	6	6	4
0	3	0	1	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	1	3	1
3	2	0	3	2	0	0	6	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
3	2	0	1	2	0	2	1	14	1	0	0	0	3	0
3	3	0	3	0	0	1	1	6	9	0	1	2	1	1
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	3	0	1	0	1	0	1	11	0	4	4	1	0	5
14	15	1	14	5	1	7	19	46	16	7	6	12	16	12

Struggle to Identify Examples of Bias/Obstacles	Struggling with Politics	The Pathway to the Superintendency	The Role of Superintendent	Superintendent Traits	The Superintendency is a Membership	Work/Life Balance	Working Harder/Feeling Extra Pressure	Totals
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	18
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	14
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25
6	3	8	3	5	6	7	2	81
5	7	0	2	2	6	2	6	83
0	2	0	0	2	0	1	6	38
1	0	1	0	1	1	3	2	37
3	2	3	0	1	1	0	6	61
1	0	3	0	3	4	3	6	71
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	17
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	45
1	2	4	4	4	0	0	4	74
17	16	19	9	18	18	16	32	0

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