

MIAMI UNIVERSITY
The Graduate School

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

UNCHARTED TERRITORY: THE PROFESSIONAL, GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by

Erica L. M. O’Keeffe

Since the beginning of American education in the U.S., women often have been left out of educational prosperity. First, by excluding females from learning and working, and later by disregarding their capacity for educational leadership. The superintendency of American Schools is perplexing because women dominate the field of teaching whereas men hold the majority of superintendent roles. Although we are in the modern world of the twenty-first century, where women have gained the *legal* right to *equality*, gender discrimination exists. A great body of literature exists regarding female superintendents; however, there is a significant gap concerning female rural superintendents.

Six female superintendents from rural school districts were invited to participate in this research study. Their stories paint unique portraits of their professional, gendered experiences as rural female superintendents. The purpose of this research study was to explore women’s experiences in the rural superintendency, add female voice to history, and illuminate the prevalence of the feminine social injustice, often silenced by society’s perception of the American superintendent.

Each female rural superintendent’s story was unique and intertwined with intersections of gender, leadership, and rurality. Through this narrative inquiry five common themes emerged: 1) The District Must be the Right *Fit*; 2) Other Women (Female Saboteurs); 3) The *Good Old Boys’ Club*; 4) Loneliness; and 5) An Ethical Fighting Spirit of Determination, Grit, and Resilience. This research found that there are several challenges due to one’s gender and those are amplified in the rural setting where a superintendent must wear several hats, manage a lack of resources, and survive the unique value system and culture established by each rural community.

This study revealed that gender discrimination endures in the twenty-first century for female rural superintendents by both men and women, stemming from historical societal perceptions of the female role. As women’s stories are told, national and state organizations, school systems, and universities can support females who aspire to becoming educational leaders. By revealing the *hidden* voice of female rural superintendents, each individual in society may recognize their own discriminatory perceptions and exploits in order to enact change towards a brighter world of equity in educational leadership.

UNCHARTED TERRITORY: THE PROFESSIONAL, GENDERED EXPERIENCES
OF FEMALE RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
Miami University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Department of Educational Leadership

by

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The Graduate School
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio

2020

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2020

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	1
INTRODUCTION	1
PURPOSE STATEMENT	7
GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	8
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	9
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	10
PERSONAL RATIONALE AND ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER	14
DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS	15
DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	17
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	18
ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY	18
CHAPTER 2	19
HISTORY OF FEMALES IN EDUCATION.....	20
POLITICS AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS’ IMPACT ON FEMALES IN EDUCATION.	33
BARRIERS FOR FEMALES IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP	36
AMERICAN RURAL COMMUNITIES	43
AMERICAN RURAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS.....	46
RURAL SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION AND THE SUPERINTENDENCY	52
SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS	55
CHAPTER 3	57
RESEARCH DESIGN - QUALITATIVE STUDY	58
<i>Constructivist Worldview</i>	59
<i>Narrative Inquiry</i>	60
RESEARCH QUESTION	61
RESEARCH SETTING AND SAMPLE POPULATION	62
INSTRUMENTATION	63
DATA ANALYSIS	65
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS	67
MILLY	68
<i>Milly’s Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency</i>	68
<i>Milly’s Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent</i>	71
<i>Vignettes</i>	73
<i>Milly’s advice to future female rural superintendents</i>	75
RUTH	76
<i>Ruth’s Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency</i>	76
<i>Ruth’s Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent</i>	78
<i>Vignettes</i>	81
<i>Ruth’s advice to future female rural superintendents</i>	82
SARAH	83
<i>Sarah’s Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency</i>	83
<i>Sarah’s Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent</i>	86
<i>Vignettes</i>	96

<i>Sarah’s advice to future female rural superintendents</i>	97
ALICE.....	97
<i>Alice’s Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency</i>	97
<i>Alice’s Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent</i>	102
<i>Vignettes</i>	110
<i>Alice’s advice to future female rural superintendents</i>	112
LIZA.....	113
<i>Liza’s Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency</i>	113
<i>Liza’s Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent</i>	116
<i>Vignettes</i>	120
<i>Liza’s advice to future female rural superintendents</i>	121
MARTHA	123
<i>Martha’s Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency</i>	123
<i>Martha’s Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent</i>	125
<i>Vignettes</i>	129
<i>Martha’s advice to future female rural superintendents</i>	129
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS.....	130
CHAPTER 5.....	133
EMERGENT THEMES	133
<i>Theme 1: The District Must be the Right Fit</i>	133
<i>Theme 2: Other Women (Female Saboteurs)</i>	136
<i>Theme 3: The Good Old Boys’ Club</i>	140
<i>Theme 4: Loneliness</i>	150
<i>Theme 5: An Ethical Fighting Spirit of Determination, Grit, and Resilience</i>	153
SUMMARY OF EMERGENT THEMES	157
UNANTICIPATED FINDINGS	158
LIMITATIONS.....	159
CONCLUSIONS.....	160
RECOMMENDATIONS	161
REFERENCES.....	163
APPENDICES.....	171
APPENDIX A.....	171
APPENDIX B.....	172

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 O’Keeffe Visual Representation of the Literature Review and Main Components of this Research Study.....	20
Figure 2 – O’Keeffe Visual Representation of Background Commonalities Among Six Female Rural Superintendents from this Research Study.....	130
Figure 3 – O’Keeffe Visual Representation of the Common Female Rural Superintendents’ Professional Gendered Experiences of this Research Study.....	157

DEDICATION

I dedicate this doctoral study to my precious family and specifically to my husband, Joseph O’Keeffe. Joe, thank you for encouraging me and being my pillar throughout this journey. I could not have made it without you, your love, patience, and your guidance. You stepped up for our family, thank you, my love; we have withstood the storms of life and we are better for them.

And to our beautiful children – I love you. Perseverance, this is what it takes, to never quit or give up! Remember, the miracle is right around the corner. Each and every one of you are our miracle, an answer to our prayers and we are more than blessed to call you our sons and daughters: Jordan (soon to be Hunter), Carson, Liliana, Aubrey Jane, and Ellianna. I love you – go grab your dreams, always know how much you are loved; we believe in each of you. Be brave, stand strong, take on this world and when you fall, pick yourself up, brush it off and always move forward. We are The O’Keeffe’s (Optimistic; Kind; Ethical Educated; Faithful; Fearless: and Encouraging)!

Thank you to my Mom, Vicki, and Dad, Greg, for giving life to my aspirations and instilling in me a spirit of determination to achieve my educational dreams. I love you both so much! You have taught me to do what is right, fight the good fight and to be me – loving, kind, and courageously fierce.

Most importantly, without the divine intervention of my Lord, God Almighty, I would not have had my prayers answered or finished this doctorate. During this doctoral journey, you brought us, our five children, an answer to a fourteen-year-old prayer. God, you answered the desires of my heart - not in the way I ever imagined, instead you answered them better than I could have dreamt - and somehow helped me complete this doctorate.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” Joshua 1:9

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my amazing committee who has stood by me throughout this entire doctoral process inspiring me, believing in me, and encouraging me to keep going. Thank you, Dr. Lucian Szlizewski, who has believed in me from the beginning and inspired me to pursue my doctorate in education. Thank you for being there for all of us, answering at a moment's notice and guiding us with your wisdom and optimism. You have truly dedicated yourself to future educational leaders. To Dr. Kate Rousmaniere who gave me a passion for history and feminist theory. Thank you for pushing me to do and be my best. With your approval, I believe I can say that I have done well. To Dr. Sheri Leafgren, thank you for your suggestions that have added depth to my dissertation, kept me on track, and your enthusiasm for my work. Dr. Lucian Szlizewski, Dr. Kate Rousmaniere, and Dr. Sheri Leafgren, thank you for your support - you have given me great strength. And, thank you to all of the educators in my life who have taught me and shown me the educational pathway.

Thank you to Sally Henrick, for giving me the capability to follow my dreams and encourage me throughout my journey as a rural female principal. Thank you for all of your understanding, compassion, and drive. You are an incredible mentor and a fearless leader who demonstrates a true love for our school community. To all of my school colleagues and community members – thank you for being on this life-long learning journey with me, whether you knew it or not; you have motivated me, taught me, and helped me grow in ways I never knew possible.

I could not have done this without my cohort and countless hours of support from all of you, thank you! I appreciate all of the patience and love that I have been afforded from my family members (Mom, Dad, Shane, Laura, Joe, Lilly, Aubrey Jane, Ellianna, Jordan, and Carson). A special thank you to Mom and Dad O'Keeffe for sending me coffee to help me through the middle-of-the night and early-morning hours spent on this doctorate, and your love too, of course.

To my beloved grandmothers, Georgia Lee Hunter and Mary Francis Mitchell. You encourage me from afar; you lift my spirit; and you bring me joy from all of the cherished memories I carry in my heart. You were models of intelligent, independent, beautiful women

and proved to me that we can break all societal norms. I love you – thank you for believing in me.

Finally, I want to thank the most incredible women who have allowed me to see a window into their hearts and souls as they have shared with us their professional gendered experiences as rural female superintendents, which are indeed, extremely personal encounters. Without your willingness to participate, this study would not have been possible. I stand in awe of your power, passion, and leadership – I hope to one day be an inspiration to other women as you have been to me. Thank you for your life’s work, for paving the way for aspiring female educational leaders.

Chapter 1

We are 'knocking on the old weathered door' of the position of the superintendency. We desire a window of opportunity for women like ourselves—women who have dared to dream differently.

(Brunner, 1999, p. 7)

Introduction

Through personal experience, my research, and my conversations with other female leaders I have found that, often, women are frequently excluded from important communications and decisions, continue to have lower salaries than their male colleagues, and are subsequently withheld credit for their ideas and work. Unfortunately, these barriers for women in education remain, especially for females in rural educational leadership roles. In general, female educational leaders continue to endure discrimination and inequity in the twenty-first century concerning professional treatment, advancement, and salary in comparison to their male counterparts. Rural communities, where there has been a history of turmoil, poverty, transience, conservative gender roles and small-town politics, often make it all the more difficult for female educational leaders to be taken seriously (Sherman, 2000; Lavalley, 2018; Theobald, 1993). The purpose of this research was to add women's voice to history, representing the authentic experiences of female superintendents in rural communities.

As a woman of educational leadership for eighteen years, I have found myself in various professional situations that made me wonder if I were crazy, insufficient, abnormal, or just not cut out for the business of teaching and administration. How could I think this with the talent of speaking a second language fluently, finishing several master degrees and achieving great awards during my career? Why have I suffered from thinking and feeling “not good enough” when my actions have proven otherwise? I believe, that I have truly experienced professional, gendered occurrences throughout my career by both men and women. However, my research demonstrated to me that I am not alone; there is a long history of American societal perceptions of gender and mistreatment of women in education. Prior to narrowing my research to female rural superintendents, I accepted a principalship in a rural school district. This position opened my eyes to a unique culture often making it twice as difficult to lead being female.

An extensive amount of research has been completed regarding female barriers in educational leadership, but without a rural context. Due to this gap in the research of female rural superintendents, I chose the following research question: What are the professional, gendered experiences of female rural superintendents in the twenty-first century?

The lack of female voice and point of view, the masculine societal perceptions that entrap women, and the social injustices of intersectionality supported a conceptual framework rooted in feminist standpoint and intersectionality theories (Kiguwa (2019)).

In my efforts to answer this question, I felt it necessary to add female voice to the realm of educational history from a feminist perspective and bring light to the inequity that continues to exist in the twenty-first century for females leading rural school districts. This is a qualitative study that interviewed six female rural superintendents who completed their superintendency during the twenty-first century. Semi-structured interviews, vignettes, and each female superintendent with their individual feminist standpoint were the qualitative research methods employed for this research study. My research revealed five common themes for rural female superintendents:

- 1) The District Must be the Right *Fit*
- 2) Other Women (Female Saboteurs)
- 3) The *Good Old Boys' Club*
- 4) Loneliness
- 5) An Ethical Fighting Spirit of Determination, Grit, and Resilience

These themes will be explored in Chapter 5.

Sherman (2000) declared that barriers are amplified by the rural setting for female rural superintendents. Theobald (1993) commented on how rural schools are often dominated by the male voice from well-established local families. These men reinforce the local values and ideals of the community (Theobald, 1993). Thus, strengthening the glass ceiling and increasing the challenge for females to lead rural school districts.

The patriarchal, traditional family gender roles, where the man worked to provide for his family and the woman's job was her household, prevailed in agricultural communities. For example, land was only passed on to male heirs, women were dissuaded from having a voice, and school curriculum left females out of the picture unless they were depicted as *good housewives and mothers*. History portrayed this story through a primary source, *The Great Rural*

Education Conference of 1917. Considering girls and curriculum it was said that, “the girls have done well with their club work, and in the arranging of the course of study...” (p. 461). Whereas boys visited the city in order to see professions other than farming to aspire to become more than mere agrarian inhabitants.

It was the view of the County Superintendent H.C. Krebs, New Jersey, that schoolboys from the country ought to be taken to the city and town to see the courts and other professional occupations. He had found that boys that leave the farm amount to more. (J. A. S., 1917, p. 461)

This indicated an unfair social intersection of females, implicitly left out of the academic and professional realm, as well as an implication that rural life was a lesser activity than *professional* city life. In this 1917 conference report, females were mentioned as wives and ignorant mothers which provided a negative and derogatory societal view of rural females, *the farmer and his wife* and “a vigorous rural campaign of education conducted by experts who know how to reach the ignorant mother as an aid to baby saving” (J. A. S., 1917, p 461). Moreover, male characteristics were admired, “there is no longer any ruffianism, but manliness and courage of the right kind are shown” (J. A. S., 1917, p. 461). Although, this demonstrated the manliness of men as courageous it also downplayed rural society as uncultured which exhibited an undertone of discrimination towards females and ruralness.

Historically, women were paid much less than men for any job, especially as educators (Theobald, 1993). For example, in Clark County, a small rural district of Illinois, “over the 17-year period (1862-1879), the average monthly salary for male teachers was \$33. Female teachers over the same years averaged \$17 per month” (Theobald, 1993, p. 123). Unfortunately, this trend of females earning less than men has not changed drastically in the twenty-first century.

Additionally, women in educational leadership have encountered role expectations and responsibilities that differ from their male peers. A study comparing rural female administrators in communities of Texas to similar ones in Saskatchewan uncovered that women in Texas felt several inequities in comparison to their male administrators.

Many of the Texas respondents relayed instances of inequitable treatment that they believed were due more to their sex than to their abilities. These included being granted more administrative tasks than men, being held accountable for paperwork when male administrators were not reprimanded for their refusal to complete it, and being

deliberately excluded from discussions with male colleagues until “the guys really need something, especially knowledge about something.” Other responses included: (a) the provision of secretaries to male administrators only; (b) male colleagues taking credit for their work; (c) being told they could not accept phone calls from their husbands while at work; (d) male teachers or school board members refusing to “answer to a woman”; and (e) unequal salaries of male and female administrators. (Wallin, 2005b, p.145)

With this inequity existing in the twenty-first century, female superintendents are far and few between and face tremendous challenges in rural communities. Throughout the nation, the majority of top school district positions (e.g., superintendents) are held by men even though education is a profession dominated by women. This is not to say that this inequity transpires overtly or even maliciously; however, there is sufficient research that exhibits that females are treated differently by both men and women. I believe these injustices are partially due to historical and societal norms. My belief is supported by Montgomery (2019):

Gender systems are deeply entrenched in our societal hierarchy and leadership, based on gender stereotypes, contain status beliefs that give men more status than women in their worthiness and competence in leadership (C. L. Ridgeway, 2001). Specifically, being masculine is aligned with being a competent leader (Madden, 2011), while demonstrating feminine qualities such as caring and collaboration are not always representative of what people perceive as skills of leadership. (Montgomery, 2019, p. 11)

Furthermore, females are depicted as more emotional than men and less likely to be aggressive, decision makers. However, when women act outside of the societal perception of warm, kind, motherly, and collaborative they receive backlash; even though the business of educational leadership frequently requires such decisive, direct action (Brescoll, 2016). If women demonstrate masculine qualities as society defines them, then women are perceived as one of the three *B*'s (Bossy, Butch, or Bitchy).

Women who do attain superintendencies and attempt to conform to its social constructions find themselves in a no-win situation. If they are perceived as caring and collaborative, they are deemed not tough enough for the job; if they *act tough*, they are perceived to have betrayed their socially constructed gender roles and are, therefore, unheeded or labeled as *bitches* (Bell, 1995; Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Tallerico, 1999). (Wallin & Crippen, 2007, p. 22)

Thus, complicating the road of achieving and retaining leadership positions in the educational realm of the superintendency for women. Sachs and Blackmore (1999) claimed female administrators learned to control their emotions in order to prevent adverse community perception. In this study women were governed by implicit guidelines that they covertly acquired as young teachers; emotions were considered to be weak and instable. This was an example of how society taught women how to act, be perceived, and lead... without emotion, like men.

According to Wallin (2005b) *The Good Old Boys Club* was alive and well in small, rural Texan communities. Female administrators recognized they had to *play the game* in order to have success, survive, and improve their schools. One female ascertained how she had to protect men's egos by finding ways to connect with them and ensure to never sound arrogant. Her board members in her rural community were mainly white men who only had high school degrees whereas she was working on her doctorate (Wallin, 2005b).

Overall in rural communities, most residents do not have high levels of education, live in impoverished states, and believe women's place is in the home without a public voice. Yet, these female administrators arrive with high levels of collegiate degrees, make more than many of the local men, and are in positions of authority. Beekley (1999) confirmed:

Even service organizations such as the Rotary Club and Kiwanis have only recently admitted women; many golf clubs still limit playing times for women. For those women who do aspire to leadership, entrance continues to be a challenge. Women have to be asked to dance, and the dance is still male dominated and controlled. (p.163)

Although rural towns are unique from town to town, a commonality among them is that the schools have served as the center of the community and are the town's largest employer (Schafft, 2009; & Tekniepe, 2015); hence, I conclude, the female superintendent serves in a capacity similar to that of a mayor. These distinct set of circumstances pave the way for women as administrators, particularly female superintendents, to more likely be resisted by both men and women of the town. Moreover, several research studies depict the inequity among female and male educational leaders. For example, Fugler (2016) remarked:

Women account for more than 70% of last year's valedictorians. They're at the top of their class, but that appears to be where they stay. More than three-quarters of public-

school teachers are female while only 30% of educational administrators are. Put simply, women are doing the work while men are making the decisions. (Fugler, 2016, para.1)

According to Brenneman (2016), Michelle King, the first female superintendent since 1929 for Los Angeles Unified School District, defined the importance of women in educational leadership by claiming the necessity of female representation in the superintendency so that both women and society can conceptualize female's capabilities for leading the helm of a school district. According to Montgomery (2019) students and teachers alike are not exposed to much female leadership and that men are "40 times more likely to advance to the superintendency than women (Skrla, 2000)" (p. 20).

Moreover, Brenneman (2016) provided data from the National Center for Education Statistics and the School Superintendents Association that a mere 50% of females are principals while 75% of females are teachers and that only 25% of women are district leaders. Typically, rural communities prefer to hire men over women unless they are concerned with gender equity which is uncommon (Wallin, 2005b).

Many of the Texas respondents and some of the Saskatchewan respondents indicated that they had been interviewed in situations where they were the only short-listed woman and that they had felt that their presence was the equivalent of tokenism. A final commonly mentioned hiring/selection factor was that women remained at a disadvantage for certain positions, particularly the high school principalship, because of stereotypical notions about the nature of discipline, physical stature, and/or women and athletics. (Wallin, 2005b, p. 144).

Interestingly, female administrators do not only suffer from *The Good Old Boy* mentality or socially unjust male attitudes. "Historical accounts and current research reveal that woman-to-woman betrayal and sabotage covertly coexist alongside collaboration and mentorship. Reports of career sabotage by trusted mentors and confidants present a dismal contrast to reports of women's collaboration" (Brock, 2008, p. 211). Rural female administrators noted the injustices and bitter betrayal experienced by other women. For example, Wallin's study of female rural administrators of Texas revealed the unsupportive nature of other females. "As one woman said, 'women do not support each other. The issue of 'jealousy' for lack of a better word, is hindering career development'" (Wallin, 2005a, p. 36). If female superintendents and administrators cannot trust fellow females and do not have the desire to play *The Good Old Boy* game, how can they

survive the position of the rural superintendency let alone lead a rural school district to increased social justice and improved academics?

Three Texas administrators and four Saskatchewan administrators spoke of resistance they felt from other women. As one woman stated, “Women do not support each other. The issue of ‘jealousy,’ for lack of a better word, is hindering career development. Women are socialized to ‘compete’ with other women—men are socialized as ‘team players.’” As well, a number of Texas and Saskatchewan administrators had replaced unsuccessful female administrators and thus lived with the stress of being a symbol of competence for the entire sex. In the end, most of these women believed they had to work harder and smarter to prove themselves worthy of an administrative position. Some women alluded to a sense of betrayal when all their hard work in the community seemed not to be recognized. (Wallin, 2005b, p. 145)

The barriers exemplified for women by society for becoming and sustaining a superintendency are augmented in the rural setting. Montgomery (2019) contended, “Although gains in the area of principals and district offices have been made by women, the glass ceiling remains intact and is reflected in how few rise beyond the glass barrier to the position of superintendent (Kelsey, Allen, Coke, & Ballard, 2014)” (p. 14).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research was to add women’s voice to history, representing the authentic experiences of female superintendents in rural communities. The research regarding rural communities is minimal and studies about female rural superintendents has been scarce. Since rural communities operate differently than do urban and suburban school districts, it has been vital to reveal the experiences specific to females in the top leadership positions in rural communities.

Moreover, there is a unique intersectionality existing between women and rurality that is understudied, expressly in the area of educational leadership. According to Pini, Moletsane, and Mills (2014) “... due to the complexity of research beyond the urban, feminists studying education have regularly considered the intersections among gender and other taxonomies of identity such as sexuality, class and race, but have rarely included rurality” (p. 454). Although there has been a subtle increase in the number of women in the superintendency, men continue to

control this profession. Wallace (2014) claimed the importance for future generations to have the opportunity to enter the job force with equity, especially in the realm of education because the increase in female superintendents is slower than anticipated for the 21st century (Wallace, 2014). Thus, Wallace (2014) declared the need for further research regarding female superintendents in order to tip the scale.

Guiding Research Questions

Research regarding female superintendents demonstrated to me the that disparity of female leadership in education requires further investigation. The literature begins to define the barriers for females and depicts the disproportionate numbers of female versus male superintendents. Additionally, “work on female principals in rural schools has demonstrated that their roles are highly circumscribed by dominant ideologically charged versions of rurality which emphasize traditional gender scripts...” (Pini et al., 2014, p. 455). I determine that if the literature depicts the influx of gender issues for female rural principals, inequity based on gender must exist for female rural superintendents. These untold experiences of female rural superintendents are mostly absent in the past and present. Most research has focused on suburban and urban school districts because they are visible and heavily populated. According to Palladino, Grady, Haar, and Perry (2016):

Discussions about the specific characteristics of rural superintendents and the challenges they face are underdeveloped... an additional slant indicates male superintendents have had a greater voice in the literature than women. Grogan (2000) summarized the justifications in the literature about this gender bias as (a) lack of a women’s historical presence in the superintendency necessary for research pursuits and (b) the belief of certain members within the academy that no such paucity exists. (Palladino et al., 2016, p. 42).

Although, rural districts are often linked to urban districts, they have their own, unique set of issues. These challenges create an entirely different need, way of life and school community to be navigated by educational leaders which is left for exploration, expressly from the female perspective.

Earlier statistics from 1994 suggested that rural school boards are more likely to appoint male superintendents which raises the question, if a female is selected for a rural

superintendency, is it due to the lack of male applicants or because she is the best and most qualified candidate? Or is there another underlying reason that has to do with neither consideration? “School boards that appoint female superintendents are more likely to govern in urban or suburban districts (60%), whereas school boards that appoint male superintendents are more likely to govern in rural districts (70%)” (Marietti & Stout, 1994, p. 376). Furthermore, Marietti and Stout (1994) found the school boards who hired females had more board members with collegiate degrees than the boards that hired men which coincides with the findings that rural people do not acquire higher education post high school. Nevertheless, other research mentions that historically, women spend part of their superintendency employed by a rural district even though, these communities often contain traditional, societal viewpoints. Potentially, even when women are hired by a rural school district, it may be for reasons other than being the board’s first choice for the job. This too supports the distinct barriers faced by women who aspire to the female rural superintendency and makes this research all the more alluring and necessary. My guiding research question for this study was:

- What are the professional, gendered experiences of female rural superintendents in the twenty-first century?

Significance of the Study

Due to the absence of research concerning rural school districts and the female superintendent, my study attempts to add additional insights to history. My study of female rural superintendents, past and present, unveiled unique challenges, successes, weaknesses and strengths of female superintendents through their personal stories. The main objective of my research was to learn about each rural superintendent’s professional journey leading to the superintendency and her journey as a rural superintendent. I feel that the findings of my study revealed components of history that had not been documented. In addition, it is my hope that my research will afford advice to aspiring rural female superintendents. Moreover, as we sit in the twenty-first century, with equality and women’s rights movements having already taken place, it has been difficult for me to believe that female discrimination has remained, specifically in education.

It is my hope that my study divulges some of the discrimination perpetrated on some females in rural communities; however, in contrast I hope that it also unveils female successes

and perseverance in rural communities despite gender differences. The stories communicated to me were unique to each female leader in very different rural community settings. Most importantly, it is also my hope that my study supports feminist theoretical frameworks and ideals. The history of education has told a story mainly from the viewpoint of the dominant masculine culture and I hope to correct some of that deficiency through a feminine perspective.

Conversely, this study has uncovered a missing female voice, no longer hidden, from six very powerful female rural leaders. I feel that my research can be a call for society to take a look inward on how women continue to be perceived as educational leaders. The necessity for change towards equity for women in educational administration continues, as shown through this study. It is of the utmost significance for females to visualize the presence of the woman superintendent so that she may believe in herself and realize that educational leadership is attainable. Therefore, this research has added female voice to history, provided insight and inspiration to aspiring female leaders, and added to the body of feminist theory and frameworks.

Conceptual Framework

Feminist thought is comprised of several different suffragette theories. Within feminism there are various ideals and perspectives for achieving female social justice. Blackmore (1999) mentioned the majority of these feminist theories (as cited in Tong, 1989), including: “socialist, liberal, radical, cultural, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and black eco-feminism” (Blackmore, 1999, p. 50). Ultimately, feminism seeks to highlight the underrepresentation of female voice and perspective in society, historically, politically and epistemologically to usher social change towards equity (Kiguwa, 2019). Due to the presumed deficiency of female voice in history and the rural female superintendency, it was crucial to analyze the retelling of personal, and professional female experiences through the lens of feminism. According to Pini et al. (2014) it is imperative to study the rurality of the educational system through a feminist lens.

In our desire to champion feminist rural studies of education we also used this introduction to argue that rural spaces, the practices and norms of these spaces and the identities constituted by and within them are inflected by gender...this provides a strong rationale in itself for greater attention to rural education. (Pini et al., 2014, p. 461)

Thus, it was crucial to conduct this research study through a feminist lens. Moreover, I believe that it would have been an injustice if these stories had been interpreted from other viewpoints

because they would have been distorted due to theoretical approaches grounded in masculinity. Subsequently, this body of research was reviewed through a feminist frame of reference.

Blackmore (1999) claimed that society is a large entity of ideals governed by and from the most attractive and heroic male qualities defined as “rational, logical, hard-nosed, and independent leader” (Blackmore, 1999, p. 39). These qualities transform into the standards, norms, and epistemological viewpoints of society. Hence, the embodiment of female characteristics contrasts society’s stance of how the world should work (Blackmore, 1999); thus, placing females, especially female educational leaders in a world dominated by men. This masculinity silences the female voice because it is untold, hidden, and often undermined through *the boys’ club of this is how we do things around here* (Blackmore, 1999, p. 130-135). Therefore, when women take a stand for social change by suggesting that feminine qualities are equally as strong as masculine virtues they are often seen with opposition (Blackmore, 1999). This research, was framed from the theoretical perspectives of feminist standpoint theory and intersectionality.

Feminist standpoint and intersectionality theories are founded in feminist thought and therefore provide a feminist outlook. Pini et al. (2014) concluded that there are several intersections between gender and rurality which was considered when conducting this feminist research on the gendered and professional experiences of female rural superintendents. One of the main purposes of this research study was to add the female voice to history; hence, I believe that the research analyzed through a feminist lens was most fitting. I do not think it appropriate to define this research by a theory rooted in masculine thought; not because I disapprove of such masculine thought but because most of female history has been told through a masculine perspective which does not depict the true female experience. Standpoint theory suggests that female experiences (in society) are distinctive from male experiences. Therefore, knowledge is diversely constructed; thus, creating several truths and realities. Furthermore, it states that standpoints are not always visible.

The purpose of this research was to add women’s voice to history, depicting the authentic experiences of female superintendents in rural communities, in search of *female* social justice. In my research, I asked six females who held or hold rural superintendencies to tell their personal stories. The storytelling was compiled from a qualitative study using narrative inquiry.

Standpoint feminism, as interpreted by Kiguwa (2019), asks females to tell their personal stories in order to eliminate female passivity and exhibit how women involve themselves and decode society; thus, adding to history and knowledge (Kiguwa, 2019).

Additionally, feminist standpoint theory recognizes the political undertones that perpetuate existing conditions of inequality and attest that without female support, confidence, and influence true social and democratic justice cannot ensue (Hyndman, 2009). According to Wallace (2014) feminist standpoint theory emerged from the 1980s. Feminist standpoint theory is a feminist critical theory and states that men and women live and have different encounters which shape their knowledge of the world (Wallace, 2014; Intemann, 2010). From these ideals, I conclude that all people perceive truth dependent upon their individualized experiences and social settings. This theory explains how history can influence people's *truths* regarding women and their appropriate place in society (Intemann, 2010).

Intemann (2010) defined standpoints as cognizant, critical, personal, and deeply reflective views regarding the essence of social positionality and power relations and their influence on knowledge in certain contexts (Intemann, 2010). Moreover, Intemann (2010) ascertained how standpoints are created from patterns, themes, and relationships of similar experiences gleaned from groups of women; which establishes how feminist standpoint theory can be considered social and normative, standpoints are subjective with beliefs and specific value systems (Intemann, 2010). One of the aims of standpoint feminism is to examine power relations, institutions, policies, and technologies that perpetuate oppression from the perspective of the oppressed, so that they may be changed, undermined, or abolished (Intemann, 2010). Intemann's description of standpoint theory (2010) has supported a theoretical framework that provided a feminist reference, valuing history and personal truths, for the analysis of this study regarding female rural superintendents.

Like feminist standpoint theory, intersectionality points out the differences among women due to their placement in society and there are interlocking systems of oppression (Lutz, Vivar, & Supik, 2016). According to Davis (2008), "Since its inception, the concept of 'intersectionality' – the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination – has been heralded as one of the most important contributions to feminist scholarship" (p. 67). Furthermore, Davis (2008) dictated intersectionality as "... the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices,

institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power. Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) ...” (p. 68). This study contains intersection of gender and rurality.

Additionally, intersectionality fits well with feminist standpoint theory because it proposes that females are different and experience life and discrimination from their own, unique perspectives. All women have intersectional dimensions of their identity based on being female, their personal experiences, and social standing (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Collins and Bilge (2016) confirmed Davis’ definition of intersectionality by detailing how it explores various dimensions of power from the dominant culture, how this power influences a person’s identity, and acknowledging these identity intersections and their interrelatedness.

...power relations are to be analyzed both via their intersections, for example, of racism and sexism, as well as across domains of power, namely structurally, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal. The framework of domains of power provides a heuristic device or thinking tool for examining power relations. (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 27)

Intersectionality is a critical analysis tool that studies the complexities of the world by noting the intersections of the lives and their experiences of unique individuals, specifically for marginalized people, such as women and rurality (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Intersectionality provides multiple perspectives and reasons to situational outcomes such as gender discrimination. Moreover, Pini et al. (2014) argued the necessity for a feminist lens utilizing intersectionality for addressing rurality within educational research due to its absence; thus, supporting the feminist conceptual framework implemented for this research study of rural female superintendents.

The extensive and significant contributions feminist academics have made in identifying and redressing gender inequalities in education have too rarely extended to consider rural spaces and places. Indeed, even as rightful attention has been given to pluralizing the subject of feminist educational scholarship, including recent engagements with intersectionality, concern with difference has rarely extended to rurality. (Pini et al., 2014, p. 460)

This framework, based on Feminist Standpoint and Intersectionality theories has afforded a lens that aided in maintaining as much objectivity as possible because the researcher has looked through several lenses with the goal of telling individual’s unique stories. This was a

qualitative study, employing narrative inquiry based from participant's responses to interviews and vignettes.

Personal Rationale and Role of the Researcher

Personally, and professionally, I have first-hand experience as a female administrator regarding male politics in education. As an educator of 18 years, I have worked as both a teacher and an administrator in two very large school districts (one very wealthy with minimal diversity and one with mixed-wealth which included great diversity). Each of these school districts contained three high schools (HS) with more than 1,700 students per HS building. Additionally, I have served as K-12 principal in a one-building, rural district with less than 600 students total. This has provided me with many experiences with diverse ways of thinking and varying cultures. Often, within my first administrative role as an assistant principal at a large suburban school I found my inner dialogue asking these questions: Why am I doing the majority of the work? Why are men taking the credit for what I have done? Why, if I have proven my value as a leader of the school and district through tangible results... am I not being considered for promotion or a raise? Why is it that I have three master's degrees and I have established that I can be non-emotional and handle big, burly male senior students all the while my male colleague administrators who have less experience, do minimal work, and get paid more? Why are they not providing me professional development when I ask to grow? Why am I not chosen to be on certain committees? Why in principal meetings do we discuss sports (not school sports) for an hour?

Within the rural setting, I have often asked, what the heck is going on? Have I retreated back in time? In both settings I have asked myself, am I crazy or in a twilight zone? Nonetheless, my exposure to various female educational leadership issues has come from men and women. It is my opinion that if women (and men) are raised in a society where male qualities and values are revered, neither males or females may recognize the female education leadership injustice; rather they preserve and perhaps, implement it.

These feelings and experiences have guided me to explore females in educational leadership. The nature of rurality has opened another door of research necessary to study because the rural district I have experienced operates differently than anything I have experienced in my lifetime. Throughout my research, I have discovered that there is an

inconsistency with male and female leadership in a profession dominated by women, especially in a rural setting. The question has remained throughout my research, where are the female rural superintendents in the twenty-first century? Furthermore, the literature has revealed the absence of female voice throughout history (Palladino et al., 2016) because the majority of history, regarding education, was written from a white-male's perspective. Additionally, this exploration has shown the shortage of research concerning rural schools and female superintendents.

Moreover, my experiences and *wonderings* were similar to that of other female leaders as found within the vast amount of research depicted in the literature review and the women interviewed for this research study. We as women have not yet arrived in the twenty-first century as respected female educational leaders and this is demonstrated in the literature and the current numbers depicted in the superintendency. This research was imperative to conduct in order to educate the world about present day truths, embedded in the past and present, so that women and men are aware of the immense cultural history that is buried behind falsities of smoke and mirrors.

Definition of Key Terms

Barrier – A hindrance that prevents forward progression (Montgomery, 2019).

Bias – According to Schwandt (2015), bias has two meanings. The first definition of bias is “the prejudicial drawing of inferences or generalizing from nontypical or no representative persons or events . . .” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 18). For example, in this study bias is mainly referred to as people consciously or unconsciously treating humans differently because of their gender.

The second definition from Schwandt (2015 is, “individual preferences, predispositions, or predilections that prevent neutrality and objectivity...” (p. 18). For this study, it will be imperative that the researcher examine her own bias because she is female, an educational leader, and has experienced barriers in educational leadership.

County Superintendent – Is recognized as a nonmetropolitan and / or rural school district superintendent.

Determination– The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines determination as a “firm or fixed intention to achieve a desired end

Discrimination – Is recognized as a prejudiced act, belief, or treatment imposed on someone based on a distinguishing difference (i.e., gender, race, social class, sexuality, etc.) (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

Gender – The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines gender as the “sex sense,” for example, female or male gender. The second component of this definition as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) is “the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex.”

Good Old Boy:

- 1) a male who embodies the unsophisticated good fellowship and sometimes boisterous sociability regarded as typical of white males of small towns and rural areas of the South.
- 2) a person who belongs to a network of friends and associates with close ties of loyalty and mutual support. (Dictionary.com, 2020)

Grit – The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines Grit as “firmness of mind or spirit: unyielding courage in the face of hardship or danger.”

Experience – This study will use the Merriam-Webster Dictionary’s (n.d.) definition for experience which encompasses:

- 1) a: direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge.
b: the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation
- 2) a: practical knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events or in a particular activity
b: the length of such participation
- 3) : something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through
- 4) a: the conscious events that make up an individual life
b: the events that make up the conscious pas of a community or nation or humankind generally
- 5) : the act or process of directly perceiving events or reality

Marginalize (Marginalization) – To marginalize a group is “to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). This research study mainly refers to the marginalization of the female gender in education.

Resilience – The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines resilience as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.”

Rural – For this study, rural will be defined as a community that is nonmetropolitan with a population of 2,5000 to 49,999. This definition comes from Lavalley (2018), “The ‘rural’ category spans a variety of communities. The critical factor in categorizing and understanding rural communities is that they are fundamentally nonmetropolitan in nature” (Lavalley, 2018, p. 3). Additionally, this definition is created from Weber and Miller (2017) as described below:

A place is rural, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, if it is not part of an urban cluster (of 2,500 to 49,999 or an urbanized area with a population of 50,000 or more. The boundaries of urban and rural territory as defined in the Census do not follow county lines. Almost all of the historical data collected by governments for local areas, however, are county-level data. It is common practice to use county-based classification of “metropolitan” and “nonmetropolitan” counties to describe urban rural areas. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines as “metropolitan” (or metro) core “counties with an urbanized area of 50,000 population or greater, plus surrounding counties that are linked to that core through significant commuting flows.” OMB defines “nonmetropolitan” all counties not included in the metropolitan definition. Following common practice, these c counties are referred to...as rural or nonmetro. (Weber & Miller, 2017, p. 33)

Stereotype – For this research study, stereotype is defined as, “a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.).

Superintendent – The definition for superintendent is the highest position in a school district that has “executive oversight.” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.)

Delimitations of the Study

This research study was limited to a sampling of six female rural superintendents. I interviewed four retired female rural superintendents, one current rural superintendent, and one superintendent who worked in a rural setting that now is a superintendent of a larger school district (nonrural). This research has provided a greater perspective of female experiences to be added to the historical knowledge base of educational leaders. Furthermore, this study only

interviewed female rural superintendents who occupy or occupied a rural district in the Midwest.

Therefore, because of the small sample size of female superintendents, from one specific area, and the participant willingness and availability to share their personal stories this study should not be considered a comprehensive study or directly related to all experiences of female superintendents in public schools of any district. Additionally, the data collected from these female superintendents came from public educational rural school districts; thus, evading any information from private schools and schools from urban and suburban locales.

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation to this study is me, as the researcher and as I conducted my research, I had to be keenly aware of my positionality so I worked diligently to ensure the correct interpretation of other female's experiences while reflecting on my personal bias. For this, I had the interviewee's review my interpretation of their responses for accurate representation of their personal experiences. Also, this study had a small sample size and was limited to one region in the United States of America which hinders the generalizability of these research findings.

Additionally, the subject is somewhat political and I had to ensure the anonymity of this study to protect all participants; however, due to the political nature of this topic and livelihood of the participants, there was a potentiality for lack of forthrightness. To further protect these participants, I am not naming the state in which this research took place because some of the information revealed may have been linked directly to participants based on the state and ruralness of the school districts. This study was conducted under time constraints and therefore was not a study producing longitudinal data; this study provides a glimpse into the professional lives and gendered experiences of female rural superintendents' career journeys. Moreover, the purpose of this study was to add female voice to history in an understudied area, the rural school district, and shed light on the plight of the female superintendent, in the twenty-first century.

Organization of the Study

As declared, this study has attempted to answer the question:

- What are the gendered, professional experiences of female rural superintendents in the twenty-first century?

This study set out to collect stories of lived, professional experiences on the journey to becoming a superintendent and leading as the superintendent in a rural school setting. This study is comprised of five chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to the study, reviewing why it is pertinent to conduct a study on the female rural superintendent. This introduction provided an overview of the female superintendency, purpose and significance of the study, guiding questions, and the conceptual framework.

In Chapter 2, I attempted to render a review of applicable literature by examining the American rural school community and school leadership; history of females in education; politics and women's rights impact on education; and female educational leadership with an emphasis on female superintendents.

Chapter 3 conveys methodology and theoretical frameworks, describing how the research was conducted and analyzed. Following, Chapter 4 discloses the findings of the research study. Chapter 5 is the conclusion, providing a summary of the research study outcomes along with implications for future inquiries.

Chapter 2

In chapter 2, I attempted to provide a synopsis of the literature found on the history of females in education, barriers for females in educational leadership, rural communities, rural school systems, and rural governance. This section opens with an overview of how females entered education as students, teachers, and leaders. The review of societal perceptions and political influence is displayed. Next, a discussion of female educational leadership barriers is presented. Next, this research is contextualized by highlighting rural communities, their school systems, and the unique leadership challenges school leaders face in rural school districts. Lastly, a summary of implications is presented.

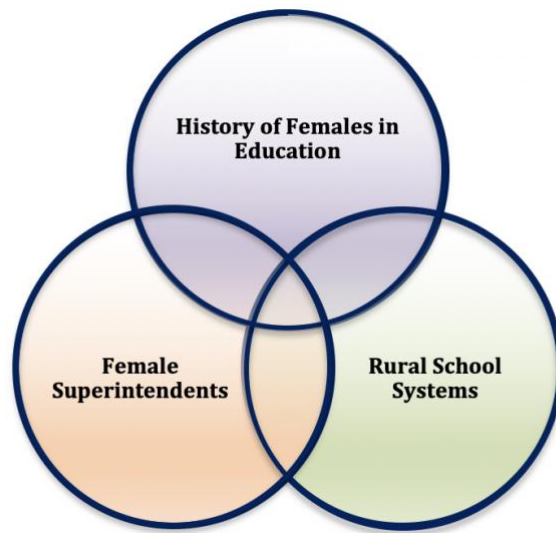


Figure 1 – O’Keeffe Visual Representation of the Literature Review and Main Components of this Research Study.

History of Females in Education

The history of the American school superintendent is one mainly blanketed by white male perspectives, repeatedly overlooking the female voice (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Various research has confirmed that women have battled American educational equality since the colonization of the United States. Discussions of females in educational history support that women have been excluded from: attaining education higher than elementary school, *men’s clubs*, equal pay, school administration, and sometimes, teaching itself. I believe that in order to tell the history of the female rural superintendency (and do it justice), it is essential to first look at the overall historical, political, and socio-cultural plight of females in education and rural America.

Moreover, history recounts a story of unfair treatment towards the female gender, specifically in regard to education. According to Blackmore (1999), “To reinstate women’s presence in the past provides spaces for women’s voices and actions in the present” (Blackmore, 1999, p. 23). Historically, women were considered the *weaker sex*, built to: reproduce, dote on husbands, and nurture society through their virtuous qualities. Through these *virtuous* qualities, women entered the educational realm via teaching. In a study conducted concerning farm women and feminism, the patriarchal system of societal beliefs was entrenched in rural thought.

There may be several explanations for the rejection of feminist thinking and politics by women in the farming industry. Explanations may partly be found in the way in which popular conceptions of feminisms have been regarded as destabilizing and as a threat to many of the social relationships that are valued in rural life. Rural women have perceived feminists as being hostile towards men and critical of traditional nuclear family relationships (Poiner, 1996). As Alston (1995: 23) has pointed out, "being hostile towards men is unacceptable in a system that depends on a high degree of co- operation" between women and men. (Brandth, 2002, p. 6)

Even women in rural communities have believed that the masculine ideals, rooted in American history, regarding feminism and cultural norms of female position are acceptable. This implies that females, themselves, do not outwardly accept the female gender in leadership positions which makes it difficult for women to lead in rural school districts and more customary for males to engage in superintendencies. Because female rural superintendents may struggle with both genders accepting their leadership, unique obstacles unfold in rural communities for them to navigate.

Jackie M. Blount (1998) ascertained that every time women gained social status with a pro-feminist argument, immediately following this advance, the very same argument was employed to demolish their short-lived win. History has shown that during the early establishment of the United States, frequently, women were barred from teaching and expected to kneel to the authority of men. Blount (1998) argued that according to society, education for women was unnecessary; females had wifely and motherly duties to perform. Even if they wanted to become teachers, they could not because of their personalized educational deficiency (Blount, 1998). It was not until late eighteenth century (1790s) that women gained educational rights as students and teachers (Blount, 1998). During this time period and well into the late nineteenth century (1870s) the majority of the population lived in rural communities where women maintained traditional familiar roles (Fuller, 1968).

Blount (1998) suggested that advocates for female education believed in order to have proper citizens (sons) their mothers who raised them should be educated; thus, beginning the early stages of female admittance into teaching and higher educational institutions. Later, as females began outnumbering males and the US population grew, families encouraged their young daughters to pursue teaching. Most females were sent off to teach in remote areas

whereas men were still preferred as teachers and held most urban school sites (Blount, 1998). Remote areas are nowadays considered rural. Most likely because female teachers were predominant in these secluded, rural areas, they had more opportunity to hold positions of leadership. “Women in this period held a number of county superintencies, particularly in the less-populated mountain and rural areas of the state” (Weiler, 1994, p. 27).

In the mid to late 1800s, advocate, Catherine Beecher, proclaimed females were born teachers because of their femininity, nurturing abilities, patient nature, and child rearing capacity. Furthermore, she declared teaching would prepare young ladies to become better mothers and wives; hence, feeding into society’s values and morals. “Teaching offered women a chance to pursue work that did not conflict with expected social roles, yet still allowed them a measure of economic independence” (Blount, 1998, p. 20).

According to Urban & Wagoner (2004) schools were seen to be an extension of the nurturing home environment where pupils learned from motherly figures. As females accepted these teaching positions automatically, they were employed for less money (Urban & Wagoner, 2004). In addition, Beecher and Mann pronounced that women were a bargain because they worked as hard as men for less of a cost to schools and their communities. Women teachers aligned with this new vision of education as a humane and caring institution since women, it was believed, had a ‘natural’ affinity for children” (Rousmaniere, 2013a).

To make the system work, of course, it required that differences between males and females be emphasized and rationalized at the earliest possible age. Rural schools played their part in this socialization process. The subtle sexism of the curriculum, however, was complemented by rather overt sexism in the governance of the local district. To keep women excluded from economic market relations, it was necessary to downplay the value of their labor.²³ This was done, of course, by paying women much less than men doing the same job. This was a major selling point of Horace Mann's call to feminize the teaching profession. Local districts took it quite literally at their annual meetings. Often, by vote of the male, tax-paying residents, boards were instructed to hire a woman teacher. (Theobald, 1993, p. 122)

One can observe from history that females, for the most part, felt happy to gain independence and rights to attend school. It is my opinion that consequently, women did not exhibit discernment concerning reduced wages or working longer hours with higher expectations than

men; they desired only to prove their worth and intelligence. In fact, I consider that women were so ecstatic about this societal gain that they lacked the ability to perceive the unintended consequences of positioning future standards of sex inequality (e.g., salary, expectations, and promotions). Rousmaniere (2013b) noted that male traits and characteristics were the most advantageous; however, because society viewed females as weak, if men were to enter the teaching position they were, now, considered to be or become debilitated (Rousmaniere, 2013b). This was found true in rural settings as well.

State Superintendent Edward Hyatt was equally concerned that the men who would replace young women in classrooms be "virile men." As he argued in 1910, at a time when there were 8,738 women and 920 men elementary school teachers in California: "Many school officials make strenuous efforts to obtain male teachers, though not always with the best results. It is not only a male teacher that is needed, but a live, red-blooded man." (Weiler, 1994, p. 28)

During the mid-nineteenth century, as women entered teaching, male instructors felt emasculated and therefore exited the profession even though other males implored them to stay in education (Blount, 1998). Blount (1998) wrote that due to this *emasculatation*, men decided to establish a kingdom of administration to create a new men's world of professionalism that resembled the *executive* business world in education. The emergence of administration, dominated by men, surfaced during the mid 1800s.

Supervision and administration as careers for men continued to be pressed throughout the 1920s. Male educators continued to argue that education as a career for men did not simply imply classroom teaching, but also the opportunity for leadership and scholarship, as well as public service in the community. (Weiler, 1994, p. 33)

Ironically, the argument prepared by Beecher was turned against females because their femininity equated to an inability to manage the large boys of school. This new argument brought masculinity to the forefront of educational leadership. Men were to lead because women were too weak. Thus, the father figure of authority was to oversee the schools. Most importantly, men supervising a group of subservient women was cost efficient (Rousmaniere, 2013a). Moreover, "as was true throughout the United States at this time, concerns over rural education in California were tied to anxiety about the perceived decline of white Protestant rural

culture, urbanization, immigration, and a general sense,” (Weiler, 1994, p. 30) which was directly correlated to females gaining rights and positions of power in education.

During the late 1800s and through the mid 1900s, schools grew larger with increased populations, the one-room school house became multi-classrooms and administration developed into a hierarchical system with superintendents appointed to direct all of the schools in a community, or several communities combined. Men disregarded women’s voices and school communities searched for the hiring of more male teachers with the lure of quick promotion to administration (Blount, 1998). Abowitz and Rousmaniere (2007) described how society in the 1900s believed that women were considered perfect for teaching, not administration, due to their lower wages and potential to be easily controlled by their male administrators. Rousmaniere (2013b) shared a story of a 1946 job posting looking for a sporty, *Greek God* hero to fill a school principalship (Rousmaniere, 2013b). “Oklahoma actively sought and hired male teachers even though a number were unqualified. Some received rapid promotions to superintendencies to help preserve male leadership” (Blount, 1998, p. 34-35).

During and after the Civil War (1861 – 1865), the comparison of schools to businesses, industry, and the military broadened the control of authoritative males in administrative positions over teachers, who were mainly female (Blount, 1998). As the world turned toward industrialization and away from the traditional agrarian society, “rural schools were described at various times as unscientific, backward, out of touch with the needs of rural society, unclean, disorganized, and presided over by untrained and ignorant young country teachers” (Weiler, 1994, p. 31). Hence, women were impacted by the social role intersections of gender and rurality and were equated as lower-class citizens. Yeo (2001) depicted the societal viewpoint of rurality well:

Opening lines for the last frontier of acceptable public comedy, humor about country bumpkins, rednecks and other rural caricatures perpetuates American middle-class notions of our country “cousins,” reminds us of the inherent superiority of suburbia, and maintains the invisible marginalization of that which constitutes rural. (p. 511)

Despite all the odds, in the late 1800s, some states permitted women to apply for superintendencies, they gained the positions, and were thought of as efficient and sometimes, better performers than males.

Blount (1998) conferred as cities grew tremendously during this time period, population and employment transferred away from rural communities. This paramount societal change enticed male superintendents and educators to “regard city districts as the most exciting and prestigious places to work” (Blount, 1998, p. 45), opening some of the rural communities to women because men did not seek those positions. Weiler (1994) told a story of a fascinating woman rural educator who set the stage for the female rural superintendency. She advocated for rural education and showed to the world that women and rural schools were doing a fabulous job educating children. This woman was, Helen Heffernan who was appointed around 1926 as the commissioner of elementary education in California. She had served as a rural supervisor in Kings County and was well respected among all. Heffernan considered herself a progressive, following the experiential ideals of John Dewey (a renowned progressive educator). Once Heffernan was appointed state commissioner she established the Rural Supervisors Association.

Through her support of the Rural Supervisors Association and of the progressive county superintendents and teachers throughout the state, Heffernan was central to the creation of a network of like-minded progressive educators, a group dominated by women teachers and administrators who were committed to upholding the value and dignity of teachers. (Weiler, 1994, p. 40)

This rural association was a major gain for women during the equality movement and provided an organization of female networking and support for other females. Additionally, during this political change towards women’s suffrage, female superintendents often found local female backing which supported their elections in county and rural communities. Blount (1998) explained:

School board members tended to appoint superintendents demographically similar to themselves, which almost invariably meant that they chose white, protestant men. On the other hand, elected superintendencies offered women better chances for school administration positions because female candidates sometimes could find enthusiastic bases of support from local women’s groups, a constituency that otherwise had little direct influence in an appointive system. (Blount, 1998, p. 68-69)

In rural California women held the position of rural supervisor due to various reasons: women were established as teachers in remote areas, women’s salaries were lower, women had several other women supporting female candidates, there were not enough men to fill the rural

supervisor positions, and rural school districts were not prestigious or sought after. In rural California between the years of 1924-25, “there were 33 men supervisors earning on average \$3,139 and 75 women supervisors earning on average \$2,738. In 1925-26, there were 37 men earning on average \$3,583 and 85 women earning on average \$2,687” (Weiler, 1994, p. 39).

In addition, according to Blount (1998) the state of Illinois (1873) had ten female county superintendents who attained evaluations from the president of the state teachers’ association for continued employment. The evaluation covered: finance, legalities, instructional support, and efficiency. This evaluation was paramount because it proved women’s worthiness and capabilities as superintendents; this evaluation stated that women far exceeded expectations in comparison to their male counterparts (Blount 1998, p. 69). I determine that this evaluation, among others (even from state governors of Idaho and Colorado), as well as suffrage publications, gave credence to women as superintendents, eliminating any doubt of their professional capabilities, especially in rural communities. The state instructional superintendent of Montana and the state commissioner afforded similar public statements regarding female county superintendents (Blount, 1998, p. 70):

“... I have favored the extension of suffrage to her in all matters relating to education and the opening of appropriate offices to her in connection with institutions and systems of instruction.” With such a strong endorsement from the commissioner as well as with broadening bases of support, women made rapid gains in the superintendency in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They especially won elected county positions in midwestern and western states where women had enjoyed suffrage long before their eastern sisters.
(Blount, 1998. P. 70)

Thus, opening the door to female (rural) superintendents. Women and men voters found that female superintendents were more efficient and harder working than their male peers (Blount, 1998). In 1909 California had 40 elected county (rural) superintendencies (Blount, 1998, p. 84-85) and “by 1930 women accounted for nearly 28 percent of county superintendents and 11 percent of all superintendents nationwide” (Blount, 1998, p. 61). Therefore, I determine women were often selected as superintendents of county (rural) school districts because of several varying reasons such as: rural schools were not as prestigious, rural schools paid less than urban and suburban schools, historically, women were elected in these school systems because of a strong female support base, and many prestigious men who held political positions stated that

females proved to do a better and more efficient job than some of their male counterparts (Blount, 1998; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Sherman, 2000).

This next quote summarizes how rural communities felt about superintendents:

Chronicling the search for a new superintendent in a small rural community, Peshki noted that the successful candidate was chosen because, as one school board member indicated, "He's country. "In other words, he would fit in. He would provide the kind of educational leadership that was right for the community. (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995, p. 1)

Hence, the rural community wanted men who would *fit in*, not women; even though that is often what they got, female rural superintendents. In 1933 a conservative movement arose to eliminate rural supervision, stating that it was too expensive and needless (Weiler, 1994). Weiler (1994), argued the creation of rural supervisors was a powerful tool that enabled women to flourish in teaching and leadership positions. However, by the 1940s the Rural Supervisors Association, established by Helen Heffernan, was altered to comprise "all school supervisors and directors of instruction, whether urban or rural," and changed its name to the California School Supervisors Association" (Weiler, 1994, p. 46). This change dissolved female influence while male authority was reclaimed in rural education. According to Weiler (1994):

Helen Heffernan, provided female leadership, an organized network of educated women, and institutional support for women teachers. But the failure to articulate the gender issues of this struggle or to create an institutional structure specifically for women made these gains vulnerable. (p. 47)

Women worked for less pay and did double the work of men. I argue that as females forged ahead, these women proved their incredible value meanwhile creating ever high expectations for their new administrative roles; hence, the double-edged sword. In other words, women substantiated their worth and distinguished themselves among men. Blount (1998) proclaimed that female administrators cultivated a superb knowledge of curriculum and instruction because they had held prior teaching positions. Likewise, they were comfortable and competent when talking with teachers who were mainly female (Blount, 1998). Although victorious, female educational leaders continued to be held to a "higher standard of performance than men" (Blount, 1998). Furthermore, Blount (1998) articulated that during the last half of the nineteenth century, men fashioned the *Good Old Boys' Clubs* for educators as women secured more administrative positions. These clubs served to network within the community of decision

makers (men) and to close the door on women who were climbing the administrative ladder. This *Good Old Boys' Club* continues its prominence in the twenty-first century as noted by a female rural superintendent below:

Good Old Boys' Club. Almost all participants indicated that the *Good Old Boys' Club* in Texas was alive and well and was still a force in Saskatchewan, although not to the same degree. Although frustrated by its presence, most of the administrators in this study accepted the fact that the network existed, and tried to use the Club to their advantage. One of the Texas principals spoke of *breaking in* to this club during her university classes because of her strong intellectual ability, after which she used her relationships with these men as leverage into administration. A second woman spoke of her involvement in the Rotary Club, of which she was the only female member. She indicated that her involvement with this group allowed her to network with some of the *good old boys*, who then helped her and her school. She was astute enough to notice that the same help was not extended to two other female administrators who worked in the same district but who had not joined the Rotary Club. (Wallin, 2005b, p. 145)

These organizations pushed for superintendencies to become appointed positions as opposed to elected positions because women were winning several of the elections (Blount, 1998, p. 85). “Women rarely received appointments to superintendencies because they tended to be excluded from the male political networks responsible for placing most superintendent candidates” (Blount, 1998, p. 85). These men’s clubs of superintendents and other male educators gained power and friendship with governmental agencies and *professionalized* the occupation of administration (Blount, 1998).

Additionally, one of the feminist strategies to gain women’s rights and equality in educational leadership was for women to envelop themselves in masculine characteristics to demonstrate their ability to do anything a man could do. This assisted females to permeate the male-dominated clubs (Blount, 1998) in hopes to gain support and overcome the male-only networking and appointment system. It is argued that instead of showing the world distinguished female leadership, females chose to assimilate into male roles by adopting their value systems and leadership styles (Freedman, 1979). Estelle Freedman (1979) disputed that as women procured their rights by adapting to men’s culture such as drinking, smoking cigars, and *shooting the bull*, they unconsciously gave up their femininity. Freedman (1979) claimed that this act of

cloaking themselves with masculine ethics inherently demonstrated that men's value systems were superior to that of female principles, morals, and qualities.

I deem this was another piece of the double-edged sword that supported the decline of women's advances in education during the early twentieth century. Moreover, I believe that it exists in the 21st century. Sherman (2000) contended that this double-edge sword is most prevalent in rural communities.

During the early twentieth century women gained more rights in society, such as holding public educational offices and administrative roles. Nevertheless, at this time rural communities were considered a societal ill which was equal to the gender debate of the early 1900s.

In California, as elsewhere, the rural school became defined as a social problem at the turn of the twentieth century. But in the period 1900-1920, gender, or the *woman question*, was equally a matter of open debate and discussion. In their concern with the rural school problem. Some male educators and politicians were just as concerned with the *woman peril* in education. (Weiler, 1994, p.27)

Although, women secured the right to vote in 1920, appearing as if women were truly obtaining social justice and equality, it is evident that women and rural schools were considered a social disgrace. Blount (1998) attested that women still did not have full access to higher institutions of education, property ownership rights, or opportunities for waged professions (p. 62). Later, this played another important role for eliminating female superintendent positions in county, rural communities. According to Blount (1998) in 1922 NEA published a report that blamed superintendents (mostly female) for all the rural school issues and declared the necessity for the position to be appointed as opposed to elected.

The NEA formed the Committee on the County Superintendents' Problems, which released its report in 1922, two years after enactment of the suffrage amendment. Committee members lamented that "one does not have to study the rural-school problem long until he becomes convinced that its success or failure centers in and around the office of the county superintendent." Their report concluded by strongly suggesting that future county superintendents receive academic and professional training—available to men, but rarely to women—and the office should be removed from politics "by having him selected very much as a city superintendent is now selected... by a board small in

number, selected especially for the purpose of conducting school affairs.” (Blount, 1998. P. 86)

Because literature has revealed that women became rural supervisors and county superintendents they were also associated as part of the problem with rural schools. Now, that women could vote and continue to elect other women for these educational leadership roles, society (mainly white men as found in history) proclaimed higher education was needed for the superintendency and at this time only men were permitted to attain higher educational degrees. Furthermore, the very nature of the pronoun, him, used in the text suggested that men were considered the most appropriate and warranted for the position of superintendent.

Thus, as women gained suffrage rights, superintendencies across the nation were considered ill equipped for improving academics and moving education forward, especially in rural and county communities (Blount, 1999). At this time, “women held 40 percent of county superintendencies in California (a little over “one in three”), the elected position... on the other hand, women held none of the thirty-three appointed superintendencies” (Blount, 1999, p. 23). This was the beginning of the end, increasing the decline in women serving as superintendents. According to Blount (1999):

Women rarely received appointments to superintendencies because they tended to be excluded from the male political networks responsible for placing most superintendent candidates. This superintendent selection method quietly and effectively removed women from contention for school leadership opportunities. A more public means of selection, or one that explicitly invoked gender as a factor, would have raised the ire of organized women’s groups. (p. 24)

As of late, the arguments for female teachers (and administrators) were based on the teaching profession preparing them to be better mothers and wives. Furthermore, society believed that married women should not work because they had men to do the *heavy lifting* for their families. Almost congruent to women achieving the right to vote, a new social movement called, *race suicide*, ensued. Nonetheless, as women earned social influence and empowerment during the early 1900s, this virtuous profession for single women shifted into a disgraceful act that would render society void of white, middle-class children (Blount, 1998).

A writer for the Eugenics Review in 1919 stressed that unmarried female teachers are the worst tempered and spiteful individuals of all mankind, chronically suffering generally

from anemia, neurasthenia, hysterics, neurosis of all kinds, rheumatism, stomach and bowel trouble, and more or less sexual diseases... (Blount, 1998, p. 97-98)

All throughout the 1900s, as women were gaining their rights and educational leadership roles, they were also being ridiculed. For example, Blount (1998) described that women who did not fit the traditional social role of wife and mother were treated as suspicious characters. These women were condemned if they could be classified into this *new* social category, also known as *zolibat women*, meaning celibate (p. 98).

In addition, these single *zolibat* female teachers could have had same sex relations and therefore were considered sexual deviants (Blount, 1998). These particular *spinster teacher* (Blount, 1998) women underwent grievous turmoil, socially and financially (Blount, 1998). This new societal viewpoint began a *witch-hunt* in search of destroying any person that did not fit the typical gender roles of female or male (femininity vs. masculinity) and lasted through the mid 1980s (and some would argue that this movement remains in the twenty-first century). This was a no-win situation. If you were a single female you were considered a lesbian spinster unless you dressed with pearls and lace. Yet again, I conclude that these movements put women *in their place*, at home, in the kitchen, raising their children and waiting on their husbands. Brescoll's research on female leaders and their emotions (2016) found that societal perceptions of how women should respond as counterintuitive to the leadership role.

When women are in leadership roles, there is a mismatch between the warm and effusive emotional displays expected of them as women (by dint of their social role as caretakers) and the emotional control that is expected of them as leaders. This mismatch in display rules may set the stage for women leaders to experience difficulties in decoding the appropriate way to communicate emotion at work. Specifically, I argue that it poses two fundamental challenges that female, but not male, leaders have to navigate: (1) identifying the appropriate amount of emotion to display and (2) identifying the appropriate kind of emotion to display—i.e., identifying ways to exercise power without displaying emotions that convey power. (Brescoll, 2016, p. 420)

Furthermore, according to Blount (1998) World War II offered women a chance to become independent and self-sufficient when several men left teaching and their professions to fight in the war. Additionally, in a study of California, school consolidation finally began to impact rural

schools after World War II although it had been a long debate for rural school improvement in the earlier 1900s, (Weiler, 1994).

Editorials in the Sierra Educational News throughout 1916 and 1917 strongly supported rural supervision, along with proper training of rural teachers and consolidation, as the solutions to the problem of the rural school. (Weiler, 1994, p. 32)

Rural communities hesitated the consolidation movement because they did not want more government control or a breakdown of their personable, small communities. Therefore, in order to appease rural communities, the idea of supervision was granted.

Given the local resistance to consolidation of district schools, rural supervision was a politically easier path, which seemed to promise greater control over rural teachers at a relatively low price and with much less disruption to local institutions. Thus, the attention of rural school reformers in California after 1920 turned to the implementation of rural school supervision. (Weiler, 1994, p. 33)

School consolidations along with better supervision were supposed to fix the *rural school problem*. Consolidations of one-room school houses into larger county school districts opened doors of opportunity for women, at first. Weiler (1994) continued by stating that women put forth the ideas of enhancing rural school teachers' work who were mainly women. However, men, especially professors and administrators of the male decent had a different vision for the rural district supervisor: to direct a school system with efficiency and science (Weiler 1994).

According to Weiler (1994), Rural supervision was established by 1921. Due to the lack of male candidates, rural women teachers often were chosen for the task (Weiler, 1994).

Ultimately, some believe that due to school consolidations, making school districts larger like their urban equivalents, eliminated jobs for female rural superintendents. Likewise, when men returned from the war, the government and the media urged women to leave their positions so that men could take them back (Blount, 1998). Again, society decided and demanded that men deserved to work over women.

Although women were asked to leave their employment after the war, teaching had turned from a single woman's job into a married woman's job. Nonetheless, women were to carry on their house duties as well as their job duties at schools; thus, preserving the *double duty* standard for females. Married women, holding the majority of the female teaching positions considered their careers subordinate to those of their husbands (Blount, 1998). Even though,

married women were urged to give their jobs up after WWII, by the 1960's there were less than 30% of single female teachers, thanks to the *spinster teaching movement*, (Blount, 1998).

After WWII, a decline of the female superintendency occurred due to the double duty standard that women were expected to uphold; completing all the house tasks and rearing of children plus upholding the laborious job of a superintendent became too much for many women (Blount, 1996). Some say that another motive behind the female superintendency regression was The GI Bill of Rights, passed in 1944, directly after WWII. This bill provided veterans substantial monies for higher education that women were not afforded. This created an influx of highly educated males who were able to take over more administrative positions, chiefly, the superintendency. All the while, the superintendency positions began requiring more prestigious degrees and more strenuous working hours; thus, making it difficult for women to attain these positions, considering they were supposed to first take care of the home and then, have a career (Blount, 1998).

I resolve that during the majority of the twentieth century, as a woman, you could not be female and single and you could not be married and teach or lead a school district. If you were an administrator and portrayed "male qualities" such as decisive decision making and non-emotional responses, you were a sexual deviant. If you were a female administrator and feminine, you were too weak and should not be a supervisor of a school system, according to society (even if these ideals were hidden social norms) (Montgomery, 2019).

Politics and Women's Rights' Impact on Females in Education.

As noted in the above historical and socio-cultural research regarding females in education, women have fought for their rights to be educated, to work, and to become leaders. This work began earlier than the legislation arrived. The right to vote arose with the 19th amendment also known as *women's suffrage*, in 1920. However, this did not change the treatment of women. The next official legislation was signed into action in 1964, The Civil Rights Act. Ironically, it excluded women (Galles, 2004). Furthermore, Galles (2004) remarked that the only way women benefited from this movement was found in Title VII. Title VII, The Equal Employment Act of 1972, protected humans from employment discrimination. Prior to passing, females were added to the employment section, attempting to vanquish its existence. Nevertheless, Title VII passed despite all odds (Galles, 2004).

Prior to Title VII, another female political exclusion was found in Title VI which kept them out of various educational opportunities. During this time, girls were frequently forced down a *home economics* educational path whereas boys studied sciences. Similarly, female sports did not exist; it was a male athletic world from elementary through college (Galles, 2004). Galles (2004) noted that women were prohibited from promotions and hired for elementary positions as opposed to secondary ones (Galles, 2004).

Nevertheless, Title VII, The Equal Employment Act of 1972, opened up leadership positions for women (principalships, district coordinators, superintendents, etc.) (Galles, 2004). One of the most important acts for the female superintendent was Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. As stated by Stromquist (1993) Title IX is the basis for sex discrimination equity where the government asserted that they would cease to provide funding to any federally funded educational system (Stromquist, 1993). This opened the door for females to enter universities and colleges, choose their career paths (not be forced into a certain subject area) and become female educational leaders. Additionally, female athletics became, over time, a part of the American educational system (Galles, 2004). Nonetheless, Stromquist (1993) contended that when Title IX was passed it took several years before it blanketed all components of an institution, not only federally funded programs. Finally, the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988 protected all people from sex discrimination in educational institutions and their programming, federally funded or not (Stromquist, 1993).

These governmental acts eliminated the bar on women's acceptance into universities and all male organizations, as well as aided in equal opportunity employment; albeit, the men's clubs remained and often women continued to be ignored professionally. In spite of these efforts, female superintendents and administrators have not regained momentum in the educational hemisphere. Still to this day, in the year, 2020 the following remains; once women make it through the laborious candidate pool, they are asked inappropriate questions by board members that continue to place women in a specific gender role (Maranto, Carroll, Cheng, & Teodoro, 2018; & Blount, 1998). For example, Maranto et al. (2018) detailed experiences of board members consistently, evaluating and selecting their superintendents based on their coaching history, management expertise, employee morale, and student safety. Research has indicated that women typically have broader expertise on curriculum and instruction (the foundation of

schooling) whereas men tended to be skilled in coaching and management (Maranto et al. (2018).

As a participant and observer in school board meetings, Maranto has seen very few discussions about teaching or curricular matters but many about budget, athletics, construction, transportation, attendance zones, and school safety. Similarly, as school board sympathizer and former board member Gene Maeroff (2010) writes, classroom instruction (the schooling activity most heavily dominated by women) is ‘invisible’ to most school board members (p. 18). While they rarely visit classrooms, they often attend athletic contests and frequently win election or appointment with the help of athletic booster clubs. (Maranto et al., 2018, p. 13)

Moreover, still to this day in the twenty-first century, Bernal, Lajoie, Monsov, Raigoza, Stencler, and Akhavan (2017) described a theory of gatekeeping where women face the barrier of becoming a superintendent based on the board members and headhunters’ ideals of women and their ability to successfully carry out the task of the superintendency. Men are hired more frequently than women (Bernal et al., 2017).

The literature has displayed a history (socio-cultural and political) for women in education that took one step forward and two steps backward. According to a recent study by Brescoll (2016) women have been seen as more emotional than men and if they display one emotion or quality that is different than feminine in leadership roles, they are often chastised.

Women are also more likely than men to be penalized for expressing emotions that convey power (e.g., anger and pride) (Lewis, 2000). In this way, gender-emotion stereotypes present a set of challenges that are unique from the difficulties women face from navigating other double binds rooted in stereotypes of communality and agency. (Brescoll, 2016, p. 425).

This is the wheel of history, a woman is either too masculine or too feminine... she cannot be beautiful, strong, and smart... or can she? Blackmore (1999) affirmed society’s viewpoint on the feminine appearance. Female bodies have been subject to certain standards (e.g., genteel, sexy, nurturing) whereas the male body has been represented as tough, heroic, and aggressive (Blackmore, 1999). This societal and historic perspective has played into the way females are perceived, especially as leaders. Blackmore (1999) found in her research that if a woman was

too large, she was distinguished as weak and undisciplined (Blackmore, 1999). Furthermore, Blackmore details how females are held to certain appearance standards:

Stigmatized people such as those women who try to pass as normal by ‘dressing up’ risk having the gap between the image they seek to construct and how they are perceived made transparent, dress was also read as a statement. It symbolized conformity or opposition to organizational and often masculinist norms. How one clothed the body meant taking a position in organizational gender politics. (Blackmore, 1999, p. 174)

Who holds the power in education, as Jackie M. Blount asks in her work from 1998? My hypothesis is that, men, history, and old ideals hold the power, if society allows them to remain. This literature review of historical, socio-cultural, and political issues supports the need for my research conducted on female rural superintendents.

Barriers for Females in Educational Leadership

History recounts a story of unfair treatment towards the female gender, specifically in regard to education. “To reinstate women’s presence in the past provides spaces for women’s voices and actions in the present” (Blackmore, 1999, p. 23). Historically, women were considered the *weaker sex*, built to: reproduce, dote on husbands, and nurture society through their virtuous qualities. Through these *virtuous* qualities, women entered the educational realm via teaching.

Not much has changed since the early twentieth century where teachers were majority female and males dominated administrative roles such as principalships and superintendencies. Female educational leaders began to make their mark during the 1930’s where 11% of superintendents were female (Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004). Now, in the twenty-first century, the year 2020, females continue to rule the teaching field whereas males command the school leadership positions (Muñoz et al., 2014). Björk (2000) affirmed that society has not caught up with women’s rights and civil equality movements. She indicated that these advances in women’s equity may have changed some ideals; nonetheless, the *glass ceiling* continues to restrict female career promotion and achievement (Björk, 2000). More recent research from Sampson, Gresham, Applewhite, and Roberts (2015) asserted:

It is the social and cultural expectations that the role of superintendent is filled by males (Muñoz et al., 2014). Women who rise to the office of superintendent are viewed

negatively and assessed more stringently (Muñoz et al., 2014). When a woman is perceived as one who seeks the role of superintendent or is viewed as one moving toward that role, colleagues or supervisors may thwart opportunities for promotion (Chen, Langner, & Mendoza- Denton, 2009). (p. 188)

Some of my research has depicted a social construct in favor of men for superintendent positions while marking women as less likely to attain educational leadership roles, especially in rural communities where traditional gender roles are exasperated. In addition to this social complexity, when searching for female perspective regarding this phenomenon, it is difficult to uncover. Thus, history lacks female voice and the majority of female perspective is drawn upon through its absence. Literature has revealed several studies surrounding females in educational leadership and the superintendency; however, there is little research considering the female superintendent of rural communities.

Interestingly enough, earlier research from Craig and Hardy (1996) found that the majority of female superintendents have begun their superintendency journey in rural or poverty-stricken areas with low populations (Craig & Hardy, 1996). Literature has unearthed several possible reasons for this phenomenon, one being that rural communities are less prestigious and pay less; thus, men are less likely to apply for such a position. Another thought implies that because rural communities are in such turmoil and women often perceive themselves as solution-oriented and empowering that they choose rural communities. Furthermore, some rural communities, steeped in traditional gender ideals believe they can control female superintendent decision making. In a power and gender study, Brunner (1999) ascertained that informants explicitly commented on the fact that board members desired control over their newly hired, female superintendent.

Additionally, Gammill and Vaughn (2011) discovered that minimal researchers had studied the female superintendent in rural communities even though close to a third of school districts in the United States of America are rural with women making the decisions (Gammill & Vaughn). Furthermore, as I have conducted my female rural superintendent research, I too found that little information surrounding women superintendents in rural communities.

In a more recent study, Allred, Maxwell, and Skrla (2017) established a study of seven female superintendents in Texas communities in order to uncover female superintendents' aspirations, motivations, and constraints. Their study confirmed that most female

superintendents spend part of their career in a rural school district. They avow that universities should prepare and support students (future superintendents) for leading rural school districts, especially because they reported that females make up the majority of the superintendent training programs (Allred, Maxwell, & Skrla, 2017).

Moreover, from Craig and Hardy's (1996) former research they questioned the reasons for lack of females in the superintendency. Their research revealed that women educators typically did not choose teaching careers in order to become administrators and if they did have the desire for administration, they kept it a secret for fear of ridicule (Craig & Hardy, 1996). Brock (2008) supported this research by explaining how women can become targets of other women as noted below:

Newfound opportunities have also brought changing and more challenging expectations. According to 214 B. Brock Tannenbaum (2002), "Women are caught in an impossible bind. We need to be competitive in order to be truly feminine; yet we can't be competitive because that would make us unwomanly" (p. 21). Today's successful women are expected to attain advanced degrees and powerful positions, and at the same time look gorgeous, be perfect wives, have perfect homes, raise perfect children, and be devoted caretakers for aging parents. Women who "have it all" or are perceived as such, often become targets of women, who by comparison, are made to feel inferior. (p. 213-214)

Another finding from Craig and Hardy's (1996) earlier research identified rural communities viewing school leadership similar to a traditional family household structure; males as the prominent figurehead and females as homemakers. On a positive note, these communities frequently felt that female leaders were compassionate advocates for teacher educators (Craig & Hardy, 1996). This earlier research from Craig and Hardy (1996) has been further examined and supported by newer research which has demonstrated the negative impact on the female superintendency due to societal norms and perspectives (Brock, 2008; Sampson et al., 2015; Björk, 2000; & Brescoll, 2016).

In an older but relevant study, Wiggins and Coggins (1986) explored gender bias in an Oklahoma study of superintendent selection where the board of education received six hypothetical male and female resumes to review. Wiggins and Coggins (1986) uncovered that two out of ten comments mentioned concerns about female candidates' family, children, and parenting style. No such remarks were made regarding male candidates. Overall, the results of

this study did not bring specific information regarding gender bias; nevertheless, it suggested that board members' prejudices and perceptions of female leaders are brought to the table during the candidate search, interview, and hiring processes. "People tend to hire people like themselves, i.e. white males hire white males (Shakeshaft, 1989). Because women remain in the minority in management circles, the male stereotype endures and hiring men is "normal" and never questioned (Powell, 1988)" (Miller, Washington, & Fiene, 2006, p. 11).

Craig and Hardy (1996) confirmed board member's worry about women candidates alluding to their incapacity to lead a school district while also being a wife and mother. In their study, one board member claimed that their community was ill prepared for a female leader (Craig & Hardy, 1996). Regrettably, not much has changed since Wiggins and Coggins 1986 study of female superintendents. (Bernal et al., 2017) avowed that women were kept from the superintendency due to board members lack of faith in female capability.

To further support these claims, Gammill and Vaughn (2011) found politics and power to play a huge role in females attaining the superintendent position. How women see themselves and how society perceives women impacts the female superintendency. Hence, Gammill and Vaughn (2011) reasoned that obtaining the superintendency as a female is only half of the battle; maintaining their position is equal if not more difficult to uphold due to social constructs of gender roles (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011). Additionally, these researchers supported that a female educational leader must decide how she will choose to be portrayed and operate under this assumed role while in the superintendency (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011).

Additionally, Wolverton and MacDonald (2004) discussed potential barriers for female superintendents. They explained how retired superintendents, who are majority males, search for rehire positions out of state. These retired superintendents are members of a "consortia" of white-male consultants. Often, these retired, white-men win the superintendent positions over females because these consortiums choose experience over new and inexperienced superintendents (be it male or female). Thus, due to the amount of underrepresented, experienced female superintendents, females do not have the same opportunities as their male counterparts because they are new and often found without experience (Wolverton & MacDonald, 2004). These authors described the necessity for female mentors in order to increase female superintendents especially because, "... men often act as gatekeepers, and make

deals before positions are announced: women normally are not privy to those informal agreements” (Miller et al., 2006, p. 20).

Furthermore, history depicts the plight of the female and her desire to attain educational positions (teaching and leadership) which has established a certain societal perception that has hindered women from gaining jobs, promotions or set upon them nearly unattainable professional expectations. This circumstance is called the *Glass Ceiling*. The *Glass Ceiling* is defined as an invisible roadblock for women and minorities that prevents them from advancement into executive positions due to cultural, social, and or biological norms that exist no matter how qualified the candidate may be (Weyer, 2007). An example portraying this metaphor is the hiring process declared by Sampson and Gresham (2017).

Another barrier is the hiring process. School board members and search firms often block women because they do not view women as good financial managers and do not desire women as leaders of school districts. Unwritten criteria of school boards may hinder women candidates from obtaining the position [29]. (Sampson and Gresham, 2017, p. 1152)

Blackmore (1999) examined how the *Glass Ceiling* existed in a covert way for women in educational leadership positions because organizations were already established and governed by the original set of masculine guidelines and undertones. The new legislation regarding discrimination and women’s rights may have directly prohibited female intolerance; nevertheless, this injustice persisted (Blackmore, 1999). Likewise, Blackmore declared the hypocrisy that female managers face; they are given power to be executives and make decisions yet they are trapped in a male cultural paradigm. Blackmore (1999) highlighted how women commented on feelings of awkwardness while trapped in these situations (Blackmore, 1999).

Also, Blackmore (1999) described the masculine advantage which thwarts female advancement. For example, Blackmore (1999) portrayed the *Boy’s Clubs* as organizations entrenched in tradition with antiquated, male-dominated processes (Blackmore, 1999).

The boy’s club was characterized as a range of practices that positioned women as being outsiders – storytelling, male-bonding practices, social rituals, language, talking about football and meeting after work for a drink when many women picked up children. More formally, in meetings, subtle discursive ploys of resistance, outlined by Eleanor Ramsay (1993: 48), came into play to position women as powerless one moment and co-opted the

next. A common tactic was ‘professional betrayal’, when the credit for a woman’s work was assumed by a senior male. (Blackmore, 1999, p. 132).

Wallin (2005a) researched female rural superintendents in Texas and found that the *Good Old Boys Club* existed and that in order to succeed in their career they had to infiltrate it and use them to their advantage. Additionally, this study concluded that often, in rural districts if women were not a part of this *Good Old Boys Club*, they had a much tougher job.

Although frustrated by its presence, most of the administrators accepted the fact that the network existed and tried to use The Club to their advantage. One of the principals spoke of “breaking in” to this club during her university classes (Wallin, 2005a, p. 36). Blackmore (1999) elucidated how men may converse *manly* items while excluding females (e.g., sports, golfing, sex, etc.). Connell (2006) reported that some male leaders were members of *drinking parties and football clubs* where they often excluded women and joked about sexual topics (Connell, 2006, p. 844). Also, Blackmore (1999) portrayed the tactic of men using women’s ideas as their own (Blackmore, 1999; Polka et al., 2008). Excluding women and stealing their ideas may come from a phenomenon called, *male anxiety*. Stating, that these described tactics are rooted from fear of losing control or being seen as weak (Blackmore, 1999).

Keeping women out of committees, administrative, and communication or information gathering meetings was another female exclusion strategy; the idea is that if women do not have the opportunity to network or glean information there is no way for them to remain informed-competent leaders (Blackmore, 1999). In Blackmore’s research (1999), she discovered that women responded to these tactics by taking more initiative, learning when to speak up and when to keep quiet, employing strategies of unconformity to conditions of weakness, etc. (Blackmore, 1999).

Blackmore (1999) commented on how society has established “attacks” on feminism alleging that it is “the evil” monster that has disintegrated family values and encroached upon masculinity, the patriarchal figurehead of society (Blackmore, 1999). Blackmore (1999) described a male principal who was angered by the existence of female-only organizations or programs (Blackmore, 1999). This male anxiety due to female influence emerged during the late 1870s out of an uneasiness of women procuring power. Their masculine ideals felt that these women were damaging their manliness and taking their jobs (Blackmore, 1999). This fear is supported by a recent comparative superintendent study by Bernal, et al. (2017) “Issues of

gender bias are ever present. When compared to men, women are still perceived as being inferior in both strength and intelligence” (2017, p. 51). Unfortunately, this male anxiety continues to echo throughout society’s perception of feminism and females in leadership.

Alston (2000) presented another barrier for women stating that female mentors are missing for other females who aspire to become superintendents, possibly because there are minimal female leaders in the superintendent role (Alston, 2000). Mentorship for women has been limited and females either find informal mentors who also serve as friends and / or are mentored by men (Sampson et al., 2015). Sampson et al. (2015) conducted research on women superintendents and found:

Peters (2010) found that women school leaders often had informal mentors that emphasized friendship with no set of preliminary guidelines for the mentorship.

However, Searby and Tripses (2006) determined that women often did not receive mentorship and thus were reluctant to mentor other women. Whitaker (2006) indicated that women do not have strong mentorships and actually resisted feminism as it was seen as negative. Central office or mid-level administrative roles provide opportunities for mentorships. (p. 189)

As a female leader, my internal dialogue has been such that I have wondered the following: 1) Why are these male leaders upset about female-only clubs when they have had male-only clubs for years? 2) Are they consciously or subconsciously preserving the ideal that feminism is evil and destructive to society? 3) Do they really feel excluded? 4) Why do some male leaders disregard the female voice when it could improve their school districts? 5) Why do they consider these women as *troubling women* Blackmore (1999)? Nonetheless, I speculate that what Blackmore’s research (1999) discussed and the answers to many of my questions come from the societal attitude that perpetuates the *hidden* feminine discrimination in the twenty-first century. Do men who hold these historical ideals of women mentor other younger male and female leaders to think the same way and prohibit certain females, the troubling females, to be promoted – no matter their competency and value? These barriers for females in educational leadership support the need for future research regarding female superintendents.

American Rural Communities

Lavalley (2018) reported rural communities as often excluded in thought with regards to public education. According to Blauwkamp, Longo, and Anderson (2011) state policies are advantageous for larger school districts with higher populations (i.e., suburban and urban communities). Moreover, Blauwkamp et al. (2011) ascertained that rural communities often feel powerless and unable to transform these unfavorable policies. The majority of students in the United States of America attend urban or suburban school systems. Yet, a large portion of students attend rural school districts which deserve the very best of America's public educational services and attention. As of 2009, more than half of the United States public school systems were found in rural communities (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Currently, it is estimated that over 46 million Americans live in communities considered to be rural (Lavalley, 2018).

The ninth edition of the Rural School and Community Trust's 50-state report on rural education, *Why Rural Matters 2018-19: The Time Is Now*, shows that nearly 7.5 million public school students were enrolled in rural school *districts* during the 2016-17 school year—or nearly one of every seven students across the country. The number is even larger when counting students who attend rural *schools*, including rural schools within districts classified as “non-rural.” By this measure, more than 9.3 million—or nearly one in five students in the U.S.—attend a rural school. This means that more students in the U.S. attend rural schools than in the nation's 85 largest school districts combined. Nearly one in six of those rural students' lives below the poverty line, one in seven qualifies for special education, and one in nine has changed residence in the previous 12 months. (Showalter, Hartman, Johnson, & Klein, 2019, p. 1)

Furthermore, Lavalley (2018) claimed there is an unequal distribution of rural communities across the country and therefore in some states, these communities, go unnoticed while the focus remains on their comparable suburban and urban equivalents (Lavalley, 2018). Seeing as rural schools operate with historical and socio-cultural influences, unique to their communities, I believe it is vital to have a basic awareness of rural communities in general.

For this research, “The ‘rural’ category spans a variety of communities. The critical factor in categorizing and understanding rural communities is that they are fundamentally nonmetropolitan in nature” (Lavalley, 2018, p. 3). Lavalley (2018) created this definition from the National Center for Education Statistics' urban-centric locale codes released in 2006. There

are three descriptors for rural: Fringe, Distant, and Remote. This rural definition integrates population density and geographical location as distance from a metropolitan area (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Additionally, it is imperative to highlight the importance of understanding that each rural community has its own set of unique cultural identities

The history of rural communities has mostly been one of poverty; not all inhabitants benefit from agriculture. Rural areas are prone to fewer employment opportunities, lower wages, and a less-likelihood of overcoming an impoverished state. During the early 1900's free land in the United States ended and industrialization began. In search of jobs, much of the working rural population migrated to urban locales, leaving their communities desolate. Additionally, several immigrants from Europe came to America and this influx of working persons contributed to the decline in employment availability for all (Weber & Miller, 2017). Tickamyer and Duncan (1990) established the lack of employment opportunities and rural exodus, "Jobs have been scarce and unstable in most rural communities for decades, and people have responded by combining different kinds of work or by migrating to cities for better employment opportunities" (p. 68). Beginning in the 1930's, including the Great Depression, the introduction of machines to farm larger areas of land with less workers, sharecropping, the Dust Bowl of the south, and various federal mandates added to the disparity of rural, farming communities (Weber & Miller, 2017).

During this time period, the economy and other political entities impacted the rural educational arena. As mentioned in earlier sections, school consolidation dates back to as early as the 1800s with legislation in 1867 in Massachusetts for free public transportation, forging the way for rural communities to conjoin. Other states, like West Virginia, created organizations to fund school improvements; however, districts had to a student enrollment mandated by the state (Bard, Gardner, & Wieland, 2006). Moreover, society believed the urban, larger school with industrialized models to be the best form of education. Additionally, a study by "Conant (1959) determined that in order to offer the best possible college preparatory curriculum, a high school should have at least 100 students in its graduating class" (Bard et al., 2006, p. 40).

"A new type of rural normal training is needed," he added, "for it will be long before the one-room rural schools will all be consolidated because of the physical impossibility."

This statement was substantiated by Dr. G. M. Phillips, West Chester, Pa., State Normal,

who told of 9, 255 rural one-room schools in Pennsylvania and their urgent needs. (J. A. S., 1917, p. 461)

In the 1960's – 1970's technological advances and companies moving their industries overseas for cheaper labor, forced several Americans, some who migrated from rural communities to urban areas for employment, into poverty (Weber and Miller, 2017).

As noted by Alan DeYoung in his 1995 study on the closing of a rural West Virginia high school, the most significant reform brought to rural education this century is consolidation, where ninety percent of rural schools were "reformed" out of existence between 1910 and 1960. (Yeo, 2001, p. 516)

According to Tickamyer and Duncan (1990), in the late 1970's government programs focused on providing industries' benefits for moving their companies to rural areas in order to increase employment opportunities and lower the amount of people leaving their communities.

Nevertheless, these jobs continued to offer low wages and minimal working benefits which preserved poverty for some rural communities, the rural south being the most impoverished (Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990). Smith and Pruitt (2017) substantiated this devastating poverty with marked percentages:

In 2014, the nonmetropolitan (rural) poverty rate was 18 percent compared with the metropolitan rate of 15 percent (USDA 2015). The Great Recession and continued declines in manufacturing and resource-based industries have resulted in fewer jobs and increased unemployment in rural areas (Jensen, Mattingly, and Beam 2011).

At the height of the Great Recession, nonmetropolitan unemployment rates rose to levels unseen in more than twenty-five years –9.8 percent in 2009, which was higher than the 8.7 percent in metropolitan areas (McBride and Kemper 2009). Poverty is particularly high in the rural South, at 22 percent, and in the West at 18 percent (USDA 2015). Rural minority populations have the highest poverty rates in the United States (Smith & Pruitt, 2017).

According to Tickamyer and Duncan (1990), these new businesses were not completely successful for all rural areas; however, for some rural communities such as *rural Appalachia* these career opportunities improved the overall quality of life. In the 1980's the movement of industry to rural communities became unsustainable with the upsurge of new technologies and globalization. Even high paying positions in rural communities were and are often seasonal and

require workers to look for outside work, further contributing to poverty and a lower quality of life (Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990).

Smith and Pruitt (2017) acknowledged the overall job loss for rural families decreased male confidence based on the masculine perspective of being the traditional, main economic provider for his family. In essence, literature has revealed that rural communities lean towards traditional, conservative female and male roles. As rural communities have transformed over time with America's shifting economy, so have some of the traditional gender norms, mainly due to the poverty surge. For example, Smith and Pruitt (2017) discussed the success of rural families based on how men were able to adapt their ideal of masculinity. The families who were able to change gender roles, allowing for females to become breadwinners, seemed to withstand poverty. However, for families where men maintained the traditional ideals of "manhood" and lost their confidence, struggled and most likely entered into poverty (Smith & Pruitt, 2017).

Moreover, as women entered the rural market to help their families, male employment continued to decline. There has been a consistent struggle among female employees in rural communities because of inconsistent job availability, single households, inflexibility of job hours, limited time for family care and/or paid leave, and low wages (Smith & Pruitt, 2017). Nevertheless, females have increased their education, entered the workforce, and some rural men are providing childcare and partaking in nontraditional rural male roles.

With these gender equality gains, the traditional rural gender role ideology remains (Smith & Pruitt, 2017). By and large, rural communities have high rates of poverty and continue to struggle with gender identity roles. Paradoxically, it has been noted through much of the literature that although women are thought of as traditional mothers and wives in rural communities, they are still expected to be strong and help out with the farming and *harsh* labor conditions, typically thought of as male roles. Thus, establishing a conundrum of misperception. What are the true stereotypes and gender roles in a rural community for females? How does this paradox of female gender roles shape the female rural superintendent?

American Rural School Systems

How does the idiosyncratic nature of rural communities shape their school systems? It is suggested that rural school districts are inimitable from suburban and urban communities in that they face distinctive adversities. "Little is understood about rural schools and the unique

challenges they face outside of the communities in which they operate” (Lavalley, 2018). Furthermore, rural schools’ needs and strengths have suffered from the popular wisdom and bureaucratic vision that *bigger is better*, resulting in the twin pressures of consolidation and industrial” (Yeo, 2001, p. 516).

Referencing the history and definition presented in this research of rural communities, it may be illuminated that many of these towns tend to have little urbanization (e.g., public transportation, malls, stores, recreational outlets, etc.) and have significant poverty with limited resources. Due to this scarcity of *big business* and urbanization, rural schools often serve as central hubs for their communities (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). The school itself is considered a place of recreation (e.g., sporting and theatrical events, etc.), affords the community with a sense of pride, provides the town with a space for meetings, and much more (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). “Beyond providing students with the basic education and training that are important for securing an economic livelihood, rural school districts also provide economic support and serve as a cultural center in the community” (Tekniepe, 2015, p. 1). This is considered to be a distinctive quality of rural schools that is not often found in suburban or urban school systems because they are surrounded by developed areas with several businesses and community centers. The Great National Rural Education Conference of 1917 stated, “One of the best things in connection with the school is the free night school offered to adults of all ages. Two nights a week are devoted to such work” (J. A. S., 1917, p. 461). Typically, the rural school is the largest employer in the district and the school success depends on the community support. The school district serving as the largest employer is said to be extremely uncommon in suburban and / or urban locales. Wallin (2005b) confirmed this notion:

In most cases, a sense of community ownership of the rural school is reinforced by the fact that often the rural school is the largest employer, claims the largest share of the local tax dollars, and is the location of most community events (Hobbs, 1994). In essence, the rural school becomes a symbol of community unity, community survival, and community values. (p. 136)

One may assume varying implications for the school district as both serving students’ instructional needs and a community’s main source of income. One may discern the potential conflict of interest and probable political conflict that could arise for a superintendent while

making decisions. Harmon and Schafft (2009) reported that both the community and the school should share the same core values due to their convergence.

In sum, we argue that enlightened educational leadership that seriously considers the 21st Century needs of students – as well as the communities in which they reside – cannot help but interpret academic and community improvement goals as mutually reinforcing priorities. (Harmon & Schafft, 2009, p. 4).

Based on the history of rural communities described earlier in this section, it is noted that rural schools are inclined to have a small, agricultural population with a high percentage of poverty.

According to D. Truscott, and S. Truscott (2005), rural schools are some of the most distressed educational systems due to: the poverty they face, a decreased population, leaving for improved economic conditions, and increased global challenges (D. Truscott & S. Truscott, 2005). Lavalley (2018) defined the poverty for rural children existing at more elevated rates than for children in urban communities. “Many rural communities are in economic distress, which contributes to many social problems that affect rural schools and rural students’ achievement. In general, rural economies, dependent upon agriculture or extraction of natural resources, are weak throughout the nation” (Budge, 2006, p. 2).

Likewise, Lavalley (2018) considered this poverty as *deep*, meaning that families consistently make well below the poverty line and the poverty persists throughout several generations (Lavalley, 2018). Often, this poverty and deficiency of educational supports for children in the home, place students on a path for learning gaps in reading and math (Lavalley, 2018). Hence, these learning gaps require extra supports (e.g., specialized teachers, programming, etc.) which necessitate financial resources from the school system that they do not have. Although the poverty is substantial, government assistance is not. A measly 17% of state funding is allocated for rural school districts (Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017). For example, a low population density and reduced tax rates for agricultural land would suggest lower revenue for school systems; thus, making it difficult and more expensive for rural schools to fund educational programs for high student achievement and success (Truscott & Truscott, 2005).

Many states provide a disproportionately larger amount of funding to rural districts to account for challenges such as teacher recruitment and retention, among other needs.

However, the following 12 states provide disproportionately less funding to rural districts (beginning with the most disadvantageous to rural districts): Nebraska, Vermont, Connecticut, Iowa, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, Michigan, Massachusetts, California, Ohio, Minnesota, and New Jersey. (Showalter et. al., 2019, p. 17)

Thus, rural students have limited access to high performing educational programs (i.e., Advanced Placement and STEM) which prepare students for university curriculum and often grant college credit. Moreover, rural students are less likely to gain a college degree. As demonstrated, rural students often begin and remain behind their urban and suburban peers; as a result, continuing the cycle of poverty (Lavalley, 2018).

In addition, rural communities have difficulty recruiting and retaining highly qualified educators due to pay, community barriers, and their geographical location (Truscott & Truscott, 2005). Lavalley (2018) commented that rural districts tend to hire new teachers who lack experience and higher levels of education (i.e., Master Degrees) (Lavalley, 2018). Truscott & Truscott (2005) quoted 32% of secondary students take coursework from teachers without a minor in the subject area; again, adding to the limited access rural students have to a quality education (Truscott & Truscott, 2005). Moreover, Lavalley (2018) suggested rural schools have high levels of teacher turnover which in turn requires rural schools to spend their financial resources on teacher training as opposed to other academic programming for students (Lavalley, 2018).

Geographic location of rural schools impacts the community, students, and administrators in unique ways. To illustrate, Lavalley (2018) discussed the lack of resources for professional development, advanced student coursework, and high teacher and administrative turnover. This is due in part to the geographical location of the rural school district. Most rural communities are isolated, surrounded by underdeveloped-remote agricultural land. The distance to transport anyone (students, administrators, teachers, etc.) to businesses, local universities, and / or surrounding districts is far to say the least (Wallin, 2005a). The amplitude of the distance increases cost associated with bussing, staff mileage, and basic deliveries for an impoverished community.

Likewise, this distance upsurges the amount of time to arrive to a location that offers professional development, collegial collaboration, and advanced coursework for students. There are only so many hours in a day. Not to mention, that in small remote communities it is difficult

to attain substitutes to cover classes for teachers to receive professional development. Thus, a rural school district's geographic location often establishes challenges for rural administrators, teachers, and students. Furthermore, due to the lack of collaborative opportunities, this isolation tends to cause additional barriers for female rural superintendents. For instance, Wallin (2005a) described how females were more likely to remain in their districts *taking care of business* in contrast to their male counterparts which eliminated female administrator opportunity for networking and / or collaborating with the *Good Old Boys' Club* and professional development.

The time, distance, financial resources necessary for administrators to access them were very demanding. Rural female administrators, especially in school administrators, more often than not elected to remain on their campuses *taking care* of the students and staff. This has major ramifications for the skill level and quality of administrators in rural areas. (Wallin, 2005a, p. 40)

Lavalley (2018) discerned the necessity for high quality professional development for both teachers and administrators specifically tailored to the rural community because currently, it is nonexistent (Lavalley, 2018). Additionally, Wallin (2005a) found that isolation due to geographic location and the unique nature of being a female administrator in a rural district was cause for these female leaders to experience loneliness. As quoted from Wallin's (2005a) Texas, female rural administrator study:

Aren't we all like lonely stars

Separated from others by empty space

Occasionally, one unforgettable relation comes

Only to be gone in the blink of an eye. (Anonymous) (Wallin, 2005a, p. 42)

Rural school systems tend to be overlooked, underfunded, and exist in a context of diverse challenges. Budge (2006) pronounced that policy makers likely assess rural communities as economic entities as opposed to places where people live. Thus, when these communities are no longer viable for their economic and / or political gains, policy makers may see these country towns as disposable (Budge, 2006). Moreover, "state policies for how schools are funded typically are formulated to benefit larger districts with higher population concentrations. As long as these policies remain in place, rural and small schools are unlikely to maintain themselves and avoid consolidation" (Blauwkamp et al., 2011, p. 3). More often than not, to overcome the lack of resources and funding, some rural schools consolidate into

larger rural school districts in pursuit of resolving this financial challenge of school operation. Nevertheless, these rural consolidated schools usually maintain their poverty, lack in school resources and less-experienced and under-educated instructors (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). However, according to Blauwkamp et al. (2011), “school consolidation deprives rural communities of a vital site of community life, and it also fragments and destroys relationships that are vital to the maintenance of community life.”

Herzog and Pittman (1995) maintained students may underachieve and rural schools in general may be neglected based on social perception. These authors explained how the perception of rurality is often deluded with unfortunate stereotypes of ignorance (e.g., “country bumpkins, hillbillies, rednecks, hicks, etc.” (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, p. 3) which influence both how community members (including students) perceive themselves and how outsiders perceive the rural setting. Herzog and Pittman (1995) illustrated how curriculum and every day, accepted English language usage depict rurality as crude in nature. I agree with Herzog and Pittman (1995) and I believe that although this descriptor is from 1995 and may have since changed, it is steeped into our history and societal norms which impact our current day perspectives.

One North Carolina social studies text labeled the rural, mountainous western part of the state as an “unproductive region.” Click on your thesaurus when your cursor is on the word rural and see what you find. Our computers listed provincial, uncultured, unrefined, hinterland, backwoods and forsaken as synonyms for rural. For urban, the thesaurus listed civic, civil and cultured. Over time, such negative connotations have a way of becoming the norm. (Herzog & Pittman, 1995, p. 4)

On the contrary, the complete opposite thought regarding country exists as well, creating a paradox of rural perception and human confusion. Earlier research from Haas (1990) portrayed how Americans can idealize rurality, also referred to as the countryside. He reminded us of the many portraits we have seen growing up of traditional, lovely landscape that depicts *the good ole days*. Let me paint a picture for you, imagine a beautiful farm covered in grassy, green plains splashed with colors of vivid floral landscape. As you gaze into this beautiful countryside painting, you begin to escape the hustle and bustle of the city as you notice a young and lovely lady sitting under a tree, reading a book. The skies are blue and the world is peaceful. Which societal perception is true of rurality? Is it the idealized landscape or the redneck riding his tractor to school?

How can we truly understand the rural community and school system when this contradiction of rurality exists, almost making it seem a fantasy in our minds or an old-fashioned way of life that no longer exists; after all, rural communities are often invisible to policy makers, the media, and people living in urban and suburban settings. Furthermore, Blauwkamp et al. (2011) pronounced a bleak future for rural school systems:

The future does not look bright for rural communities to avoid school consolidations and retain their local community schools. State policies for school funding tend to provide insufficient support to local schools to permit them to meet their expenses without consolidating. The public officials who set school funding formulas favor consolidations as a cost-saving measure, and rural citizens typically do not have sufficient representation in state legislatures to counter those policies. (p. 14)

In the twenty-first century, rurality and gender issues are thought to be nonexistent and therefore disregarded. I ascertain that female rural superintendents have a challenging journey leading rural school districts based on the impact of historical and societal viewpoints that remain forgotten in the public eye.

Rural School Administration and the Superintendency

It is conveyed to be difficult to hire and retain highly qualified teachers in rural school districts. Additionally, it is arduous to find and sustain rural leadership. According to Pendola and Fuller (2018), rural districts attract fewer applicants for leadership positions due to non-competitive salaries, geographical locations, and socio-cultural contexts (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). Although Pendola & Fuller (2018) focused on the rural principalship, they discuss working conditions and social expectations as further deterring highly qualified administrators. The rural principal is described as having several more roles of accountability than their urban and suburban peers and rural community expectations of *fitting in* are often reasons for losing administrators in the rural setting (Pendola & Fuller, 2018). “Boone (1998) and Garn (2003) studied rural superintendents and concluded certain tasks hamper leadership pursuits, with budget and finance tasks as the most noted obstacles” (Palladino et al., 2016, p. 41). In addition, applicants who manage to obtain the rural superintendency tend to *micromanage* as opposed to ensue elite leadership due to the numerous amounts of tasks with limited supports (Palladino et al., 2016). Moreover, Pendola & Fuller (2018) stated, “Principals in rural schools are less likely

to be persons of color and less likely to be female” (Pendola & Fuller, 2018, p. 4). Furthermore, Pendola & Fuller (2018) proposed that rural communities are more accepting of male leadership and decision making (Pendola & Fuller, 2018).

Literature has suggested similar challenges facing rural principals exist for rural superintendents as well: they wear several hats, face varying difficulties, and are held to certain social expectations, depending on the rural community (Copeland, 2013). Copeland’s rural superintendent study (2013) examined the various roles of rural superintendents through a qualitative study and found five major themes: 1) superintendent as manager; 2) superintendent as planner; 3) superintendent as listener; 4) superintendent as communicator; and 5) superintendent as community involvement. In his findings, each of these categories held several sub-roles (e.g., budget, facilities, staffing, staff development, schedule, accessibility, media, school board and other stakeholders, visibility, church, social organizations, etc. (Copeland, 2013). Copeland (2013) concluded, “Accessibility was an expectation from all those interviewed and falls into more than one of the themes...these rural communities expected their school superintendents to wear many hats – some given to them by the community, others dictated by events out of their control” (p. 12).

Educational leadership programs and professional development opportunities are scarce for rural teachers and administrators. With all of the tasks, gender expectations, and various issues specific to rural communities, it is no wonder that female superintendents often find themselves filled with uncertainties. “Likewise, Irby and Brown (1994) worked with rural female superintendents in a professional development program and noted how their participants —indicated anxiety and felt that they were not equipped to meet the demands of leadership roles (p. 3)” Palladino et al., 2016, p. 42). Harmon and Schafft (2009) found that superintendents who encompass the same values still struggle with demands of national and state mandates focused on testing and what is needed in order to prepare students for success in the twenty-first century; all the while managing community expectations, poverty and the recurrent unemployment. Jenkins (2007) exemplified the sometimes very specific expectations for a rural superintendent based on that community’s core values, “rural towns in the United States, and especially Oklahoma, have distinct religious and socio-economic characteristics...” (p. 29). Jenkins (2007) interviewed a successful superintendent who made it clear that when he was hired he was told that he had to

dress a certain way and was not allowed to drink alcoholic beverages in public due to the conservative and religious nature of the community.

Lamkin's study (2006), found rural superintendents to be exposed to specific challenges, including: "isolation, lack of resources, community resistance, (p. 17)," recurrent employee turnover, absence of personal privacy, lack of training, and an interconnectedness with the community and school as employer. Furthermore, Lamkin (2006) discovered rural superintendents confronted the obstacle of leading versus managing; for as much as they desired to lead, they found themselves mostly managing, potentially due to their overwhelming job responsibilities and accessibility as described by Copeland (2013) and mentioned below.

Rural superintendents in all three states and nearly every focus group interview used the same phrase to describe their work: *jack of all trades*. In a variety of ways, they talked at length about the speed and diversity of their tasks, the level of personal accountability, the difficulties of time management, and the constant interruptions to their work, all stemming from their service in the rural setting. (Lamkin, 2006, p. 21)

In Lamkin's 2006 study of rural superintendents, it was revealed that rural districts deal with: community scrutiny based on personal judgements of what they see and what the superintendent says, emotions running high and gossip maneuvering the district, and superintendents having to do the jobs of several district employees which takes focus away from leading instructional learning.

Lamkin's study (2006) confirmed the various challenges outlined by Copeland (2013), Harmon and Schafft (2009) and Jenkins (2007)'s rural superintendent studies. Furthermore, Tekniepe (2015) ascertained that the unique set of challenges a rural superintendent must face (e.g., finances, resources, elected boards, community members, stress of the job, specialized expectations, etc.) regularly leads to high turnover, chiefly indicating district instability. "The rural superintendent who does not give serious consideration to the community's reaction when making a decision, is a superintendent who is destined for a short term" (Jenkins, 2007, p. 30).

Sherman (2000) proposed that women continue to be marginalized in rural settings and misrepresented in leadership research because men have maintained the majority of executive roles in and outside of education. Sherman (2000) asserted that successful female superintendents have taken on the traditional leadership roles as "men in skirts" (Sherman, 2000). In addition, Sherman (2000) emphasized that rural communities continue to see women's

place in the home, rearing children, which makes it difficult for female leaders to be taken seriously. I find Sherman's research particularly intriguing based on the above rural community gender research that exhibits how rural communities seem to live in world of paradox: females are supposed to take care of the family as traditional history would depict the female yet they are expected to conduct laborious work in the field. Frequently, the traditional ideal of a *woman's place* causes community doubt for the female rural superintendents when they generate educational decisions (Sherman, 2000). One may conclude that female superintendents of these school systems face gendered, professional adversities, experiences, and successes. This research looks to describe the female gendered, professional experiences as female rural superintendents.

Summary of Implications

There is an absence in the literature that focuses solely on female rural superintendents. Moreover, it was difficult to find recent female rural superintendent studies (within the last decade). Nonetheless, this limited research demonstrates how the experiences of female rural superintendents vary from their male associates. In my literature review I presented an overwhelming historical account of barriers for women in education, particularly regarding females as superintendents in rural school districts.

Likewise, research has shown that rural communities are often overlooked and present a unique set of challenges that are not necessarily found in urban or suburban school districts. Additionally, rural communities have been governed by policy set for urban and suburban schools which has led to discontent, consolidation, and a disregard for the rural people (Blauwkamp et al., 2011). Not only has the literature ascertained the importance of gender equality for social justice in educational leadership, it has also uncovered the explicit need to add female voice to past and present history, perhaps influencing the future to balance the scale for female superintendents, especially in rural settings where traditional gender roles hinder female leadership. It is possible, and most likely, that female rural superintendents navigate multiple dimensions of injustice both due to their gender and rurality. Blauwkamp et al. (2011) explained, "More troubling still is the reality that rural citizens are subjected to discrimination. *Ruralism*, as Bassett has argued, "remains unacknowledged, indeed unrecognized, as a form of discrimination" (2003, p. 279¹²)" (p. 3). Thus, it is necessary to bring forth literature,

highlighting the inequities from the intersection of rurality and gender for the female rural superintendent. Therefore, the literature has presented a substantial gap which has greatly supported this research study of the professional, gendered experiences of female rural superintendents in the twenty-first century. Research in the field of female rural superintendents must continue. Through thoughtful, proactive thinking and support, women seeking the rural superintendency are encouraged to challenge these barriers and boundaries in their rural communities (Sherman, 2000). Consequently, my study will be conducted in rural communities of the Midwest.

Chapter 3

The research question at the heart of this investigation is:

- What are the gendered, professional experiences of female rural superintendents in the twenty-first century?

As noted in Chapter 2, the literature has presented a need to examine the intersection of being a female superintendent in a rural school district. As distinguished, rural school districts are discounted, much like female superintendents who only make up approximately a third of US superintendents in a majority female-dominated profession. Chapter 1 introduced research concerning female superintendents and afforded a summation of the purpose for conducting this inquiry. Additionally, Chapter 1 founded this investigation's conceptual framework grounded in feminist standpoint and intersectionality theories. The main research question was presented along with the delimitations, limitations, and organization of this study.

Chapter 2 examined scholarly literature regarding: the history of females in education, barriers for females in educational leadership, rural communities, rural school systems, and rural leadership and the overall social injustice faced by females in rural school districts. The selected literature was derived from scholarly articles from peer-reviewed journals (e.g., JSTOR, Sage Publications, ERIC, etc.), university research, current news articles for statistics, government agencies for statistics and reports, and various educational dissertations. The goal was to locate as much literature as possible in order to postulate an exhaustive synopsis of females in educational leadership, rural communities, and the social injustices faced by female rural superintendents.

Through this research process, I gleaned two identified gaps in the current literature. First being, there are several female superintendent studies that have been conducted or are in the process of conduction; however, there are limited female superintendent studies found in rural settings. The second gap in literature is the overlooked-rural school district in educational research and policy and the intersection found for females as superintendents in rural settings. An inherent duality of social injustice for females in rurality as educational leaders exists and is often ignored. Only a few rural specific sources were found when searching for literature regarding rural schools. These sources consisted of: a recent government report on the current predicament of rural education (Lavalley, 2018); reports on *Why Rural Matters* (Showalter, et al, 2017 & 2019); the journals, *The Rural Educator*, and *Journal of Research in Rural Education*.

Other sources originated from various peer-reviewed articles and books. Although other sources highlighted rurality, they were not dedicated to rural education and the superintendency. Thus, I confer that when combining the female superintendency with a rural school district, an identified gap in the literature is established.

The purpose of my study was to add authentic, female voice to history by retelling the stories of present-day and retired female superintendents who experienced their professional careers in rural school districts through a feminist lens. “The rural, like gender, is messy, fluid and complicated. Definitive and unequivocal universal assessments of inequalities which arise from the intersections between gender and rurality are thus impossible to make” (Pini, et al, 2014, p. 456). Chapter 3 sets the stage for the research design and methodologies implemented in this research study. Moreover, Chapter 3 reintroduces the methodology, research questions, research setting and population sample, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, and timeline for this research study. Thus, this study sought to answer the question:

- What are the gendered, professional experiences of female rural superintendents in the twenty-first century?

Research Design - Qualitative Study

My study of female rural superintendents was performed as qualitative research. Qualitative research searches to distinguish society through social experience and interaction in order to gain insight into our human world (Hatch, 2002). Additionally, it comprises methodologies that are often subjective and not easily amenable to analysis with statistics or other quantifiable systems (Hatch, 2002). In my view, qualitative research was advantageous for this exploration of female rural superintendents. Qualitative research afforded a foundation for the feminist theoretical lens of standpoint and intersectionality theories employed in this study. Qualitative research with the feminist theoretical lens provided a frame of reference for my positionality, the writing of the questions and chosen vignettes, the way in which I interviewed candidates, and how I analyzed the data and afforded conclusions for this study (J.W. Creswell & J.D. Creswell, 2018). The goal was to capture twenty-first century female stories, lived experiences of their gendered, professional journey as superintendents in rural communities. This study inserts female voice into the rural superintendency of the twenty-first

century and has added to the overall history of women in educational leadership in the United States.

Constructivist Worldview

The philosophical perspectives taken during this inquiry were based from a constructivist worldview containing the following elements as depicted by J.W. Creswell and J.D. Creswell (2018), “understanding, multiple participant meanings, social and historical construction, and theory generation” (J.W. Creswell & J.D. Creswell, 2018, p. 6). Nevertheless, this research integrated transformative outlooks, including: “political, power and justice oriented, collaborative, and change-oriented” stances (J.W. Creswell & J.D. Creswell, 2018, p. 6). Constructivists believe that a multitude of truths and realities exist according to individuals and *social groups* who experience them (Hatch, 2002). This definition fits well with standpoint feminism, implemented in this study. Furthermore, constructivism or social constructivism ascertains that a person’s perception of reality is constructed from social interaction, and historical and cultural customs that are personal to their unique experiences (J.W. Creswell & J.D. Creswell, 2018). In this constructivist framework, I positioned myself within the research, recognizing how my own perspective of the world and positionality impacted this research; yet I diligently worked to accurately represent the participants’ insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018) without personal bias.

Constructivism adds voice and knowledge to history; however, it does not always seek to improve social structures, whereas transformative frameworks elevate the research in order to bring about change. Transformative standpoints typically work with marginalized groups and seek helpful solutions for social justice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, this worldview interconnects well with feminist theory because “feminist scholars are most interested in exposing material differences gender makes in women’s life chances” (Hatch, 2002, p.16). I consider this study of female rural superintendents to use both the constructivist and transformative vantage points. Nonetheless, the political nature of transformative worldviews and certain feminist theories conflict with the purpose of this work because it is not meant to be political; instead it is meant to uncover the hidden stories of female rural superintendents.

Narrative Inquiry

Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk (2007) claimed, “In terms of locating it in the broad spectrum of qualitative research, it (narrative inquiry) tends to be positioned within a constructivist stance with reflexivity, interpretivism and representation being primary features of the approach (p. 460). I agree with Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk (2007) that because narrative inquiry encompasses all of these above methodological approaches, narrative inquiry was the best choice for this research study and the reason for its application. According to Hatch (2002) narrative research favors both constructivist and feminist philosophies; therefore, it was beneficial for this study of female rural superintendents.

Narrative research interprets individual’s stories to bring forth meaning and an awareness to a social injustice (Hatch, 2002). Likewise, narrative studies tell how people experience the world they live in (Connelly & Clandinin, 2016). Authors, Ospina and Dodge (2005) ascertained that narratives provide hidden standpoints of wisdom and knowledge that add to the body of social science research. Components of narrative research are: reviewing life experiences, examining social groups, telling stories, and incorporating history, sociology, and ideals from the humanities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, narrative inquiry provided a necessary framework for this research study of female rural superintendents.

Ospina and Dodge (2005) affirmed that narratives “... allow new voices to be heard that can inform how we understand life in organizations” (p. 413). Hence, my study of female rural superintendents was a qualitative study with a constructivist mindset, conducted by narrative inquiry. Furthermore, this study integrated the following narrative inquiry concepts from Ospina and Dodge (2005):

- 1) ... conveys meanings ... intentions, beliefs, values, and emotions that reflect situated social reality, rather than reflecting an “objective reality” per se.
- 2) ... carries practical knowing that individuals have gained through their experience....
- 3) ... is constitutive, which means that they (narratives) are not only shaped by individuals, but they also shape individuals” (Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy 2005, 290–91). (Ospina & Dodge, 2005, p. 414)

Additionally, Savin-Baden and Van Niekerk (2007) postulated that narrative inquiry in qualitative research inspires experiential stories of individual realities. Yet another reason why I applied narrative inquiry. In this research, I chose to reveal the professional, gendered stories of

each female rural superintendent as well as afford the common themes that resulted from this research. These themes were found through the coding process (J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018). People learn from storytelling; we read stories, we hear stories, we gain understanding about the world we live in and other's navigations of the world and their personalized experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 2016). What better way to add *the hidden* female voice to the world of educational leadership and scholarship than through the telling of personal, lived, real-authentic experiences, I conclude. Furthermore, it is my opinion that this study has the capacity to touch the lives of others who may relate to the stories told. Additionally, these stories afford empathy to those who have not experienced such tales; thus, illuminating social injustices that remain for females in rural superintendencies.

Research Question

The aim of this research study was to add female voice to the study of educational leadership specific to the superintendency in rural school districts. Through the literature review, I uncovered the reputed absence of the female voice in history with regards to education and in rural America. The literature revealed the substantial barriers for women in attaining their education, becoming teachers, and achieving leadership positions, especially the superintendency in rural school districts. Furthermore, the literature has postulated the lack of research and oversight of rural school districts.

Additionally, this gap has acknowledged the unique challenges faced in rural school settings that are dissimilar from urban and suburban school districts. Thus, conducting a narrative, qualitative study of current-day and retired female rural superintendents via a feminist lens adds scholarly work, informing the public about the existing female social injustice in the rural superintendency, other educational leadership positions and the general need to attend to rural school districts (Lavalley, 2018). Hence, the research question for this study was:

- What are the professional, gendered experiences of female rural superintendents in the twenty-first century?

Research Setting and Sample Population

Qualitative research explores how individuals interact and add significance to society (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Typically, qualitative research is concerned with an in-depth look at individual's lived experiences and therefore, requires a relatively small sample size (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). This qualitative study consisted of four retired female superintendents and two present rural superintendents who have served or currently serve rural school districts. These participants were chosen based on their service to rural districts, their willingness to be interviewed, and their availability.

Due to the nature and sensitivity of this topic, I had to protect each participant's untold story. First, I designed an *Informed Consent* document, approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in order to comply ethically while conducting research (Kim, 2016). Next, I removed all potential identifiers and implemented pseudonyms for participant names and any other possible identifying information. I did not mention any names of school districts or the state where these rural districts are situated. Instead, I informed the readers of this research that my study took place in the Midwest region of the United States (Kim, 2016). I ensured the privacy of all participant statements and responses; only I had access to the research data as proposed by Kim (2016).

Lastly, Kim (2016) recommended two other ways to maintain confidentiality by including a *post-confidentiality form* at the end of the interview that asks for the participant to identify what exactly is to be kept confidential (p. 159). I verbally asked each participant after the interview if there was anything in particular that I needed to change or keep secret. Each participant informed me of their wishes and I granted them in this research process. The second suggestion was to simply ask the participants if I could contact them after the interview for clarification which I did (Kim, 2016, p. 159). Furthermore, I invited the participants to review their narratives in order to ensure that I have interpreted their stories with integrity. This practice offers validity to my research through a process called member checking. This practice is considered to be a strong triangulation methodology (J.W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell (2018). Member checking helped eliminate my researcher bias and ensured the validity and confidentiality of this study.

Instrumentation

As noted, the purpose of this research was to express the untold stories of female rural superintendents. These experiences were unique to each individual. There unique stories are told through the feminist lens. Five themes appeared among the six female rural superintendent participants (the district must be the right *fit*; *the good old boys' club*, other women / female saboteurs; loneliness; and a female *fighting* spirit). I gathered this data through qualitative data collection procedures as described in the next section.

Interviews

It was my goal as a feminist researcher to embody the true nature of feminist research as described by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006):

Research that gets at an *understanding of women's lives and those of other oppressed groups*, research that promotes *social justice and social change*, and research that is mindful of the *researcher-researched relationship* and the *power and authority* imbued in the researcher's role are some of the issues that engage the feminist researcher.

(Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 117)

According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) feminist interviewing has the opportunity to provide excellent insight into the world of women's lived experiences. In addition, as the feminist researcher I employed what is called, reflexivity, which indicates that I consistently thought of how my positionality and personal bias impacted the interview and research process, myself and the interviewee (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Additionally, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) affirmed that by utilizing feminist standpoint theory, I was able to constantly review my own standpoint as the researcher which increased my objectivity.

I engaged in the semi-structured interview process with each of the participants either face-to-face or over the phone. I sent the research questions to candidates via email and invited them to participate in a google form for vignette response. I interviewed two candidates face-to-face, three candidates by phone and one candidate responded to my questions electronically. I researched the gendered, professional experiences of female superintendents in the twenty-first century; therefore, I guided the interviews with general questions which helped us to stay on topic (Kim, 2016). Nevertheless, the semi-structured interview process allowed me to go with the flow of the respondent's answers and gave me the ability to ask clarifying questions when necessary (Kim, 2016).

As each participant responded, I had the opportunity to add and ask follow-up questions in order to acquire vital details to best understand the entire story given from each of the participants. Kim (2016) posited, "...An interview needs to be designed in a way that it invites our interviewees to speak in their own voices, to express themselves freely, deciding where to start their story as well as the flow of the topics (creating their own narrative schema)" (p. 165). My goal throughout the interview process was to grasp the authentic perspectives of female rural superintendents and their lived (gendered and professional) experiences while on their journey to becoming superintendents and while leading their districts.

Once I received IRB approval, I contacted the interviewees via phone and email to set up times for the interviews. Respondents were selected based on a willingness to be interviewed, their identified gender as female, being over the age of 18, and their service to rural districts as superintendents. Every single female rural superintendent I invited to participate agreed and partook in this qualitative research study. Although interviewing participants face-to-face would have been ideal, due to distance (i.e., participants physical location out of state, etc.) I conducted some interviews over the phone and I turned my interview and vignette into an open-ended computer questionnaire.

Moreover, I implemented a recording device and took notes in order to attain all response details during the interviews. Then, I transcribed each interview. There was one interviewee that chose to answer the vignettes prior to the interview and sent those to me via google forms and one other participant sent the interview questions and the vignettes via email and a google form. Their answers were automatically in transcription format.

Vignettes

In order to enhance the qualitative gathered, each participant responded to five vignettes. Each vignette chosen were stories of females in educational leadership situations. Hughes and Huby (2004) avowed that "Vignettes refer to text, images or other forms of stimuli which research participants are asked to respond (Hughes & Huby, 2004)" (p. 36). I implemented textual vignettes in the form of short scenarios taken from real-life female superintendent, rural superintendent scholarly articles, and or eye-witness accounts that addressed gendered, professional experiences. This provided vignette validity which indicated that the vignettes implemented were true to the research topic studied (Hughes & Huby 2004). Furthermore, Hughes and Huby (2004) posited that, "generally vignettes are more likely to be effective when

they engage participants' interest, are relevant to people's lives, and appear real" (p. 40). The textual vignettes were real and relevant because the participants are or were female superintendents in rural school districts, having faced gendered professional experiences.

Moreover, the use of vignettes as a methodology elicited more truthful responses because they were impersonal. According to Martin (2006) vignettes "... offer a less threatening way to explore sensitive subjects (Finch, 1987). Their specificity allows contextual influences on judgments to be examined" (p. 2). Moreover, these vignettes triggered memories that they had either forgotten about or saw in a different light. These responses were combined as a component of the participants' interviews in order to add details to their narratives. Furthermore, they were analyzed for emergent themes.

Data Analysis

As described above, two main data instruments (interviews and vignette responses) were utilized and qualitatively collected. Each subject was considered a source of information that provided data for this research study. Furthermore, the interview and vignettes were complimentary data collection tools which increased internal validity. First, I coded the interview and vignette responses for meaning as I searched for themes interpreted through standpoint and intersectionality feminism. Creswell, J. and Creswell, D. (2018) described the process of coding as, "organizing the data by bracketing chunks... and writing a word representing a category in the margins" (p. 193). During the coding process, themes emerged and became integral parts of the analysis process as supported by Creswell, J. and Creswell, D. (2018):

...themes are the ones that appear as major findings in qualitative studies and are often used as headings in the findings' sections of studies... they should display multiple perspectives from individuals and be supported by diverse quotations and specific evidence. (p. 194)

Then, I wrote a narrative that represented each of the themes, supported by research and evidence found during data collection and analysis. Moreover, I interpreted these results by "summarizing the overall findings, comparing the findings to the literature, discussing a personal view of the findings, and stating limitations and future research" (p. 198), as noted by Creswell, J. and Creswell, D. (2018).

Lastly, in order to add the superintendent's voices to history, I organized their individual responses into stories that provided insight and lessons learned for the world to see regarding female educational leaders and rural school districts. I found this to be of the utmost importance because it was an objective of this research study to tell the untold stories of these amazing women who have forged the way for other females to become leaders in a world of societal injustices based on gender and rurality.

After the interviews were transcribed, participants had the opportunity to revise their transcribed interviews and narratives elicited from both their interview and vignette responses. This afforded validity and is called, *member checking*. Member checking is the process that allows participants to review their responses and the narratives established from those responses in order to ensure that the researcher interpreted the data (their personalized responses) (Creswell, J. & Creswell, D., 2018).

I was keen to my positionality as I conducted my research and I worked diligently to ensure the correct interpretation of other female's experiences. I applied reflexivity and included how my data analysis was configured by my personal and professional lived experiences and belief system (Creswell, J. & Creswell, D., 2018). Overall, the purpose of this study was to add female voice to history in an understudied area, shed light on the plight of the female rural superintendent, and demonstrate the importance of the rural school district, in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

My mom always said,

“When you get the right job, you’ll be like a creek running free.” When I got the superintendent’s job, there were days when I felt like I was in my element. I felt like that creek running free.

– Milly, Female Rural Superintendent Participant

The purpose of this study was to uncover the gendered experiences of female rural superintendents and add their voice to history. History has a lack of feminine perspective, especially in the realm of education. Although, women have been somewhat ignored and placed into a box of societal expectations and perception, rurality parallels a similar history and existence; hidden from reality. Thus, creating a duality of intersectionality for women superintendents of rural school districts. The following research question was the underpinning of this data collection:

- What are the professional, gendered experiences of female rural superintendents in the twenty-first century?

This chapter attempts to answer this question by revealing the unique stories of six female rural superintendents who have served their school districts in the twenty-first century. In order to obtain their stories, I conducted semi-structured interviews and asked each participant to respond to five vignettes during the 2019-2020 school year. One interview was conducted face-to-face, one interview was conducted by answering the questions via the computer and the other four interviews were conducted by telephone. Every single female that was asked to participate, had a great desire to tell their story and was included in the study. My research revealed five common themes for rural female superintendents:

- 1) The District Must be the Right *Fit*
- 2) Other Women (Female Saboteurs)
- 3) The *Good Old Boys’ Club*
- 4) Loneliness
- 5) An Ethical Fighting Spirit of Determination, Grit, and Resilience

These themes will be explored in Chapter 5.

In order to maintain anonymity each participant was given a pseudonym and the school districts went unnamed. Interviews (except for the computer response interview) were recorded and transcribed. Each interview was transcribed by an outside, approved organization and sent to the participants to check for accuracy and to include triangulation. Furthermore, because this study was conducted as narrative inquiry, I found it imperative to outline their stories and then, apply an eight-step process to find, relate, and interpret any themes (J.W. Creswell & J.D. Creswell, 2018).

Out of the six female rural superintendents, four of them were retired and two continue to serve as female superintendents. These female rural superintendents share familiar stories and yet they contrast as much as they are alike. Each female superintendent's story is broken down into four major sections: 1) Her Professional Journey – On the Road to the Superintendency; 2) Her Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent; 3) Vignette Responses; and 4) Her Advice to Future Female Rural Superintendents.

Milly

Milly's Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency

Milly is a woman of perpetual strength and unconditional servitude for others, with a life's mission to grow all learners, especially the underachievers. She dedicated her life to the field of education with a desire to set people free, free from oppression and authoritative demands from bureaucracy within school districts. Throughout Milly's professional experiences she concluded that the only way to carry out her life's mission was to become the CEO of the organization, the superintendent of a school district... and she did just that, but not without struggle and strife. This is Milly's journey.

Milly was raised by parents with conservative values backed by military principles which she claimed, attributed to her: ability to be mobile, strength of character, work-ethic, and overall perseverance to accomplish her dreams. Milly confirmed:

I grew up traveling a lot and that played into my ability to be mobile. I continued college to pursue all of my degrees. It wasn't difficult for me to pick up and move.

Unfortunately, I went through a couple of divorces in the middle of all that - so that helped me to be mobile too, because I didn't have a reason to stay put.

Milly began her career with a bachelor's degree in home economics and became a specialist in child development. She pursued her master's degree in early childhood and began her career teaching kindergarten level work which led her to obtain a teaching certificate for elementary grades, K-3. After developing her love for the elementary, Milly pursued her career through middle school grades and became intrigued in the economically deprived; children who were academically challenged. This work led to her position as the president of the state's association for state and federal education programming. During her middle school teaching, Milly earned her doctorate degree in Educational Leadership with an emphasis on preparing administrators for community partnerships.

Throughout Milly's journey she acquired numerous educational administrative experiences serving as: a principal for a Christian Private School, the Director of a Military Academy for grades 7-12, and an adju of Education. While serving as a Christian Head of Schools, she often acted as the superintendent and this is where she thought, "Okay, I think I'll be a superintendent someday." Additionally, Milly mentioned that she had a supportive male mentor who encouraged her throughout her professional journey. She met him through employment as her boss, where he identified her strengths and advocated for her career in educational administration. Milly followed his career and became the Coordinator of Federal Programs of a large, mainly blue-collar school district with a community predominantly Caucasian. After working as the Coordinator, Milly became the assistant superintendent in another school district and left the district where she had worked for her mentor. It is important to mention that this school district was demographically very different from the district of her rural superintendency.

Prior to becoming a female superintendent of a rural school district from 2007 - 2016, Milly professed:

Before it was over, I had everything from caring for infants to college in terms of my experience, so that set me up for the superintendency because that made me a systems thinker and all of the education was icing on the cake. I moved, I traveled, I had seen the world, I had been in private schools, I had been in small schools, I had been in large schools and I was ready.

Milly's career was not without turmoil; she faced many gender issues and financial struggles due to being a single female. During Milly's interview she disclosed that women

mistreated her more than men. In summary, women treated her badly because they wanted her to disappear, demeaned her; gave her the cold shoulder, would not let her be in the spotlight, they felt threatened by her and they would keep her uninformed. Milly proclaimed that one woman had her doing work outside of the district, researching, in order to hide her away from the school community and keep her from knowing what was going on in the district. She stated that men hit on her and when she did not comply she knew she could not get promoted and that it was time to leave. "I was a pretty woman in a man's world and that made it even more difficult," Milly, revealed. When asked about the barriers, Milly stated:

Financial because I was a single mom and I was trying to make ends meet and I had to pay for my own schooling so I had a financial barrier. Boy do I hate to ... I don't know how to say ... I don't even know how to get at the gender issues because I was a woman in a man's world, how else can I put it?

Next, Milly began to explain the obstacles she had to overcome. Although she mentioned the financial obstacle of supporting herself through school as a single mother, her reasons for mobility, heartache, and lack of promotion was attributed to being a beautiful, intelligent woman. Milly emphasized:

This is not meant in a bragging way. This is just how I felt and how I was treated. I was a pretty woman in a man's world and that made it even more difficult. That was the rough part. I had to move a lot. I had to go where ... Boy, this is hard to put in words. Women didn't like me. They were threatened by me. And, oh, this hurts my gut. Women wanted me to go away. Women, they didn't even want to compete with me. They just wanted me to disappear and they were not always kind. Well, they gave me the cold shoulder of course. Some of the women who were educational leaders who maybe were supervisors above me would find demeaning words to say to me. Or if they had the power, they would withhold certain assignments from me to kick me out of the picture. They would not put me in a lead role. They would push me back in line so that I didn't have a chance to shine. One supervisor put me on the road. She actually took me out of school district and gave me assignments that would take me out of the school district so that I wasn't even in the meetings with my colleagues... and the men would hit on me and when I wouldn't comply, I would get the cold shoulder and in order to get promoted, I had to move on to different jobs. It kept me moving to different systems. I would move

to a different school... To play the game, I had to keep moving ... Because I couldn't stay there and overcome the situation. Because when your boss is a man and you've turned him down, unless you step out there and make it known and live through all of the backlash from a situation like that, there's nothing else to do, but hang your head and go. I would recognize the problem and understand that I could go nowhere in that particular school district. So, I would leave, I would leave and it happened repeatedly.

In order for Milly to overcome these multiple barriers she felt that she had to attain the position as superintendent, so no one could hold her back or tell her authoritatively what and how to do things for the school district. Milly stated:

As superintendent, I could be the one to make the decisions and ultimately, I could be the one to set my staff free. I didn't want to lead a school district in a manner in which there would be oppression in the environment. The way I could overcome that and make a change was to become the CEO of the organization.

Milly became the superintendent of a rural district near a college town. This small, rural town was considered a rural, agricultural community, situated near a college town. It had a population predominantly white (approximately 90%) where over a third of its people were economically disadvantaged (approximately 36%). This school district served around a total of 900 students grades K-12.

Milly's Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent

Milly expressed that for her, being a female superintendent in a rural community was a wonderful experience yet extremely challenging because she had to keep her personal life invisible. I could hear the teardrops rolling down her cheeks and the sniffles from her broken heart. I knew that Milly's experience as a female rural superintendent was deep and personal. "Well," Milly stated, "I'm just a girl and I don't want people to find me again." This statement alone, told me everything; I instantaneously felt her pain. Milly continued her story:

It's been a very huge struggle professionally and for me personally, because I was a divorcee. I was a single lady and made it even more difficult because in a rural setting where everybody knows everybody, people want to know all about your personal life and they can be ... Oh, it's just like all eyes are on you. So, I felt like I had to live an unblemished life. I felt like I couldn't make any mistakes. I felt like I had to keep my

private, personal life far, far away from my professional life. I knew even the board members and people in the community that had these really tight values because in the rural community, there tends to be ... Oh, and in my experience, more conservative thinking. And therefore, I felt a lot of pressure to comply with those conservative standards which meant I, as a single lady, I couldn't, I didn't need to be seen out there with men.

Milly could barely express with words, the tremendous pain she felt from being a female superintendent of a rural community due to the loneliness. She had buried this pain, proud of her successful accomplishments as a long-term superintendent in a conservative, rural community. Milly explained:

I actually put my life on hold for many, many, many years. The personal life that I did have was very, very private. I often thought, I cried, I can cry today just thinking about the pain. Oh. The pain of being alone. It's very difficult. But it's real. It's real and this is what single ladies have to go through. I thought, for so many years, if I just had a family, if I just had a husband, if I just had somebody to attend the functions with, I could be normal. And I didn't get that opportunity. I didn't get that opportunity because I wouldn't get married again because I was too busy with my work.

According to Milly, part of what attributed to her loneliness and her success as a superintendent was that her two lovely children were grown by the time she accepted the assistant superintendent position. Another aspect of her lonely years, as she explained was that as an administrator, one must honor confidentiality, which means keeping pertinent information all to oneself with no one to share the burden. In Milly's words:

You have to honor the need to be ever so careful about every word you speak. Every bit of information you give or don't give. You have to be a politician and you have to honor information so I couldn't talk to anybody. I couldn't talk to people. So, I lived a very, very lonely life. It didn't hit me when I was a principal. When I was a superintendent, and I stepped into rooms, and I stepped up on podiums, I realized, Holy crap. This is all up to me. I've got to say the right thing. I've got to do the right thing. I've got to be the right person or this thing could come crashing down on any given day.

As a female rural superintendent, Milly did not experience the same types of gender obstacles as she had on her professional road to becoming a superintendent. As a matter of fact,

when asked about her experiences with the board members she stated, “Regarding the board members, the women were very, very supportive. The men seemed to show a high level of respect.” Milly was first hired by an entirely male school board and then as time went on, both men and women were elected. Furthermore, she discussed that the interviewing process was extremely empowering and she felt that with each interview she gained insight and growth. She felt that every superintendent interview prior to landing her position was a stepping stone, moving her forward in the overall process of leading a district. Milly stated, “Interviewing led me to a different level of learning and I interviewed probably eight times before I got my superintendent's opportunity and I learned a lot during those interviews!” Furthermore, Milly described her love for people and service as a major component for progressing her district.

I'm a lady of faith and I believe in putting everything I have into what I do, I wanted to serve. So, I served people, I served children, I served teachers, I served other educational leaders, I served my board, I served my community and this service type attitude opened up the door for a tremendous amount of success because people wanted to come on this journey with me.

Moreover, Milly credited a great deal of her success to honesty and teamwork, “...always laying the truth out on the table and working together to strive for our goals and developing a mission together.” Also, Milly said that this district, this small rural community, was an immediate fit for her. She knew that it fit her personality and her leadership style. Milly affirmed the importance of having a supportive team as a superintendent and for the district to be a match. ‘You have to have it. If you don't have it, you need to go somewhere else. If you don't have it, chances are you won't succeed. That's pretty strong language coming from me, I know.’”

Vignettes

During the interview, Milly commented on five vignettes, or scenarios, of real-life experiences faced by female educational leaders. When we discussed dress and size as a female, rural superintendent Milly affirmed that the way you dress and your size matters.

When I would wear my black suit and my high heels, I was treated differently. I felt like I knew the days I needed to dress a little bit more authoritatively. So yes, dress matters. Size matters because the tall overpower and whether it's men or women, there are many rooms you get in and the tall overpower. That's just the law of nature.

One vignette discussed the female experience of entering a male dominated room. This vignette reminded Milly of the necessity to build relationships.

You cannot just go into a room and say anything you want to say; you have to earn your way in and build relationships with people, one at a time. I became very skilled at working a room by building a network of people one by one by one by one. I always did a lot of building of relations outside of rooms, it was always very helpful when I had professional colleagues in a room. I would make it a point to find a way to start a conversation with people I didn't know so that I could build some trust with them ever so quickly and in order to earn the right to have a say at the table, you have to put in that kind of legwork to be able to have a voice.

Another vignette narrated a woman in a *good old boys' club* where the men take women's ideas or do not listen to them. Milly commented:

For me personally, it was very difficult because I have a soft voice. I always had to use my choice of words and I would wait until the right time before I spoke and that's how I won my colleagues over. You have to use your facets of personal power or presence. You have to work them all. You can't force your way past or into *the big boys' club*. One day, I actually walked into a group of men and I threw my arms around some of their shoulders and I said, "Okay, how do I join *this big boys' club*?" And their eyeballs came out of their heads. And I said, "Well, I guess if you won't let me in, I'll just have to go form a girl's club. *The good old girls' club*." And they just got a big kick out of that. So, I made a joke out of it.

In addition, Milly stated that she handled critical conversations with kindness and would use phrases such as, "Hey, have you thought about what you just said this way? Could you do that a different way? Or what do you think about this?" This is part of the honesty Milly discussed earlier that gained her respect with both her male and female colleagues. She addressed the issue in a non-confrontational manner. Milly affirmed:

You don't want to make the matter worse than it is. So, it's like working with kids and trying to solve problems. You just had to back out of it, figure out what it was and go about the business of resolving it. When you discipline kids, one of my favorite formulas was, "Tell me what happened. Tell me what should have happened. Tell me what you're going to do about it." And sometimes with adults, with a man who had just mistreated

me, with total disrespect, I might actually find a different time to have a conversation with him and say, "I want to talk to you about something. I want to share with you something that happened." And here's how I felt about it. "Is there anything we can do about this in the future to keep it from happening again?" And more than not, I was able to resolve issues. So, you met them head on, in a private way so nobody felt ... So, he didn't have his ego crushed in front of anybody.

Milly's advice to future female rural superintendents

Milly believed that no matter what district a superintendent chooses, it must be the right fit. She ascertained that successful superintendents must excel in the area of communication.

Milly stated:

Find a place where you can be true to yourself. Find a place where your values match the values of that community. Know yourself and have your own belief system well established. Stay student focused under all circumstances and if you find yourself in a place where that isn't the focus and people have other agendas, then look deeply before committing to that work. You have to learn how to respond to questions that come... to people's curiosities and people's interrogations. Some people thrive on the negative, you know that and you have these simple phrases that shut them down, that you simply have to learn how not to answer questions if that makes any sense. Well, you don't have to defend anything, you just don't answer it. That's right. That's right and you learn to smile and nod. You can fire people and they can walk out of the room smiling not knowing what happened to them. Those are skills. So, wrap your arms around those kinds of skills as you move on this journey, and be ever so mindful of what other superintendents are saying and how they're handling situations and maybe just keep a running tab of simple phrases and words...And then, don't let anything stop you. Then just move toward that goal with this ... With all your strength and mind!"

In conclusion, Milly's journey on the way to becoming a female rural superintendent revealed several gender issues that she confronted mainly by women. However, once she became a superintendent of a rural district, she did not face the same types of gender-discriminatory obstacles. Although she encountered the *Good Old Boys' Club*, she managed to earn their respect. Milly's story as a female rural superintendent that speaks particularly to rural

communities is the conservative ideals that she had to conform to whether they were what she believed or not. She felt she had to be a single, virtuous female leader, *leading an unblemished life* because all eyes were on her at all times. Had she been a single man in this rural community as a superintendent she doubted that she would have had to hide her personal life in the same way. Milly led her district for several years through 2016.

Ruth

Ruth's Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency

Ruth, a confident, logical, straight-shooter and spirited female who has an ability to get along with anyone, be decisive and make things happen. Ruth had overall marvelous experiences throughout her journey on the road to becoming a superintendent. Furthermore, she loved the superintendency in her rural district and viewed it as an exciting time of her life. Ruth lived in suburban areas until she was about thirteen years old and then she spent the rest of her childhood in rural school districts. For Ruth, rural communities were both her experience and comfort zone. Ruth began her educational career as a media specialist in a small rural school district. After years of coaching and teaching, Ruth was encouraged by her administrators to continue with her studies in the field of educational leadership. Ruth stated:

And they said, "You have leadership, you have a voice, you can do this." And really, I'm kind of going, Who me? Really? It wasn't something I was looking at. And they're like, "Yes, you absolutely, you're the one." So, I always stepped up to that challenge. I always went back to school. Then I always took the job and loved it. I saw myself as having a career as a teacher and maybe not leaving students, but I really felt strongly that I had a broader (not closer) influence over students as an administrator. Overall, I felt impactful and that was important to me.

Within one school system, Ruth had several opportunities for promotion. First, she was tapped to be a development coordinator, next assistant supervisor, then supervisor, then principal. Ruth explained that she truly did not have those ambitions. She was in her forties, did not have a master's degree and yet she attained these administrative positions as a female in a rural school setting.

I had taken ten years off to stay home and raise my children. Then, I went back into the field and I had to recertify. So, when I would get *tapped* for administration, I never

seemed to have the right degree or certification. Fortunately, I would always get the jobs... and then I had to hurry up and go back and get the degrees that supported those jobs.

Later, Ruth was hired as the first female principal of a Career Technical Center in the area and remained there for more than sixteen years. Ruth exclaimed:

The career tech world, that was very male driven. The only females might have been a supervisor over the business department or a supervisor over cosmetology and family and consumer science. But you weren't the principal. That was always someone who had come up the ranks. My two predecessors were a welding instructor and a carpentering instructor. It was almost more unusual to have been a principal at a career technical center in that timeframe, because it's been awhile, than it was to be a superintendent that was female.

When directly asked about any challenges or barriers Ruth faced, she mentioned that there may have been a tiny barrier during the interview process to obtain the principal's position:

"Gosh, what's she going to know about these fields," and the example I gave was, "Well, I think there's plenty of good principals that don't know the language or don't know physics or don't know some aspect, but they still know good teaching, and in that same way, I will still know if your carpentry instruction is good instruction."

Despite these questions from her interviewers, Ruth was the woman for the job! She got her hands dirty and her feet wet in order to prove that she was the right choice, female or not, for this principal position in a male's world. Ruth proclaimed:

I spent a ton of time in labs. I think that there's something to be said for being physically present, and the community felt that I was engaged because I was physically in their labs. I was in there. I was in every morning lab, I was in every afternoon lab. I had my own welding helmet, I had my own hard hat, I had my own safety glasses, and they taught me how to weld. I mean I just went up to the kids and said, "Hey," I asked with the instructor's permission, "Can I have him show me how to weld a line?" I did that, and I was in industrial mechanics and he was replacing a toilet seat. Then I replaced a toilet seat.

This is how Ruth prepared herself, unknowingly for the superintendency of a rural school district. She had several mentors that were always men because she did not know any female

administrators, only female teacher leaders. Ruth ascertained, "I didn't know any women in leadership. I mean I knew teacher leaders. I was a teacher leader. I mean, I've had every leadership role that a teacher could have."

Ruth described one other instance regarding gender that she encountered on her way to becoming the first female principal of a career technical school. Her superintendent shared this with her after she was hired. The superintendent who recommended Ruth for the principalship of the Career Technical Center told her that one board member asked, "Does she have the balls for the job?" and the superintendent replied, "She has more balls than the last three men that you hired." I believe Ruth felt empowerment from her superintendent's confidence. While on the job, she was highly supported by him and her other male colleagues (other administrators). Throughout Ruth's interview process she never felt that she had been treated differently because she was a female. However, when reflecting on this particular comment, Ruth realized that if she had been a man, that comment probably would not have been made.

Lastly, Ruth reflected on her leadership style as a principal. She confirmed that she may have used some mothering leadership strategies. Ruth claimed:

Yeah, you know, to be honest, I kind of did use mothering techniques as a principal when I was dealing with the male gender (colleagues and students). I found being a principal was very similar to being a counselor. I would ask myself, "I mean, is it a counseling issue? Is it a discipline problem?" Hmm... so, at times, I did use my mothering instincts when I was working as a principal. You use whatever is going to work.

Ruth's Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent

Sooner than later in 2006, Ruth became the female superintendent of a successful, mid-wealth, rural community where the school was the center of the village. In suburban and urban communities, schools are not typically the center of a community (Lavalley, 2018). Ruth served as superintendent for a little over five years. This particular rural community was unique because most rural communities have a high rate of poverty and her rural district did not. During Ruth's superintendency, this rural school district did not obtain federal funding for Title I (an indicator of poverty) and there were very few families with free or reduced lunch. When asked about her interactions with the rural community's school board she was accepted immediately. "I had five male school board members, but they had chosen me and they were vested in my

success and I immediately was encouraged to join rotary. And everything went exceedingly well.” Ruth discussed her success as follows:

It was wonderful. It truly was wonderful. Like I said, they were very supportive. I was in a wonderful school district. I would credit a lot of my success to knowing all of the cutting-edge improvement initiatives that were going on in the state and the nation. So, I think the board and community respected that. I just think it went super well.

In Ruth’s first year as superintendent she brought in \$350,000 plus of funding from her grant writing. She spent five years in the district as superintendent and she believes that she earned the district close to \$3,000,000 in grants. In order to gain these grants, Ruth collaborated with other school districts, always forming collaborative relationships with nearby school districts. Ruth proclaimed:

I think that the board was very happy in the way the district was moving forward with science, math, and technology. We had no AP classes before I came. We had four when I left. One AP class for each major subject area. So, they were just happy. That's why they hired me and they were happy with the way that things were going. I loved it. I mean, I was eating, drinking, and sleeping this job because I loved it.

Ruth attributed much of her success to being approachable in the community.

I spent time with families, I spent time at other civic events that were going on, whether they be art, musical, or festivals. People told me that I was approachable. I don't know whether that's specifically female or male. Probably not, but I do think that, that was a benefit, that mothers and fathers and community people felt that I was approachable. It was being approachable, but also being accessible because I was out and about. I think that helped me a lot.

Ruth described her overall experience leading a rural school district as amazing with minimal issues regarding gender. She stated that she never really thought about gender playing a role in her successes and challenges as a female superintendent in a rural community.

However, she disclosed that gender issues may have existed and if there were, she overcame them. Ruth is the type of woman who does not let anything get in her way and she moves forward with her agenda. Ruth mentioned that the school board and community were very interested in how she would handle all of the coaching situations. Ruth felt that having

been a volleyball coach and a member of the athletic board supported her ability to make decisions and the community's confidence in those decisions regarding athletics.

Ruth fits the research regarding female superintendents because she was in her fifties and her children were grown at the time of her superintendency. As we continued to talk about her overall experiences as a rural female superintendent she brought to light some incidents that were worthy of reflection. Ruth described how her personal life was in order so that she could manage her job, leading a district.

And the time of my life was very good because my three kids were either in or out of college. So, I mean, I was fifty-three years old when I took the superintendency and I wasn't distracted from my work and my husband was very supportive. I'm not sure I could have done as much as I was able to do if I hadn't had his support. He picked up the slack at home... and the kids were out of the home. That made a big difference.

Ruth described the intersections of her personal and professional life as she merged them to become successful at her job as a rural female superintendent. She was married to a supportive husband; her kids were grown and she enjoyed going to sporting events and living within the community. Ruth noted that she lived in a *fishbowl*, because rural communities tend to know everyone's business and gossip murmurs like the wind throughout the town. This did not bother Ruth in the least, she felt that no matter where she went she would delight in her superintendency role. She always maintained her lifestyle, conforming with the values of the school. Ruth proclaimed:

I think being a leader in a school district in a small town is very, very important... for me it was definitely living in a fishbowl. Whether I was pumping gas or walking down the aisle of a grocery store, or at a school event I would run into community members. Every single time that I went out to dinner or stepped outside of my front door, I took it seriously because I was always representing the school. We did have a friendship group, but many of them were tied to school in one way or the other, either they were employees of the school or their children were students; no matter what in rural communities everyone is connected to the school, somehow; so, you have to be careful, you are always representing the district. But having a personal life...I did not have a personal life - I think I just lived that school life. I loved it. I loved that we were going to cross country matches and basketball games and football games and I was really fine with all of that.

Now, I had three adult children, none of whom lived there; so, I could get away. I did travel and visit them and kind of get away from it (from time-to-time), and my husband had business trips, so there were other things going on in my life. But when I was in my home district, that's what I did, and happily so.

Moreover, Ruth had fabulous mentors and support groups while leading her school district. Two of her mentors were both male, had been superintendents of rural districts, and were head of an elite, professional superintendency organization for the state. Regarding her mentors, Ruth stated:

I mean, they really knew the athletic league and the academic structures, and the one, he knew these communities. They were very willing to talk with me any time I needed it. When they knew that I was going to apply, I applied to two districts, and when they knew I was applying at those two districts, they're like, "Oh, send me a resume. I'll help you with that." They were wonderful mentors. Gave me great advice.

In addition to Ruth's mentors, she was highly involved in the state's women's association for superintendents. Ruth explained that one of their goals was to encourage more females to become superintendents. However, she said no matter what they did, it just never happened. She said that during her time as superintendent and as part of the women's association, females in the superintendency for the state hovered right around 18% and it never increased. Nevertheless, Ruth always felt very well accepted and respected by both men and women.

Vignettes

In response to the vignettes, Ruth stated that she never felt lonely because of the support she had with the state's organization for superintendents and the backing she had with local superintendents (they met monthly). However, Ruth mentioned that she confronted the *good old boys' club* as a superintendent, not during her rural superintendency. Ruth told her story:

I think the only time I really would have encountered what I thought was an *old boy system* was when I became an educational service center superintendent. So that's a little different than ... if I'm wearing my rural superintendent's hat, I didn't really feel an *old boys' club*. However, I absolutely felt it as an ESC superintendent. Well, right, wrong, or indifferent, I think there's ESC superintendents who are these well-known and

highly respected county superintendents who just get moved to an ESC. So, by their nature they maybe had been around for a while and held a lot of clout. I just did not find them to be the movers and shakers as a group. As a generalization, they were much more interested in the *status quo* or going backwards *to the way it used to be*. I didn't find that as a rural superintendent. I picked a district that fit me. I've seen some really powerful women in one district take a job that didn't fit them and then they were not successful.

In reference to another vignette regarding the *good old days* of men talking business at golf outings, Ruth declared these events had not disappeared and still continue, today in the twenty-first century. She attributed this to a tradition that most likely started when administrators were mostly men. This tradition still stands because it has not yet been updated. Ruth commented:

I've golfed in the past socially, but I never golfed on the job. I just didn't think that's what I should be doing. When I go to work, I am working. So that might be a little bit of a difference in how a man would look at it. I think women tend to look at it as... this is education. I don't work for some insurance company or something where things are decided on a golf course. So, I just didn't participate in that.

Upon further reflection stemming from a vignette that examines how women treat other women in educational leadership positions, she stated the following:

I don't think I was jealous. I don't think I encountered that female jealousy. I think I had good strong female relationships with my colleagues whether they were principals or treasurers or board members or superintendents. I do think that there are other instances where women are our own worst enemies. I think that we see that on a national political scene and in the last election where women do each other in because that's their own insecurities. But I didn't personally feel that I ever encountered that; I made good choices as to where I went.

Ruth's advice to future female rural superintendents

To conclude Ruth's story, she was incredibly successful as the first female principal of a Career Technical Center where she remained for over sixteen years, she became the first female superintendent of a rural school district where she stayed for five years, and later finished her career as a superintendent of an Educational Service Center (ESC) which lasted approximately eight years. Ruth is a trailblazer for women being the first to succeed as a female educational

leader, breaking the stereotypes and *glass ceiling*. Ruth attributed her success to picking the right school districts that fit her. She mentioned several times how females she knew had unsuccessful superintendencies based on the values of the community. Ruth left this advice for all aspiring female rural superintendents:

It is super, super important to be sure you're a fit for that district. I just felt it from the board right away. My husband and I came down and we drove every single street in this town. We went in and out of stores. We ate at restaurants. So, we spent time in this district and just in a casual way we'd talk to people who had no idea why we were there. So, I did a lot of research on the community. I went to the US Census Bureau online and you can look up all kinds of data. I just made sure it was the right fit. I didn't have to have this job, I was happy where I was. There was a superintendent opening in my district the following year for which I already had people say you need to interview for. So, I didn't feel any pressure. If I was going to move it was going to be the perfect situation and that's what I found. So, just very important to not take any superintendency, but to be sure you're taking the one that is the right fit for you. Then you can be your genuine self and it does not feel like work; it's not a burden. It's a love to work.

Lastly, Ruth advised:

I'd go back to Sheryl Sandberg and say lean in, we have a lot to offer. We're just as smart and just as capable and just as hardworking and we have just as many leadership goals and just as good analytical skills and evaluative skills. I say lean in and do it.”

Sarah

Sarah's Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency

Sarah is a woman of academia and fortitude who embodies ethics, efficiency and selflessness. Sarah is woman of integrity who enjoys challenges. It is important to her to improve education within the district she serves. Sarah has received many accolades as a teacher and an administrator for district goal achievement. On various occasions, she has led co-workers and staff members through the change process with prodigious success. This is Sarah's story. Sarah was born in a small town, yet traveled a great deal growing up. Sarah's family moved approximately every two years which presented the task of making and sustaining school-aged friendships. Furthermore, Sarah was educated in private catholic schools, for the majority of her

educational career. Sarah's large family, Sarah being the middle child of nine, finally settled in a small home town for her fifth-grade school year. She believed this stabilization grounded her educationally.

After graduation, Sarah started her own family. She gave birth to three lovely daughters prior to the age of 30. Sarah claimed that having her children early helped her while she was an administrator. For college, Sarah was educated in a well-known university of roughly 60,000 students. She took her first teaching position at a Catholic elementary school, the one that she had attended as a child. She taught fourth grade, all subjects, for five years, proving to be a woman of intelligence and ability. Later, Sarah decided to apply for a new position because she no longer saw *eye-to-eye* with her principal.

Sarah moved to a K-12 county school of roughly 2,500 students. This county school was very similar to a rural school, especially in its small size and due to its remote location. She taught eighth grade reading, history, and science courses. When looking back at her time spent teaching in this county school, Sarah felt that it was an enjoyable, fulfilling experience. She built long-lasting friendships with her colleagues. Sarah maintained that teaching eighth grade at a county school was distinctive from teaching fourth grade at a private Catholic school. She detailed, "It was a culture-shock, going from fourth grade Catholic school kids to eighth grade public school students." Sarah believed that she grew from the challenge and that it provided a foundation of experiential knowledge for her future educational leadership positions.

Sarah began her educational leadership as a teacher leader. Teaching, she enacted several initiatives, one which set her up, unknowingly, for her rural superintendency. She took the lead of flipping a junior high school into a middle school. This movement was a shift in educational pedagogy for teachers and students. Nevertheless, Sarah helped her administration through this *school flip* by leading the change process as a collaborative, teacher leader. Later, extremely impressed with Sarah's leadership skills, her principal asked, "Hey, would you be interested in being the Dean of students?" Sarah responded, "Yeah, I could do that." However, Sarah continued her story affirming that she applied for the position and then, they hired the superintendent's son instead. Sarah commented:

That got my blood boiling. You don't ask me if you're not going to give this to me. But then it gave me initiative to go get my principal's license. Then, the principal came to

me about a year later and said, "Hey, this school district is looking for a principal at the middle level. So, I applied and I got the job.

Sarah was hired under the direction of a female superintendent as the junior high principal.

Sarah's prior experience as a teacher leader provided her the necessary know-how to successfully turn her junior high school into a middle school model. Sarah believed that this model was developmentally appropriate for her students. Sarah retold her experience:

We were full teaming: we had planning class periods, teen class periods, and exploratory courses. We had everything. And in fact, the teachers even moved their entire rooms all over the school to get their teams close to each other. The district was about 2,500 and we had about 500 kids in our building. I only had seventh and eighth graders. At the same time that was happening, our superintendent, who was awesome; she got us on the ballot to build a new school on the expedited funds. So, the community pays for the first building and then the state pays for your next building. So, a 6-12 building was built while I was principal there. And then we opened the 6-12th grade building, we took on the 6th graders and I got an assistant principal. So, during that time, it's constant change...you're always adjusting to change and it's hard. It's always easiest on the kids. It's always difficult for adults. So, we flipped that middle school and that got us into the new school building. Everything was great and I just started feeling like, "Man, something's different."

During Sarah's principalship, she had a fantastic mentor, a professor who talked her into getting her superintendent's license for her continuing education courses. Furthermore, Sarah was named middle school principal of the year! After these grand accomplishments of flipping a school model and building a new school Sarah received an instrumental phone call. She was called and told about a rural school district that was looking for a superintendent, one that could flip school models and build new school buildings. Sarah specified:

I went and I applied for the position. Their initiatives were to build a 6-12 building and to flip a middle school...and that is exactly what I had just done. So, they hired me for the position in 2008. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. One of my dear friends said to me, "You really need to pay attention to what you're doing because that's not like a community you've ever worked for." And I was like, "Come on. It can't be that

different. They're all the same type of schools, so they're all about the same size; they can't be that different.” Oh man, I was in for an eye-opening adventure.

Sarah believed this rural school district's board of education thought she was a perfect fit because she had already achieved exactly what they needed for their new superintendent to accomplish.

Sarah recalled:

I don't know if anything inspired me to become a superintendent except the tasks ahead of me. I like the challenge. If it was just a superintendency and it meant my family had to move, I was like, "Yeah, I don't need that job." But because of the challenge, by putting a puzzle in front of me, that enticed me to want to solve it.

Sarah's Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent

Sarah began her superintendency journey by explaining:

I had a really wonderful husband who made sure the kids were picked up from school when I had to stay at different places. By the time I was a superintendent, all of my kids were raised and out of the house. But while I was a principal and coming home at seven or eight o'clock at night, he would pick them up from school and he would do all of the house chores. I turned 50 when I became a superintendent, and I finished my dissertation, my doctorate, in 2016.

Sarah felt that she had minimal barriers, if any, on her journey to becoming a superintendent. She attributed to her supportive family and her wonderful mentor. Nevertheless, once she became a superintendent she encountered several trials and tribulations. In her new position as superintendent, she was afforded a mentor, but she rarely ever saw him, missing out on his potential support. However, she met monthly with the county superintendents who were mostly women. Sarah considered them to be her main source of professional support. Sarah had an additional mentor, her professor who had encouraged her to become a superintendent. He provided her mentorship and inspiration all throughout her superintendent journey. Sarah avowed:

I would be a guest presenter for him, for my mentor from the university. So, he would always take me to dinner and afterwards, I guest taught for his class. He helped me talk through various situations occurring in my district. He was super helpful because he had been a superintendent prior to his higher-education days. So, he's the guy that would

listen to me. Sometimes, he didn't say a word, he just listened. He would just let me air it out aloud. You know how you talk about something until you figure it out yourself?

Often, that is how he helped me work through some of my toughest circumstances.

Sarah had several situations that were difficult to navigate as a female rural superintendent. She said it began the night of her board approval. The beginning of the gender bias began with a community member, not her school board. Following, is Sarah's depiction:

The night I was board approved, my husband and daughters were by my side. The board consisted of four men and a woman. The board president was a man, he said, "Before we go out and have a little celebration of your new job here, we want to stop by the local newspaper. And so, we stopped at the newspaper station to conduct a private interview with the journalist who was writing an article about the new superintendent in town; she was female. She questioned our board president and said, "How does it feel to you having a female superintendent work in this district?" My thoughts are, now this is the board president. He picked me. And he came through with such a great line (and remember, I don't know these people from Adam); he said, "I've worked for women in many positions and I think this is a good thing."

The research literature affords that in rural districts, superintendents are often required to join the community Rotary Club or other town-specific organization, usually dominated by *the good old boys* (Beekley, 1999). This was found to be true for Sarah. She was unexpectedly urged to join the local Rotary Club. This concerned her because her time was best spent working toward improving her district. This soon became a weekly event.

As a superintendent, one of the first things to do is to start meeting people in the community. And they invite you to many community outings. I was expected to join the rotary. It was an expectation, and the club meets every week. Really, as a superintendent, I don't have time to go to a rotary lunch. I went like a good soldier. I gave them updates on the school building project from time to time. But one night I had to go to a meeting, I cannot even remember what organization it was, and I didn't know how to get into the meeting room. This meeting was being held in a bar. It was similar to an Elk's Club. So, the parking lots on one side and I get out of the car and walk through the parking lot. Now, I have a business suit on because I'm meeting these people for the first time. I proceed through the bar and I walk by these guys and they do

the catcall whistle, right? Just three old men sitting at a bar on stools. So, I just wave at them and I keep going. Someone tells me where the meeting room is and I make it there. So, I go do my thing, meet these people and give them my speech of who I am, "Yeah, here's my background, blah-blah, blah-blah, blah." As I'm leaving, going back the way I walked in and I thought to myself, "Dang it, I'm going to talk to those guys. I'm just going to let them know who I am. I'm just going to say, 'Hi, I'm the new superintendent. How are you.'" And so, I go over and I greet them by saying, "Hey, gentlemen, how are we doing tonight?" They're like, "Fine." I said, "I'm Sarah, I'm the new superintendent." And the one guy says, "They said they were going to hire a *goddamn woman* and I can't believe it." No, he said, "**GODDAMN WOMAN.**" And then he said, "And here you are." And I said, "Yep, I am a woman." And then I small talked with them and I left. But it was like, really? You just said that out loud to my face, I replayed it in my head, "They said they were going to hire a *goddamn woman.*" This is how I was welcomed to the district as a superintendent.

From Sarah's story, one can tell that gender issues were very much alive in her small rural community. I glean that these men did not respect women in authoritative positions. However, Sarah was not going to let them get away with it and she showed them that she was not afraid of the *good old boys*. As a superintendent one of Sarah's goals was to construct a 6-12 building which would close two elementary schools. One elementary was on the west side of the district and the other was located on the east side. The elementary building on the east side had a low socioeconomic student population. Sarah recounted:

So, we were going to level that playing field now. These decisions were all made prior to me. I just happen to arrive at the phase of implementing these new district developments. Everything had already been voted on by the public. It wasn't the board just making these decisions without the backing of the community. All of the development was all part of the bond levy for construction. So, everything was set by state and federal standards; everything had to be laid out exactly the way it was explained in the bond issue that was voted on by the people.

From tearing down old schools that were on opposite sides of the town and constructing a new building on a different plot of land changed how students arrived to school. Some of the

community members were unhappy about this change and used their argument to disrespect Sarah as a superintendent.

These kids would ride their bikes to school on highways. This is something I was never accustomed to. So, that was weird to me. When we built the 6-12 building across the highway, the community became irate because these kids would have to ride through town (used to be downtown) to get to school. Although, keep in mind, they picked the land. It's like-It doesn't make any sense. They used to ride their bikes on a highway, and now they are mad about having to go across town? Isn't that better than riding their bikes on a highway? What the heck! I don't think I was treated well, at all, during my time there. It was tough.

This story depicted a change for this rural community. Even though they voted on these changes, they inherently did not appreciate the change. In rural communities one of the greatest tasks is change because people living in rural areas hold on to tradition, they want to do things the way they have always done them (Wallin (2005b)). These community members preferred to have their kids ride their bikes on an unsafe road – a highway where cars would drive fifty plus miles per hour – because of tradition...because this is how we have always done it around here. Moreover, Sarah stated, “I don't think I was treated well, at all, during my time there. It was tough.” This statement demonstrates the challenges Sarah faced in this small rural town, being their first female superintendent. Also, it would seem that some of the community members, the highway bike-riding families, searched for a reason to make Sarah appear as though she did not act in their best interest as their district leader.

In order to get to know the staff and students Sarah sent an email explaining that she would be visiting elementary classrooms to help out with the lesson and class activities. Shortly thereafter Sarah received a formal notice from the union stating, "People are uncomfortable with you going in and working in their classroom, like... hanging out in their classrooms." Sarah was perplexed because she wanted to get to know her students and teachers. I believe that Sarah was demonstrating the unspoken code, *fearless leaders never ask their staff to do something that they would not do themselves*. Sarah discussed that later she figured out that her predecessor would walk through the hallways with a charismatic wave and smile. However, he never actually went into the classrooms to participate. Sarah understood that the established culture was somewhat of a “hands-off” approach from the previous superintendent. Afterwards, Sarah sent an email

explaining her intent regarding visiting the classrooms and most teachers felt relief. Sarah mentioned:

Now, what I realized and what I think is probably true of any staff, is that the ones that truly support you, keep quiet and do not speak up on your behalf. On the contrary, the ones who don't like you are extra vocal. And I always say there was a confluence of things during my superintendency that started in 2008. The most disparaging was the beginning of blog sites.

Sarah continued her story which illuminated highly uneducated and inappropriate special education practices that occurred in the district because the community felt that it was fine to do things the way they saw fit.

One time when I was in my first year, I discovered that this district was probably ten to twenty years behind in their treatment of special needs students. For example, one of the special education teachers put in the newspaper: "Mrs. So-and-so's special education class, put on the play, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And there's a picture of all these children. So, I had to educate the newspaper and the teacher that this was a FERPA violation. You can't publicly identify special education students and put their faces in the newspaper. But this was kind of like small-town, okay stuff. And so, I was pushing forward current ethical practices and teaching this community how things should be done – it's about always doing what is right for children.

These were just a few of the barriers that Sarah had to *break-through* in order to get this rural district up to appropriate legal status. One of the district's union representatives asked Sarah why there had been so many complaints against her because prior to her superintendency no one had complained to the union, ever. Sarah responded, "Well, no one ever took the time to make things right. They just didn't." They were busy balancing budgets and saying hello and glad-handing which was fine because that's how they got the new school."

Another rather shocking encounter occurred during the first week of school when Sarah was greeting students with the high school principals. Sarah retold the story:

I'm out there and I'm standing with these two men and one was older than me and one was much younger. And these three or four girls come walking towards us and the assistant principal, who was not politically correct on most days said, "Oh no, here come those *bitches*." And the high school principal agreed with him. And I looked at

both of them and said, "Don't you ever use that word in my presence again." And then, that set that tone. But it's like every time I turned around, I had to set the tone for something appropriate versus the way it was always done. I mean, what man would ever think he could say in front of a woman, and then your boss, "Here come these bitches." It just floored me.

There were two other administrators who began in the district the same time that Sarah did, the middle school principal and the athletic director. Sarah said that they would look at each other, shake their heads, and say, "We're not in Kansas anymore. Like, am I crazy or is this for real?" Another unethical issue Sarah ran into was that if students showed up to school on the first day with fees unpaid, they were sent home. Then, they were told they could not come back until they paid them. Sarah remembered:

So, the board members and I would go out, for example the president would take me out to breakfast once a week and he would ask, "What's going on?" And I would tell him and the other board members these things that I encountered. He and the others would just laugh and say, "Yep, we knew it needed fixed, we just didn't know how bad it was." And I would say, "I'm fixing this." So, it just went on and on and on. Story after story after story like that that just kept creeping up. Like, how does this keep happening? Well, nothing was paid attention to. It just wasn't, so yeah.

This rural district was very football oriented, like many schools. At one point, the winning football coach who was very iconic approached Sarah and said, "You know, you and I are the two most important people in this town." And Sarah replied, "Yeah, I'm not really feeling that, but if you want to be, go ahead." Come to find out, this football coach had been recruiting one of the school's soccer players as a kicker. This went against policy. Here is the football story in Sarah's own words:

So, we brought the coach in. You're not allowed to recruit a soccer player. You know you're not allowed to do that. Now you've got to go tell this kid. He had already given the kid a locker, put his name on the locker, the whole nine yards. I said, "Now you've got to go tell that kid that he can't do this and he's going to be upset." I said to him, "Here's how you're to do this: when you leave my office, you call the father and you and the father sit down with the boy and tell him." So, that's exactly how we laid it out. He walks out of my office, sees the kid in the hall and says, "That lady up there says you're

not allowed to do this anymore." So now I've got the dad and the grandpa in my office raising cane. They call a special appeal. So now we have to have a board meeting over this and the whole time the board is meeting and battling this around, are we allowed to do two sports or not? At the board meeting the football coach was supposed to stay and talk to the board afterwards. He left. No one did anything about it, just let him leave. He clearly had power in the town. In the meantime, on the football coach's evaluation, (the athletic director evaluated him) I write on the bottom of his evaluation, "In the future when a process is explained to you to handle in a certain way, you are expected to do it. Anything less is considered insubordination." Then, my husband and I always say that was the beginning of my end and that was my first year. So, he (the football coach) decided to quit in April, which made it impossible to hire a coach. The funny thing is, you can get in on a Word document and see when they created it (his resignation letter) and we found that he created it in December. He left us no time to hire a coach. But I remember being at Rotary that next week after word got out, that he resigned his position. The word got out about it and people would come up to me and say, "I don't know if you had anything to do with that, but thank you. That man was terrible to our boys." But no one ever told me that. There was never a complaint about him. All the time they knew what kind of person he was. They just let him have that power. Yeah. What I've learned is don't mess with the football program. Except we didn't. He messed with the soccer program. That started this whole football mess. Well then, we have to hire a new coach. The coach goes 500, the next year we hire another coach. That coach goes doesn't do well either. They didn't help me much.

Another event occurred surrounding athletics and teaching that played as, *boys will be boys*. A teacher was caught masturbating in the school parking lot during a ballgame. Here is how Sarah recalled this nightmare:

I brought him in. I said, here's what's going to happen. You decided. "Yup."

That was not great. We've been notified by the police that you need to go pick up your arrest warrant or you'll be arrested and here's what's going to happen. The board is going to act, most likely act to terminate your contract, and right now you're suspended without pay." He leaves and I'm like, "Shit, we got to go tell his wife. She could walk in and he might've hanged himself." This guy's a popular teacher, except as the high school

principal said to me, "Oh, he's good for one fuck up a year." What's that mean? Then, why is he here? He's a geometry teacher. Once, he drew a triangle on the board, put two eyes on it and said to the only black student in the class, "Watch out Melanie, they may be coming for you next." He should have been fired then. Anyhow, I didn't know about that, because the high school principal just would just brush it off, sweep it under the rug. So, I go to his wife's building and I take the elementary principal with me. I said to her, "You got to sit in on this meeting. I don't know how it's going to go." I sit down with his wife and I said, "You need to know what we just told your husband. The reason I'm telling you this is because I think you need to find out, go home and see if he's okay." And as soon as I tell her this, she says, "Do you think I should get a divorce?" The only thing I could think of is she's had it up to here with his strangeness, perversions, whatever. Do you think I should get a divorce?

The elementary principals. There were two elementary principals who were female and Sarah stated, "I thought were with me, but they were stabbing me all the way. Professionally, I thought we were professional women together, like a team."

I remember when I worked for a female superintendent. I would always put her decisions in the best light because she sees the big picture and she had to make them. But these women didn't do that. So, at the very end of my career, I decided we had some openings and I decided to hire this one girl who's from the town. The principal had interviewed several people and this girl got passed over. So, then another person quit at the 11th hour and I went, "Okay, we're just moving this second choice into this job." The principal called me mad as a hornet because I took the decision out of her hand. She could have been mad. Fine, be mad at me. I took a decision out of your hand. But she said to me, "Well maybe those stories about you are true and the board has something on you." I just went, and that's something I would never say to my boss. Then we hung up the phone and she tried calling back and I ignored it. Then she called again. I finally picked up and she said, "I'm so sorry. That was unprofessional." It's like, yeah, you're only afraid because what you just said was so unbelievable. Yeah. Unbelievable. I think I would get talked about, they don't like you wearing jeans to the ball games, but then they don't like you coming in dressed from your work clothes. What am I supposed to do?

As the researcher, I asked Sarah to elaborate on how people perceived her dress. She explained the following.

My office was where the high school was. So, if I'd stay for a basketball game, I would just go down there and then if it was on a Saturday, I'd wear jeans. Well they didn't like that. One time, they couldn't understand why I wouldn't come. The kind of thing to do was go to the bowling alley after the games. So, my board said, "Sarah, they'd like you to be more visible after these games." I said, "I am not walking into a bowling alley bar by myself as a woman at night. I'm not doing that. That would just go crazy in this town. But it was like I couldn't find my place. I just couldn't, I didn't fit. They needed a man. They've had men since me and it's been fine.

Something that truly was reproachful was an accusation orchestrated by a woman through the newspaper.

So, I called the newspaper one day when they printed this lady's opinion about me. It said, "And the board refuses to curb her continued misbehavior," or something like that. Like, okay, we all know what that means. What's funny is the board member they tagged me with as having the affair did not have a strong marriage in the town and everyone knew that. So, they wouldn't have picked any of the other male board members because they knew this guy already had his reputation. I remember one of the board members that I had a lot of respect for say to me, "Why don't you just come over to the house and we'll talk about this during the day?" I said, "I cannot be seen walking into your house during the day." This was before any of the stories came out and he said, "What?" I said, "I cannot be seen walking into your house during the day. That's not appropriate. You coming to my office is appropriate." It was like, I was trying to put up all these guard rails to keep myself from being exposed in that light and here it happened anyway. My female board member, a special ed teacher in another district, was 100% on my side. She was so spitting mad at some of the stories that came out about me and the things they were saying. And she stopped telling me things because it got so ugly. That ugly blog site was finally shut down. So then, that all became a big story, why he shut this blog down for me and the board member. Then, these nasty people switched to Facebook. The female board member quit telling me stuff because she said, "Sarah, you just don't want

to know what they're saying." And it was all about affairs and that sort of stuff. So ridiculous. Yep. When bitch doesn't stick, they throw whore at you, which I didn't know. Sarah had so many unbelievable stories that it would make most people shiver. When I asked Sarah, how did you stay strong? How did you make it through these barriers and continue to accomplish great tasks for the district? She replied:

Well, I don't know if it's a matter of being strong. It's a matter of you got to do this, so who's going to do it? So, if I don't do it, it's not going to get done the way it should be done. I think that was part of it. I also had a really good business manager, and as I said, the board supported me. But I do remember sitting on the countertop one night at home, I'd had a bad day and this was when this talk about me was bad with the newspaper article opinions. I remember sitting on the counter and my husband came home from work and he said, "What's going on?" And I started crying and I said, "I feel like this job is killing me. And I have to step away from it." And he's like, "Then step away." I really did feel like my health was going down. Yeah. I don't know if it was for sure because you just get yourself going and you've got to do the work and you just keep going. You know, it's kind of like summer break comes and you're like, "Holy shit! How did you just do all that?" I had just gotten to the point where I just kept going, going, going, going, and then when I finally stopped and looked at what was happening, I went, "Yeah. No, I'm not going to die for this job.

Sarah said that while on the job as this rural district's first female superintendent she never thought that these barriers were happening to her because she was a woman. She thought that maybe she had pushed them too hard, too fast with change, trying to get them caught up to the 21st century's legal way of doing things. It was as if this town had been stuck in the past.

We did fabulous things. We got a lot done. In three years. And then you look at that 36-month document. We killed it. When I look back on what I did, do I wish I would have been treated better and would've had a happier time while I was there? Yes, I do.

Sarah and I wondered if perhaps in some small rural towns there is a fear of improving. Because once they do better, then where do they go? What do they do? Do their children move away and leave the nest, alone? Sarah and I concluded that small-town, rural communities must enjoy life as is, status quo, *the way they've always done it*. Sarah compared her rural district to the movie, Rudy.

His last name is Ruettiger. That's how he got his name, Rudy. I don't know what his real first name is. There's a scene in the movie where he keeps trying, keeps trying, keeps trying. He's facing with his dad and his dad's pissed. He's not home working in the factory, and his dad says, "There's nothing wrong with being a Ruettiger." I always said that about my small rural district, they're afraid of their kids being smarter, better, leaving them, because they'll leave them. They'll leave, they'll move, they'll go somewhere else. It is a poverty thing, but I wouldn't say it was the poor people that were doing that. It was more the middle class, working middle class. They didn't want more for their kids. They didn't want us to push them. They didn't want-And that's what I think we're facing in rural communities.

Sarah stated that she never felt “power” in her positions or “powerful.” She came from a teaming background where everything was done collaboratively.

I don't ever feel like I played power or anything like that. I made the tough decisions when I had to. Sometimes, I think of when I take new jobs, I often wonder if women who come into new jobs come in just like, "I got this." Because I don't. I sit back and learn for a while and then I go, "Okay, now we're doing it my way." I've had people tell me that they're fearful of me-Intimidated. I think that's because I'm resolute. No, we're not doing that anymore, or yes, we are doing more of this. But that's not wishy washy. If a man did that, that's what they'd expect...right?

Sarah brought great points to the table regarding small rural communities and how communities perceive female vs. male leadership. For example, if a woman is blunt and straight to the point, the people may feel intimidated or uneasy but if a man tells it like it is they think he is a great leader and do what he asks of them.

Vignettes

When discussing power suits and how women dress as a gender issue in educational leadership, Sarah believed that “it wasn't that kind of district.” Power suits might have turned her constituents *off*. Sarah dressed classy in cardigans and dress pants, with classy make-up. However, she did mention, “But looky there. You don't want to look too dressed up for a sport's day. I'm able to look them in the eye. I am able to look at people in the eye.” Sarah affirmed, “So smaller women may have to dress differently because they have to look up and be forced to

speak. I think my height helped me, I wasn't really short. I didn't feel smaller than people. I was bigger than the football coach. And I was taller than the masturbator too.”

Sarah was confident and carried her head high. For Sarah, size and dress were not gender issues during her superintendency. Sarah declared that towards the beginning of her career she had been misguided by one of *the good old boys*. Sarah commented:

He says, "I really do like women to wear dresses." This is 1988, '89, and I said, "Mr. *So and So*, I am with eighth grade boys all day long. I am kneeling on the floor, I'm squatting down next to them, a dress is the least appropriate thing to wear around eighth grade boys." And he went, "Yep, change my score." He wasn't thinking.

In general, Sarah had such a unique experience as a rural superintendent with strong evidences of gender discrimination and the *good old boys* that she discussed most of the vignette scenarios throughout her interview. Although Sarah did not believe that she was always treated differently because she was a woman, after our interview she reflected and now believes that the barriers she faced in her rural community as superintendent may have been because of her gender. She postulated that this rural town was not ready for a female superintendent. She posited that this rural district never had a female superintendent prior to her and after her they hired a man.

Sarah's advice to future female rural superintendents

Sarah affirmed:

Now, the advice I would give any superintendent is to find out who your predecessor was. I followed a man who was more gregarious and could light up a room and go talk to anybody like they were their next best friend, and that wasn't my style.

Alice

Alice's Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency

Alice was born and raised in an extremely small, rural town. She was one of three kids. Her father worked for a large corporation and her mother stayed home for a while and later worked in the treasurer's office for the town. Both of Alice's parents were working parents and according to Alice, "it was just a very typical normal upbringing.”

Alice was the oldest child and became very involved in high school. She adored school and when she looks back, she thinks she could have even done better than she did. Alice was an athlete; she loved the sport of cheer, basketball, and softball. Alice never gave teaching much thought until she was in the middle of a divorce with two children of her own. She kept thinking to herself, “what can I do that will best support my kids and that I'll be there when they're available?” In the meantime, the school from where she had graduated called and wanted her to be the cheerleading advisor. Alice could not wait for the opportunity. Alice esteemed everything about cheerleading and the position of cheer advisor. She stated, “I loved battling with the principal and the athletic director about the athletes.” While she was working as cheer advisor, around the age of twentyfive, she went back to school and obtained her teaching license. This is how she got her foot in the door, she was coaching and knew all of the administrators. For Alice, she was a natural fit, working with junior high and high school kids and coaching them. Alice taught junior high for ten years and truly enjoyed her teaching position and students. She coached softball, cheerleading, and advised several kid’s clubs.

By the tenth year of teaching, Alice was a little disillusioned with some of the male administrators and the decisions that had been made which seemed to impact classroom teachers and coaches as Alice explained:

I remember thinking at the time, I never wanted to leave my classroom. I never wanted to do that. But I saw gaps. The kids needed more than what it seemed like some of the old guard felt they needed. I said, that last ninth and tenth year, I kind of was like, "Okay, well you know what, the high school kids are telling me all sorts of their personal problems, maybe I'll just get my guidance certificate which I did. I Thought that'll make me a better teacher. More prepared when kids talk to me about stuff, it was like, "Oh dear Lord, we've got to talk to your parents.

Alice obtained her guidance counselor license with the promise from the superintendent that she would get the position as soon as she graduated. However, it did not go as planned, according to Alice:

So, when the time came, I'm like, "Okay, I've got this done. I'll go wherever you need. It's a K12 license." And he was like, "No, we don't think that's quite important." And I was like, "Are you kidding me?" Yeah, so it was just like okay. Alice took five more

classes and obtained her administrator's license. She thought to herself, "I may not be better than them, but I know I can at least do it and my word will mean something." Once Alice got her principal's license she was recruited to an educational service center as the curriculum director working for four counties. Alice stated that she never expected to leave the classroom but that she sincerely appreciated working with curriculum. While on the job (within one year) a particular elementary school opportunity opened up for Alice. Alice was the right woman for the position. Alice described:

This elementary school had kind of a bad situation happening and some administrative turnover. And their superintendent called and said, "I want you to consider the elementary principal position." And I thought, "I don't want to be a principal. No way." I went, "No way. So, I said, "I'll come talk to you, but no, this isn't good." So, we started talking and he just said, "I really need you to try. You'll have a lot of support. Their scores are really low and I know this is your passion and you already know some of the staff." I'm like, "Oh, dear Lord." So, I said, "Okay, well let's set up an interview." And he goes, "Well, you just had it. And the job is yours if you want it." I'm like, "Oh my. I have to get in my car and think about this." Yeah. So, I really loved the curriculum that I did for the ESC. I loved seeing how different the schools were, but I love a challenge and so I accepted it. And I ended up working as their principal for three years.

Alice found being an elementary principal to be a great learning experience because she had never paid much attention to elementary teachers and the things they would get upset about. She had been accustomed to middle school and high school.

Alice told a story of elementary teachers:

Actually, I had two teachers whose husbands were administrators in another state. And they came in and closed my door and they started sobbing and crying. And immediately, I'm thinking oh my gosh, has there been a death in the family? So, I'm like moving my chair over by the girls. I mean they were women. And here it was all about the color of their construction paper. The red was not really red and they were going to send Valentines home with their kids. It was pinker than red. And what were the parents going to think... And I remember sitting there trying not to laugh thinking, "Oh my. I'm not in Oz anymore." But to them, it was a big deal. But I remember, I had to look down.

I'm thinking you've got to be kidding me... I guess the point of that is that it opened my eyes to things that are absolutely critical to other grade levels or subject areas and it helped me relate to elementary issues. That's my favorite ... One of my favorite memories... I was thinking dear Lord, one of them is ill or a child or their husband... and it was because the red construction paper was too pink.

This particular rural county where Alice resided as the elementary principal had been nicknamed the *armpit* of the county. There was a large number of transience, drugs, and poverty. The staff was used to buying kids clothing and they even were given money from private donors to help students.

Although the staff felt beat down, Alice believed that the morale had changed tremendously; they had become the shining star of the community. Alice remembered:

That truly is one of the highlights of my career ... I mean thinking back to the looks on their faces when they realized what they had been able to accomplish just by seeing these kids in a different light. And looking at each other differently. It's not that we can't do it. It's just we've got to refocus all this energy. And like I said, it was a pre-K, sixth grade building. And generational, lots of generational situations that had just become a norm (abuse, calling children's services, not knowing if students would show up, seeing bruises on their bodies, etc.). And it was just ... Three years kind of seemed like thirty honestly; it was an emotional drain and I needed a change.

After three years, Alice was afforded a change of scenery. There was a central office curriculum position opening for another rural, school district. Alice confirmed:

Long before I got there the slogan was, "we do it our way. We don't care what the rest of the county does because we're amazing and that's how we do it." And that's how they built their schools. That's how they ran their buildings. There was little communication among the three buildings, the high school, middle school, and elementary. They were like three little islands. So, one of the things that they asked me to do was try and bridge the islands. And bring them together. We can do better with achievement. They were good solid people but their whole career, they'd never been pushed outside of what they thought was good enough. And I guess being a parent, when is good enough, good enough? And do we have that right as an adult to say what is good enough? We're not saying it's been done wrong. We're not saying that at all. But to just

say it's good enough, that was hard for me to kind of break some mindsets on that. And I coached for so many years that I would always use that. I said, "So if you win a conference and you're six and four, that's good enough? Or do you work for eight and two? And ten and zero or is just going onto the field good enough?" I said, "You have to want to be more... is this about you as the adult or the kids?" So, it was ... Again, it was a challenge which I love.

Alice said that it was a nice transition; however, the first year or two was a little challenging because "adults do not like to be told or even suggested to do or look at something a different way." Alice thought to herself, "is it really okay to continue to serve the same amount of title students, day in and day out, and not help them improve?" Alice's superintendent was one of the *good old boys*, who had been a retire, rehire. He told his staff that they better do it his way or get out. And according to Alice, that worked to some degree; however, that was not her leadership style. Alice ascertained:

It kind of worked out that they knew the decree was coming not from me, that's not my style. I don't decree anything. But it's like we need to show an effort that we're at least addressing some of these things. So that, like I said, that was fun by year two and three because we did make huge, huge gains. And again, it has nothing really to do with me. It has everything to do with my just saying take a look at this. You tell me now what you see? And the light bulb's just go on. The buildings have really strong people in them. You're never going to get all of them. But when that train starts moving and they start seeing the success, you can't argue with it. You really can't. So, when they, on year three, they had been perfect on the report card and they were achieving things they'd never done. It was kind of ... This is kind of cool. I'm like yeah, this is about the kids. This isn't just a report card number. This is about kids that are now achieving on a different level.

During Alice's success as the curriculum director, she learned components of the superintendency because she took on anything that her superintendent did not want to do. He tended to like everything regarding building and grounds and she loved curriculum and instruction. All of a sudden, Alice sensed that her relationship with her boss, the superintendent, had changed.

I could sense the last year that he was feeling a little, I don't want to say threatened, but our styles were very, very different. And I had two board members that were extremely intelligent and so they'd want to come in and talk curriculum. He would see them come in and I knew that he did not like it. I sensed it. I knew it. And I thought uh-oh, this can't be good. I mean, you can't tell someone, don't feel the way you're feeling. And he was feeling threatened because he was very abrasive. He would go into every school board meeting with his resignation. Long before I got there. His resignation folded up ready to resign if they ticked him off. Every meeting I'm like, "I don't think I have the guts to do that." They got tired of him playing those games. And it just got a little uncomfortable. And I kept thinking I don't ever, ever want him to think I'm coming after his job. I don't want his job. Good Lord, I didn't know anything about that. But like I said, it just was not fun for me anymore and I think it was just him being threatened. And he had no reason to be but that's what he thought. A much higher paying job opened up, curriculum, it'd be a lateral move and I was offered the job. I mean I love the curriculum, but I thought, I don't want to just keep bopping around. I just didn't want to. A neighboring district had a superintendency and their ESC guy must have got wind that I'd gotten the new curriculum job. And he called and said, "Why don't you apply up here? We've got a couple openings and I think you'd be a real good fit for one of them." I thought, "Oh." And they were superintendents. And I just thought okay. And the one school was very, very little. The other school was a little bit bigger, both smaller than the district I was currently in. And long story short, I did get offered the one for the small school. I mean we had about 780 kids in the school.

Alice's Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent

Alice became the first female rural superintendent of a small town from 2000 to 2005. Alice encountered a school district and community that was like an old-fashioned movie, one where social injustice occurred, corruption at every corner, and a community filled with *good old boys*.

I was scared to death. I mean thought I had known what my boss, my former superintendent, did because he had pulled me in on so many things. But then I quickly realized there was a whole set of skills that I had no clue about. And I thought, "Oh my goodness. Here we go." And I had a treasurer that it was her first treasurer's job. And

she was about ten years younger than me. So, she and I would go to Bob Evans and go, "Oh my God. What have we done?" Here we are the blind leading the blind. But we were a lot alike in that you know what? We could learn it. We could fake our way through anything we don't know. So yes. So that's how I ended up in this little rural school district. It's kind of a little red, white, and blue school. Very divided but very, very, very rural. I mean the board had cut busing and I had a couple kids ride horses to school... Horses. So yeah. That was my welcome to the superintendency. That was- in a little tiny rural district.

Alice explained the interview process, she said that she interviewed with approximately sixty different people set up in four focus groups. She interviewed with parents, boosters, farmers, alumni, and businessmen. Alice described that she learned how to be a superintendent with the staff that she worked with there (her administrators, the staff, and the issues they went through).

I knew I never wanted to look back because it was just ... When you're able to be fortunate enough to work with people. And you all have each other's backs and we can affect change together that impacts kids and impacts the district. And you're willing to stand up and do the right thing even when the right thing is costing you. There's no better feeling than that. There really isn't. And I'm still great friends with most of the people that I worked with on my administrative team. A couple of them have gone on to be superintendents because I said, "You will do this." You just see the potential in people and it was just such a turning point with the things we experienced as a group too.

And that began the story of Alice's journey as a female rural superintendent. Alice described her story:

All three districts I was in, I had been the first and probably will be their only female superintendent. And so, for my first superintendency, which was extremely rural, the farmer's wives drove the buses. The only female we had there was Francine, my treasurer who had just been hired. And there'd always been men in every position, from principal, everything. And I know now that one of the board members wanted me on because he thought he was going to be able to control me. We got that in writing. And he had been on the board for almost thirty years. And his wife was a teacher, the whole nine yards. And I'm thinking, "Okay, really?" But then there was a banker and she was very high up in the bank. And she loved having a woman. There were some people that thought, this

is the greatest thing for our community ... this was going to be a breath of fresh air. But the whole time, which I'm glad I didn't know then, a couple of them were thinking, "We're going to be able to control her. She's a woman. And we'll get Francine and we'll do it the way we want." Yeah. And honestly, I'm not a paranoid person. I'm not a ... I don't worry about stuff like that. But after a year and after some of the things we had gone through, I mean literally, I could write a book. The district was so dysfunctional. A State University called us down to the law center because they were amazed and stunned at the history of this district.

Alice stated that there had been a huge divide within the community and they had not been able to pass a school levy in thirty years. One of the big factors in this rural town was believe it or not, the Klan, the Ku Klux Klan was a big factor there. Alice explained:

Yeah. And I had nothing but tiny little villages and bergs and we'd get these flyers that Thursday night the Klan's going to be in ... I thought they were kidding. I'd never ... I mean it's pretty prejudicial where I was raised, but you didn't ... It was not overt like that. And so those issues started coming out. And I hate to say that there were shady things, but there were. There were shady things as far as purchasing. And things that even though board policy said you can't do this or the auditor's office or the law, they would still do it. Kind of like *good old boys' club*...Like they would just do it anyways...And nobody would say anything.

Alice provided examples of nepotism. She stated that her and the treasurer were brand new at their positions and they had very ethical administrators who had watched this for years. They had felt defeated because when they would try to do the right thing, the community would not let them. Alice stated that they began standing up to the unethical issues little by little. For example, instead of bidding out the way they were supposed to by law, they would just give the job to someone's brother. Alice stated, "they would not make a big deal about it but would just say something like, "We can't do it this way. It's got to be bid out. It kind of started causing friction which I can understand that." Alice described one of her encounters:

I don't think this gentleman was on the board, but I think he was very, very closely connected. And again, I would say this, that the two men were in front of me. They came into my office. My office was in the elementary wing and the treasurer's office was right behind mine. And we were working on a building and here comes two of the

biggest farmers, one was really big. And the other one was one of my board members. But he came in and he said, "You're going to open up the building." And I said, "Well, that's a board decision. I just can't unilaterally make that." I said, "If that's something you want me to consider, then we'll take it back to the whole board." And the other farmer spoke up and he said, "Well." He goes, "I just want you to know." He says, "We're going to get the Klan involved." He said, "We're going to get this next levy passed." And I thought he was kidding. I had no idea. And I said, "What?" And I must have had a look on my face like, "What?" And then he said ... He holds up, he goes, "Well, we're not going to hurt anybody or anything." And the other one says, "No, no, no, we're not going to hurt ..." When he said, "We're not going to hurt." Oh my God, I mean I could feel the blood drain. I thought don't let them see the emotion on your face. I thought you've got to get a witness to this. So, I said, "Let me get Francine down here." I was shaking like a leaf, believe it or not. And so, I call, "Francine." I said, "They are here. Why don't you come on in? They have some ideas about the levy." So, she came in and she knew something was up. She sat next to me. I'm like kicking her under my desk like oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. And I said, "Well, they've got a couple of ideas I think you should run them by the fiscal officer." They said, "Well, we're really going to get the Klan involved in this one." Francine goes, "You're what?" And like I said, "We're not going to hurt anybody. We're just going to wake them up and duh, duh, duh." And I just said, "Well, you know, be that as it may." I said, "That's not something that we're going to sit here and endorse." I said, "We just want people to support." And I thought I need them out of my office. This is freaking me out. Oh my God. Yeah. And they ... I know they thought that by having women that they were going to do what they were going to do. They just were.

Alice talked about her predecessor, a male superintendent, who left because he was deflated because he would not do whatever the community wanted. And, when Alice talked with the former treasurer also a male, he said that when you did not do what the community wanted, it would get very ugly. Alice thought:

Oh my gosh. I thought, I'm not going to be here very long. I don't think any of us are. It just ... I mean I was raised and I'm not a holy roller or anything, but I was raised if you're going to put your name on it then you better be able to stand by it. It's your name.

And I would just say, "I'm not signing that. I'm not doing ... And Francine would say the same thing. She goes, "That could cost me my life." So, then they would do that subtle, "Well, you're going to do that or you're not going to work here anymore." And we're like, "Well do what you want but we can't do this. You can't do it." And it was like oh my God. So yeah. The barriers, both of us being women, the two really good board members; they chose not to run because they couldn't put up with it anymore. They were great people. And so, we felt like our two biggest supporters had left - They wanted women - They wanted integrity. And we were never saying what you're doing is illegal even though it was very illegal. It was just like I don't care what you did in the past, this is what we're doing from this point on. That was how we all approached it. And it just got uglier and uglier. One of the new board members was married with two children and "women did not tell him no." At one point he asked Alice and Francine to do something and they told him no. According to Alice, he said, "You know, maybe this district's in all this financial trouble because we got women running it." And Alice and Francine had been there for less than a year. Alice said that she really wanted to respond with, "You know what?" There's been nothing but men and *good old boys* running this place since day one. Maybe that's why it's in this condition." However, she did not because like it or not, he was her board member.

Alice described a situation with a minister.

In a levy meeting, the Klan member, talking about Alice and Francine said, "Well, the two of them. They both have dark hair, dark eyes, they both always wear those dark suits. That must mean they're lesbians." And the minister, telling Alice this story, cried because he was extremely supportive and he knew that it was inconceivable. He came and told me and I was like, "Are you kidding me? To say that in front of forty people, who does that?"

I asked Alice about her support through this tough superintendency and she told me the following:

It was a true trial by fire. And thank goodness I had my high school principal and my middle school principal, they were men of steel. They were men of integrity. They were kind of those silent but deadly types. They were loyal; they we're not perfect but we had to be able to stand by our word. And we had to do things the right way. Maybe people

would start voting for a levy if they knew it was not as broken and corrupt as areas of it were. And so that's why we became so tight as friends, as colleagues... Also, I had a great school lawyer at the time which I still use to this day for different things. And I would think okay am I just overreacting and I'd say, "Bob... this is what happened." And he'd be like, "Call the Ethics Committee. This is what you got to know. This is what..." I'm like, "Okay, I'm not overreacting then." I don't want to say it was a dangerous place, but it was just very dysfunctional. And it had always been that way. And everyone had just kind of gotten used to it. Well these two young, dumb females come in. And we're like it ain't happening anymore boys. I learned more in those two years than probably the rest of my career. It was ... I mean it was just unreal. So, I had most of the community's support. I had their buy in. The barrier was on the inside behind closed doors. As a superintendent or even as a building principal, if you don't have the support of the people that hire and fire, you've got to get out. You just do. You can't make it personal even though, of course, especially as women, it is personal. But it's just a fact if you don't have the majority or if you've got more than one person gunning for you like as a building principal, you just need to get out. You need to cut your losses and find a place where you fit. Where what you're saying matches what they want. And they now had an entire administrative team that was standing up. And the staff knew a lot was happening so they were silently kind of siding with all of us and it was just becoming very interesting. A state university got a hold of what was happening in this rural district and eight or nine of the staff from the school went down. And there were probably ten from this state university that were writing, they were just amazed. Alice said that she kept quiet but allowed the minister and the board member to do all of the talking. This all began in 2005.

Alice said that they had great legislative meetings and a lot of things that were very groundbreaking for that time. However, Alice explained:

I mean this board member that I told you came in on the Klan, he ended up ... He resigned from the board six months later because he tried to bribe us. He tried to give us a check from a voter for \$1000. And the Ethics Committee said you either resign immediately or we're bringing you up on charges. I mean, there he was, he's sliding a check for \$1000 across my desk and said, "This is what you're going to do with this. It's

for so and so." And I said, "We can't do that. What are you thinking?" Sliding it back. He's getting mad. We're sliding it back and forth on my old desk. And I thought he looks like he's going to hit me. So, I just thought get out of my office. I called the lawyer and that's the second one. And he said, "Here's who I want you to talk to, call the Ohio Ethics Committee immediately. That's huge bribery." I'm like oh dear Lord, oh dear Lord. Yeah. I did. And honestly, if I would not have had the people around me, because we kind of grew together, I probably would have high tailed it out of there. Seriously. Because you can survive when the strongest people around you have the same morals and values as you do and don't have to fight to get what they want done. You just do the right thing. It's about the kids. Let's talk this out. Let's move ahead. We're not saying what you did in the past was wrong, even if it was. We're just saying from this point on, this is what we're going to do. And I can remember sitting in a meeting and the lawyer would give me all this stuff to give them and I would slide it and just say, "Well, I talked to our attorney, Bob, here's something the board may want to consider. This is a direction that we can truly get into hot water. And I said plus it's the law." And two of them, they slid them right back across the table at me and said, "We don't do it that way here." I remember Francine kicking me under the table like, "Oh dear Lord. We've got to get out of here." So yeah. The barriers were ... Well, I thought, I know why my predecessor almost had a damn breakdown because you guys are ... You're crazy here. You can't circumvent state laws. I mean and I'm not one that lays in bed at night and wonders what the law said. It's just like okay black is black and white is white. And I remember when I interviewed with the administrator team, they looked like they had been beat up. And, of course, I didn't know all of this other stuff. I just thought, here's a little school, new buildings, and so on and so forth. Well then, after we all got to trust each other, that's when they told me that they had been fighting this for so long. And they just didn't feel like it was ever going to change and they were caught up in it and part of it. It was just heartbreaking. It was heartbreaking. And ironically, every single person left the district. Like I said, I got Francine out. We all got out.

Alice clarified that she stayed at this little rural district for two years before she left. She said that when she committed to the school district she thought she would retire there. She had built a

house right by the school, even though she was not going to make a lot of money she thought the people were excellent...but a few months later, in came the Klan.

She saw openings south of the district, and found one that was a fit for her. This was her second superintendency of a small, rural town. Alice explained this town as “one of those little bedroom communities where there's a lot of retirees and quiet money. And they had had the *good old boy system* for a long time.” Alice said that she had fathers who expected her to just sign releases for their daughters to play soccer, and she was like, wait, “I’m not just going to sign something, just because.” Alice said that she that about half of her administrative team were good. She thought, “I mean, you get a chance to change. You get a chance to get it right. But you don't get to do it because of the *good old boy system*. You just don't. Not if I'm going to be there.” It was very positive, the district improved academically but athletics were a little more negative. Alice retold the story:

The negative on that ended up being with athletics. And again, I had been married to a head football coach. I coached as a head coach for years. And some things were brought forward by some parents that were just not okay. And the principal and I and the AD, we didn't make a federal case. We just called the coaches in and said, “hey, this is what's being said. Where are you guys at with this?” “Yeah, we're doing this.” “You can't do that guys. Don't do it.” So long story short, after several meetings, several attempts to get things changed, they didn't. So, we suspended the coaches. And their wives got involved. *Hell, hath no fury*. I'm sure the guys didn't go home and tell them really what was happening. We weren't going to. And it ended up, long story short, there were four lawsuits out of it. And they were basically suing to get their jobs back. And you and I know that a board of education has the right to put anybody they want on or off the field. They just do. But there's always a lawyer out there that will take a case. So that became very, very, very stressful. We won every single one if winning is the right word. When it involves the kids, and these were two great kids and great families. We had the parents' permission to go public with what had been going on. But there's no way. I mean we don't need that. Why would we subject those boys to more? We brought the boys in, let them speak to the board. The boys left. Several board members were crying, yelling, “They'll never coach.” So, it's wasn't gray. And so, we knew we were doing the right thing. Well, the other side was able to go out and fabricate or say whatever they wanted.

And they did. One of the wives ran for the school board and got on. And made it her mission to make our lives hell. It became very, very ugly which is so ironic. But it divided a lot of the community because a lot of people did not know really what was going on. And by the time things worked their way through the court system, the boys had graduated and gone on. And if we had to do it all again, we'd do it all again because it was the right thing to do. Athletics can never run a school. We had email proof. We had all sorts of things of what was happening and it was cut and dry. It was like you can't do that and even if you could, it's up to the school board. I mean there was anonymous letters. I mean I was actually threatened in an email and our Sheriff assigned a detective to me. My house was broken into. It was crazy. It was crazy. Over football. So yeah. The lawsuits. I mean the unfortunate thing is how much money those cost. Yeah, insurance companies pick them up. Nothing ever went to trial, nothing. But they would work their way through. So, it might take a year and a half or two years to get a resolution on anything. But it was just so painful. It was so hard... To keep your mouth shut when you're listening to people say well the board did this and this and the principal did this and this and you did ... And none of it would be true. And you're just not at liberty to set the record straight. You're just not. It's like, you know what? I can look myself in the mirror at night, but you guys can't. But yeah. I Stayed there for four years. And ended with a completely different board. There were only two left of the original five. The other ones had pretty much been run off or just health wise couldn't take it anymore. And so, once again, other than one of my principals, the entire team left, including the supervisor of buildings and grounds. And not that we sat around and said this is what we need to do. It was just ... Like before, it was like we can't work like this. This is not how it's supposed to be. And I mean that's why I said, I think when you find people that have integrity, that are willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with you that's the only way you can do this job.

Vignettes

Alice commented on a vignette that described a real administrator losing faith who was overwhelmed with her administrative position. Alice gave her feelings regarding how to handle

this type of situation. Alice is positioned as a female rural superintendent. These are Alice's thoughts:

All administrators, male and female, have moments of doubt and questioning. If you're not constantly examining your path and direction, then it would be hard to provide clarity and focus to those around you. I can relate to this passage, in that I have tried to assist administrators who have hit this wall. Usually, it is a temporary situation that has built up. Good listening and questioning skills can often help someone self-examine and figure out a solution. As a superintendent, it is critical and an element of survival to reach out to someone you have built trust in, and be able to vent and confide. It is a sign of strength, not weakness, to confidentially work with a trusted colleague and sort through the good and the bad. Days of overload in dealing with the *nitty gritty* while never losing sight of the immediate and the pressing. It is essential to learn to keep all of the balls in the air, with no excuses. Juggling many audiences, tasks and maintaining high expectations is a skill, or trait, that does get easier over time. Keeping everyone on an even keel starts with the person in charge. There are times a parent, staff, or a board issue is brought to your attention that might seem petty or inconsequential. To that person, however, it is important. The vignette made me feel a little sad for the individual, as many good people simply get run over by the politics and the expectations of others. The individual appears to be questioning her effectiveness and worth within a system moving without her. She definitely appears to have lost faith in her contributions to lead effectively. If this were me, I would find someone immediately to help sort through the reality of the feelings expressed. Utilizing an outside or trusted independent set of eyes and ears might help put things in perspective. Her feelings seem very real, and can't be discounted, but her expectations may be contributing to her disappointments and frustrations. It is a reality that everyone in a position of leadership will at times experience setbacks and disappointments, but the position requires regrouping and continuing to move forward.

Next, Alice commented on a vignette about female administration. She ascertained:

This passage reminds me of how far we have come in the school administration profession. I have no doubt the women contributors experienced the situations they describe. While there are some things in society that haven't changed much in the past

twenty years, women in a position of authority, knowledge and leadership within a school setting, is much more prevalent today. I do not relate to their experiences with my colleagues, but I can relate to the careful path that's sometimes taken with long serving board members and/or community members used to *the good old boys'* way of running things. I have experienced some antiquated thought processes such as..."don't wear a skirt/dress to work, as you won't be taken seriously" (quote, board member). I have experienced occasions of sexism, when individuals realize they are not going to get their way..."when the treasurer and superintendent dress in blue or black suits, they must be lesbians" (quote, board member). However, the ignorance and offensive comments made have been few and far between, but you certainly don't forget them. As stated, I am blessed and confident with the colleagues I have worked with over the years. Being able to share war stories helps keep a sense of humor. The negative and sexist comments or situations I've endured as a female in administration made me feel more determined to prove why I was in the position I was hired for. Maintaining an outwardly calm demeanor and sense of humor while being furious on the inside is very hard to do, but essential. Like other leadership skills, it does become easier. Being able to calmly redirect or address the provocative comments is also a skill that has to be developed. If this were me I would work twice as hard to be fully prepared, knowledgeable and confident when addressing challenging people or situations. There are times it is a chess game, and the best female administrators know their audience and know the best way to approach them. And I'm looking, watching him coming up the stairs. "Well, he wants to see the facility." My no means no. This isn't a new facility. We're in the old one. He's not allowed in our building unless it's game night.

Alice's advice to future female rural superintendents

Alice declared:

I think I might be a little bit different from some females out there. I wanted to latch on to how other female superintendents were running a district. Because I just am a firm believer if you're a male or a female that your own knowledge base and your own way of dealing with things is what's going to set you apart. I mean yes, you need the females beside you to say, how did you deal with the board member who said that...

because again, as women, you do deal with it differently. You will deal with the board differently. I'm not saying manipulate the situation but that is kind of what it is. If you know what you're doing and you have integrity, you can look someone in the eye and it's not about you or a personal gain, then it is the right thing to do. I think people grudgingly...will respect that.

Liza

Liza's Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency

Liza is a charismatic, beautiful and soft-spoken change agent. Liza has an ability to visualize what the district needs and gain buy-in in from her staff in order to implement positive school improvements. Liza grew up in the Midwest and moved to a rural school district in 7th grade. Her family consists of her husband and five children with age ranges from twenty-three to three years old. She has an adopted daughter and a stepson that are both twenty-three and her biological children are eighteen, fifteen, and three. She is about to become a very young grandparent.

Liza attended college directly out of high school to become a 7-12 social studies teacher. In the beginning of her career, she taught in a private Lutheran School for two years and then moved to the public-school system where she *felt called*. Prior to her move, Liza had been teaching school for six years. This teaching stint was before the federal mandate of Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT). Because this was prior to HQT, she was able to teach subjects and grade levels outside of her teaching license. Therefore, she taught physical education (PE) K-8, reading 7-8, keyboarding for 7-8, and social studies in grades 6-12. Liza had a diverse background in content knowledge and was well-versed in all grade levels, K-12.

Furthermore, Liza had teaching experience by working in a rural school district and later a, career center that served city students as well as all of the surrounding rural districts. Liza proclaimed:

Frustrated by leadership and having a propensity to believe “I could do anything,” along with a deep desire to change adult lives in order to affect more student lives, I started my master’s work at the University and became a Curriculum Director. Then, I completed my superintendent’s license from another well-known university and moved into that position (the position of superintendent). This is my tenth year as a superintendent.

During Liza's interview, she commented that the only reason she obtained her superintendent's license was to complete her state required continuing education. Liza believed that due to the state requirement of continuing education that one should take classes that amount to another degree or endorsement. Liza posited, "I didn't have any intention of being a superintendent. Actually, I went straight from the classroom to being a Curriculum Director. I've never been a building principal and really... that is the job I wanted." After five years in of being a curriculum director in central office, Liza aspired for more, "I started getting an itch to do something else." By chance, as Liza considered various principal options, a superintendency opened up just fifteen minutes away from her house. She took the plunge, interviewed, and was hired as a female, rural superintendent in 2010.

When asked about any barriers on the road to the female rural superintendency she claimed:

I didn't find barriers to becoming a superintendent on the professional side of things. I had great support from colleagues and from the superintendent I worked for at the time. The barriers and challenges I faced seemed to be more personal. For example, juggling time with outside commitments, raising my children who were 3 and 6 at the time I began the work to earn my superintendent's license, and I had just finished my masters and my principal's license just prior to that. I was a single mom, working full-time, and going to school.

Thus, the main challenge for Liza was balancing her professional life and her personal life. Liza found that her male mentor was very supportive. She indicated:

He included me in decision making that had nothing to do with my title, but that would prepare me for the next level. With the exception of running a campaign for a bond issue and building a school, there wasn't really anything in the role of the superintendent that I wasn't at least familiar with due to his support.

She found two other male mentors who guided her on the road to the superintendency from the organization known as the Midwest Superintendent's Association.

Also, during my courses, these men kind of took me under their wings and helped me navigate the journey. I am very grateful. After I became a superintendent, the Midwest Superintendent's Association assigned a female rural superintendent to be her mentor.

Liza described her female mentor as an astounding confidant who ushered her through the challenges and successes of being a superintendent. Liza remarked:

We immediately became best friends and still are to this day. We have very different leadership styles but that didn't matter. We just clicked. She helped slow me down on several occasions. Likewise, she is the person who introduced me to the Schlechty Center. I couldn't have done the first couple of years without her.

Liza believed defined her personal and professional roles as follows, "I am always mother first. This is the most important and hardest work I do. I believe this defines me. My next role is leader." Liza expressed how she has led her children and how that directly correlates with being an educational leader. She denoted:

Leadership fits with being a mom. I see myself leading my children. When they were young, I was the leader that did more "direction providing," but now, I do a lot of leading. Not managing. I don't tell them who to be. I question them. I give them options and exposure to concepts that are *other*, but they decide who they will be. This is how I lead as a superintendent too. Everything is about creating experiences for thinking, reflecting, and working, so that in the end, my team is motivated by their values, not what I told them to do.

Aside from Liza's value-centered leadership, she has been an active advocate for public education and has served as an executive member of the State's Public-School Advocacy Network. This work has continued to be essential to her; however, she was compelled to step away from some of her other roles in order to ensure that she focuses on her two main roles: being a value-centered mother and a superintendent. Moreover, Liza is a Christian, a woman of faith. She avowed:

The umbrella that covers all of my is Christ Follower. My faith dictates how I will respond, plan, strategize, and make decisions. It determines how I talk to people and how I love them, even when they are not loveable. I believe we are in desperate need for leaders who can love their people regardless of how the leader is treated.

When Liza was a young administrator, she thought she led with a much more masculine leadership style. She described *masculine leadership* as more direct and less collaborative approach. For example, Liza commented that she tended to use her position to accomplish tasks.

Ultimately, Liza found that the *masculine leadership* style was ingenuine for her; that was not who she was. She maintained:

People who were really close to me and who knew my heart respected me, but I'm not sure people who didn't have contact with me on a daily basis did. I was just another central office person who was disconnected from their work. Through the frameworks presented by the Schlechty Center, I found my language. I found a way of leading that was always who I was, but that the *bureaucratic system* did not encourage. I found ways to bring values and beliefs into my work. I found ways to provide people the opportunity to share their voices. I began to collaborate. I began to trust the process more than just dictating an outcome. To be honest, I think this is a more *feminine* way to lead and I have found much success in building teams and trust this way.

Liza's Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent

"I did not receive any formal training to be a superintendent of a rural district. I grew up in one and I worked in three rural communities before I came to this rural district. I felt like I understood the landscape." When I asked Liza about the encounters she faced as a female rural superintendent she pronounced the following:

There is *a genuine magic* in working in a smaller rural district, but the challenges are many. On a regular basis, people would say to me, "you don't need as many administrators or support staff like larger schools because you don't have as many students." While we had a smaller enrollment total, the mandates from the state were no less. Every report, every rule, every policy, every training, all curriculum, all budgets, all professional development, everything that was and is required of larger schools is required of rural schools, but *with a fraction* of the people to support the work. *You feel like you are always drowning*. You can't get it all done; it's impossible and I believe that all things are possible. I learned to prioritize. I decided what was on fire and what wasn't. What would be there tomorrow, next week or even next year? This is how I prioritized my work. I found it difficult to build a smoothly running organization - it was more like working in *fits and starts*. Everyone wears too many hats and is a jack of all trades and master of none. Also, rural districts want to provide more opportunities to students, but do not have the staffing or budgets to do so. Rural districts cannot compare

with the offerings and opportunities of large suburban schools. Even getting kids to school in the snow is a challenge! LOL

According to Liza, the hurdles she encountered were not specific to being female, those trials are confronted by all superintendents who work in smaller, rural school districts. Liza's work in her rural district as a female superintendent is distinct for rural schools; such as: wearing too many hats, being a jack of all trades and a master of none, having the same mandates as suburban and urban schools but without the resources and support, and the geographical location and manpower to get kids to school (Lamkin, 2006; Lavalley, 2018, & Tekniepe, 2015). Liza maintained that being a female superintendent in a rural district was quite rewarding. She adored the *small, close-knit communities* and even talked about being invited into homes for a coffee or a quick chat. The rural community allowed her to build relationships and truly appreciate the heart of her people. For Liza, this was a blessing and it aligned closely with her value-centered, *feminine* leadership style.

Liza declared that one of the main differences of rural school districts as opposed to larger school districts is that as the superintendent of her rural district, her students knew her by name and invited shared their school work. Liza was an integral, compassionate, part of the rural school district *family*. Whereas working in a career center as a female superintendent made up of several rural schools has felt much less relational. For example, to pass a levy in her previous rural district, she held coffee meetings in community member's homes. Liza was the community's school leader and a part of their family. Liza confirmed that as a female superintendent of a larger school district, she was unable to have the same type of community support and intimate relationships. Below is another example of how Liza operated as a female superintendent of a rural school district:

I went to the funeral of every staff member's spouse, etc. who passed and any child who lost a parent and many community members who didn't have children in the school. I opened the school for the funeral of a community member and for a student. For the student who passed, my administrative team and I stayed at the calling hours in the gym for thirteen hours, never leaving the parents. Where I am now, students lose their parents and I don't know them. I don't even know all of my staff because of our Adult Education Program that has people who work remotely, in a variety of places, evenings, and weekends.

According to Liza, politics existed on a local level for her rural school district but did not damage the school in any way. She mentioned that although the politics were not on a large, harmful scale, that it was still imperative to know *who was related to whom* because so many families were interrelated in a rural school district. Additionally, she said that because of the smallness in her rural community, she could progress the district quicker.

Because there weren't that many layers between me and the students, we could affect change on a much more rapid scale than in larger districts. In my current setting with suburban districts, *politics are king*. Who knows who, who is connected to who, who can get the scoop first, all issues. I don't enjoy playing the game. I just want to have a real conversation on the up and up all of the time. This is a tough transition for me. The *poverty mindset* is the same everywhere, I think. For my rural school district, my students had never been out of the county and couldn't imagine a big city. Poverty in the city means that students have never left their neighborhood and can't imagine a life different from theirs. Same, but different. All of the health concerns and high-risk behaviors are similar too. I find more drug offenses with more suburban districts.

When Liza was a female rural superintendent she sensed support from all of the surrounding rural school districts. Furthermore, she articulated that all of her school board members embraced her leadership style, "They just wanted good things for their school - no agendas." Liza developed a large supportive network of superintendents nationally through the Schlechty center which guided her superintendency. Liza conveyed that she overcame specific rural situations because she believed that *people are people*, no matter where they are located. She posited:

People are people. All people want to belong to part of something greater than themselves. We just had to figure out how to make the school district that thing (greatness). I had supportive parents and those that would rip us on Facebook (FB) are the same anywhere you go.

Liza expressed that some people may not have responded to her *feminine*, value-center leadership style as a rural female superintendent. Although she did not experience much of this resistance, she attributed it to her gender, being female. Additionally, she observed the *Good Old Boys' Club* during her rural school superintendency but she worked well with them. She revealed:

I do think I have experienced a few individuals who didn't respond to me as well as to be expected because I was female, but to be honest, I think this has been few and far between. When I listen to older female superintendents tell their war stories, I am grateful they went before me and paved the way. I definitely ran into the *good old boys club* but they knew I knew they were the *good old boys*. They played their part and they included me like an honorary member. At the end of the day, they knew they were in their club and I was in mine and that was okay. I soon rose as a leader in many of our projects together and they were glad to let me do the work. This might sound like I am being disrespectful and I don't mean it that way, it was just the way it was. No harm no foul.

Overall, Liza thought that her femininity aided her leadership because she naturally is a collaborative leader who implemented shared, value-centered leadership, giving all a voice. She built teams with her leadership style. She asserted, "I can be tough as nails when I need to be and I can cry when it is appropriate and nobody gives me any grief for it." Liza told a story of a staff member that she had to remove.

She was making bad choices both in and out of school. We had already asked her to resign at the end of the year instead of facing a nonrenewal, but it got so bad that I needed to get her out of school for the last two weeks. The attorney said I could put her on paid leave, just get her out of the building. I think because I am female, I could deliver the message in a way that validated the trouble she was experiencing, share my concerns, and help her see I was creating a win-win scenario for both of us. After our discussion, I walked her to her classroom, helped her collect her things, escorted her to her car and then hugged her goodbye and wished her luck. She left without incident. That was me being *soft*. Then, I went back into the building and spoke with each staff person, individually, telling them that all exterior doors were locked and that no one was to let her into the building and report it to the office immediately if they saw her. That was me being, *not so soft*.

Liza was extremely proud of her district's accomplishments while she was in the role of female rural superintendent. She built a building, brought two sides of the community together, her staff displayed great commitment to the school district, and by the relationships she established. These relationships that have changed her life in a positive way. She explained that her rural

district was the result of an old consolidation from the 1960s when two rival communities had to combine into one school. Another unique situation that occurred to many rural schools due to lack of resources, support, and finances (Gardner & Wieland, 2006; & Blauwkamp et al., 2011) When Liza built the school building in 2014, she brought both sides of the district together, forgetting about the 1960s school rivalry.

Vignettes

In response to the vignettes Liza expounded upon her position as a female superintendent. She claimed that being a female rural superintendent is lonely and often, left her depleted her of energy. Nonetheless, she always strived to project inspiration for her district. “Our team members can smell exhaustion and apathy a mile away. The superintendency is lonely. Finding ways to refuel and be connected are tough because no one in the organization can deeply relate to my work.” Also, she claimed that there is insufficient staff, personnel and support to truly complete the work necessary as a female rural superintendent.

The vignette regarding female leadership dress was relatable to Liza in every single way. She declared:

These seem like I am reading my own experiences. I can relate to each quotation. I have had each one of these scenarios play out in my own life. I guess, I don't even see all of realize that they could have been gender related. I have learned how to play the game. What I wear is very important. I do not command authority by just being present. Suits, high heels, etc. Dark colors. I am always thinking about what message my clothes will communicate and how I can use that to my advantage in any scenario. It is an interesting feeling to read words written by someone else that describe my own life even though I wasn't really aware of them. She (the lady in the vignette) has learned what she needs to do in order to be effective in her world. **It would be great if we could just show up and lead without any unconscious bias, but the world isn't like that and while we play the game, we continue to gain ground proving our worth.**

Vignette three described the life of a female interacting with the *Good Old Boys*. Liza declared that the entire vignette reminded her of stories from her female mentors and superintendents who paved the way for future female educational leaders. She maintained that women have made progress. She did not directly relate to this vignette because she had not

experienced any of these stories while being a female rural superintendent. Furthermore, Liza Vignette four unrelatable because it embodied the mistreatment of women by women. She voiced that even though she had not personally experienced female sabotage she knew other women who had. “I cannot personally relate to this, but I do have friends in my generation who have worked under female leadership that was unsupportive of other females. It was very confrontational and territorial.”

Lastly, Vignette five discussed men stealing ideas from female colleagues and claiming them as their own. Liza re-counted:

There have been a couple of instances when men have stolen my ideas and run with them. There was nothing I could do about it but be grateful that good work was getting done. This has mostly occurred to me when dealing with state level work.

However, as a female rural superintendent she said that she did not experience this and she attributed that to having been *the boss*.

Liza’s advice to future female rural superintendents

My wishes for doing things differently don’t have anything to do with being female. I wish I would have been comfortable leading “my way” sooner in my career and that I had not spent so many years boxed in by the way others have led. I wish someone had told me that *I was free to be me - free to lead like me* - and that even if others might not be able to *get away with saying the things I say, or telling the stories I tell, or motivating the way I do*. I can get away with it because it is me - it is genuine. I spent too long leading like I saw others around me leading. It was an unconscious decision. I wish someone had helped me come alive sooner. - *Ok - I guess this is a male / female issue because all of my role models were male and I started my career leading like them*. It was only after I became comfortable being the *female leader* that I am that made me more successful.

One may glean from Liza’s response that females need to be themselves and lead with their personal leadership style. If a woman does not lead from her heart she may become like a butterfly without wings. Specifically, for rural districts, Liza ascertained that one must intimately know *their* people.

Know your people. Really know them. Laugh with them, cry with them, send them cards when something good happens, acknowledge when they are hurting. Have coffee with the farmers and the senior citizens' group at the local diner. Go to football games. Cheer with the kids. The bottom line is to build relationships. They will bail you out when times get tough. I can't think of an occasion when I was about to have a union issue that someone didn't come to give me a *head's up* first. I remember some tough staffing decisions where the union privately told the teacher to do what I said even though they played the part in public.

Liza described how being a superintendent is as a humbling experience. She stated that you feel as though you are always carrying a *heavy burden*. Nevertheless, Liza believed her rural superintendency to be rewarding because it was her goal to make a difference. She declared, "What I do matters. It doesn't matter to an individual student, but it matters in the overall life of the organization and organizations are living, breathing creatures, make no mistake about it." In the rural superintendency, she was pulled in many directions. She gave the analogy the following analogy by comparing the principalship and the superintendency. She asserted:

Not being pulled like a principal - that is fast and furious. The superintendency is slower. The principalship is a heart attack. The superintendency is a slow-growing cancer. They both will kill you, just one is slower than the other. It is up to me to determine the direction of the district. That is a blessing and a burden. I don't think people can understand the weight of this job until they do it for themselves.

Liza was an extremely successful female rural superintendent. She did not face professional barriers on the road to the superintendency nor as a female rural superintendent due to her femininity. She intuited that her female gender rarely affected her in negatively. She confronted barriers that the majority of *rural* superintendents encounter because of the nature of rurality and the rural school system (Lamkin, 2006; Lavalley, 2018, & Tekniepe, 2015). Liza was a genuine leader who lead from the heart and bonded a community in the name of student progress for a bright future. I leave her story with her words, "Treat everyone with equity and respect. Help people to build on their strengths. Love them for who they are not what they are."

Martha

Martha's Professional Journey - On the Road to the Superintendency

Martha, a selfless, service-oriented woman with an “I can do anything” attitude and is an inspirational leader who truly wants to change the world through education. Martha is highly intelligent with humility; this is Martha's story.

Martha grew up in a community reminiscent of a rural community that still had the Amish buggies. She went to a private school for her first six years, but because Martha wanted to be a music teacher she would have to go to a larger school with a bigger band program. Martha was the only child of two parents who did not graduate college and had blue collar jobs. Martha attended a local high school that graduated about 200 students a year. In order to further her desire to become a music teacher she participated in dual enrollment classes, taking lessons and playing in the local university wind ensemble. During her last two years of high school. Upon high school graduation, she went to a well-known university for educational music performance.

Martha's first leadership role was managing director of the university marching band, which was a graduate student position, but was the first undergraduate student to be offered this opportunity. “And that was the first experience I ever really had leading a large organization or working with a large organization.” The university band had over 300 students. Martha knew this world well as her hometown was a huge football town where the whole community lived for “Football Friday Night” and Band shows. After graduation, Martha was hired by a school district near her hometown where she was the only female head band director in the County.

And so that was an interesting experience. My band director when I was in high school was female and there was another female director in the county when I was in high school. But you figure six years out of school, right? They were all men directors. So that was kind of my first experience of being a woman in a top leadership position, in a very, very rural community.

Although Martha obtained her first teaching job, in a community dominated by men, she experienced some challenges for being the only female band director. For example, she recalled:

My first year of teaching was probably the most challenging of my entire life. I got hired three days before the band camp, a very late hire. The man they had offered the position to turned it down and so I was the second choice. We went to band camp and on my

second day we had a drug bust because my senior, who was only two years younger than me, brought drugs to band camp. A few weeks later, I had the band parent president, a man, swing at me (a punch). I had turned in his son for smoking. It was a very traumatic event when I started at this school; it is a very tough, very small, very rural school. But through those hardships and through those challenges I was able to build relationships. I maintained strength because of my ability to be strong I did not let anyone hurt me or stop me.

As Martha's career flourished as an instrumental music director, her principal (male) encouraged her to become a principal. Therefore, she went back to school and obtained her master's degree in administration. Martha stated that she had never wanted to be anything but a music teacher. Martha admired her principal and has maintained communication with him over the years. He supported her and was her first mentor of administration. He was a good old boy. Martha claimed:

He was everything I wasn't; he didn't rock the boat, he was a former athletic director, he was the true definition of a *good old boy*. And he said that I challenged him because I always put kids first. Every time I would come into his office I would make him do things for the program because my arguments were always about kids and he had no choice and he couldn't win. I think he won three times in eight years. We just had a really good relationship.

Next, Martha became an assistant principal of a high school in a rural community. Her superintendent who was a man as well became a second mentor to Martha. Martha described her experience as a challenge:

And, once again, you walked in, and you didn't know what you were getting into. The interview process there was incredibly tough, with the committee dominated by strong athletic male coaches who were teachers. And I really wasn't sure how I did. After the final rounds, the superintendent really liked me. I was the first woman ever to be an assistant principal at the high school.

Martha served in her assistant role for two years and then requested to move to become the head intermediate school principal where she worked through a building closure. This was a very difficult process. Martha described:

This building closure was in the center of a rural community and was the former high school from the 1900s. Now it was going to be torn down to the ground. And so that was a very good learning experience, working with those stakeholders. That really is where I got to work with community members, in depth. The community had strong counsels and investments in the school. After that position ended, the superintendent offered me middle school principal position. I was actually able to follow and stay with my kids, not the teachers, but follow the kids in seventh and eighth grade.

When her superintendent retired, she felt that her school district was going down the wrong path. Martha stated:

I think that in any job, in any role, it doesn't matter if you're male, female, it doesn't matter if it's rural or city, it's got to be a good fit. The ethics and the culture had changed with the new leadership.

Martha had attained her superintendent's license prior to leaving this rural district.

Martha landed her position as a female superintendent of a larger rural district that contained a city center and served as the superintendent.

Martha's Professional Journey as a Rural Female Superintendent

We passed the levies, we've built the buildings, we've done all the work to provide the best educational experience but there have been unique challenges being part of this rural community. The community brings its own culture that no other rural community had brought to me before. We have a low-income city center. So, if you put our school's demographics against other inner-city school demographics, you wouldn't know that we were a rural school district. We have over 609 of our students in poverty, we have drug use, many rental properties in the city, we have all kinds of federal and state funded systems that you don't see in rural communities. I mean, even the diversity in our city center is very unique. We essentially have a city component and a country component, which is our rural component. In this rural community there are impoverished people, middle class farmers, and millionaires.

Martha attributed her success to showing the community how much she cared and continues to care for their children and families. Also, she acknowledged that she has had success because she has had to break down barriers one person at a time. Martha said:

The other shift is trying to get your community to understand that they own the school, right? I mean this is their school, this is where we're teaching our children who will be the future of our community. So, building and breaking down those walls about education; building their understanding. My whole board was made up of men. And so, trying to get that buy was challenging. But like I said, there is a chameleon piece of being able to work in any situation that you're in; you have to know what people value. If you know your community and the players, you can make things work and then be able to lead or push or transform, if you will, whatever you need to do. One of the most influential people here, and honestly one of the two most chauvinistic people in the county, I mean flat out wouldn't even take a call from me or talk to me, had smart ideas for the district but would go through a board member to get to me. He didn't talk to women in authority positions, like they don't believe we can lead change. Ironically, these are some of the people that I have built my strongest relationships with over the years. I showed up at their businesses when they wouldn't take a call and called them out on the fact that they called a board member and not me. It is not a game of telephone. My board member would say, "Well so and so called and said." "Nope, sorry, not doing it. He wants to talk to me. He can call me." And probably my two biggest advocates if you will, are two people who don't believe in women in authority or leadership positions but have turned around. But I think it is just tradition of what rural communities expect. Women take care of families and maybe serve as teachers. Just trying to shift that mindset of what roles people can have is a challenge. But if you serve a rural community, they'll serve you back. And that's what makes rural communities special and the biggest difference from anywhere else you'll be.

Martha declared that she is not the most visible leader or figure head; she is behind the scenes, building relationships and gaining trust. That is how she was able to pass bond issues to build a PreK-6 building after other superintendents had failed. Martha has brought many programs to this rural school district such as: STEM, onsite satellite programs, career tech, and stronger relationships with community businesses. Martha strives to be an incredible listener, always has her phone on and her office door opened. She has run her district with transparency and getting things done not only to improve her school district but also her rural community.

Martha described her female superintendency:

I think one of the things you have to think about when you're talking about my specific role as a female superintendent in this county was two of us came on as superintendents at the same time and out of six districts, three of us were female. So, we had this girl power thing going on for a good couple of years. That in itself with regard to female superintendents in the county got us some momentum, if you will. We met a lot, probably every other week. We talked, we collaborated; we problem solved for example, we shared things like the insurance consortium, the educational service center, and we were constantly looking at resources, writing grants together, etc., to try to move the county in a direction that we believed in. And so, I just think it was the intentionality and the passion we all had to make a difference and turn this county into something spectacular. All three districts past bond issues and built buildings which was nice. I think those common goals were very helpful. The interesting thing you asked about concerning the challenges with working with men, I learned it can also be very challenging to work with multiple women leaders.

Martha described one major mistake that she had made by placing two very strong-minded talented women in one building as co-head principals.

I had a 1200 student building and I really thought that I could have two head principals. One, very strong in curriculum and instruction, and one, very strong operational principal that was passionate and caring but could tell a teacher or a parent what they needed to hear, no matter how difficult the conversation. You need the strength to do what is NOT easy and the strength in curriculum and instruction. We put those two women together and we, the three of us, almost didn't make it. Because you had three powerful women coupled with trying to start a new building, it was a challenge all in itself. My one principal that's still here will say it was the worst year of her career and that it almost kept her from wanting to ever do anything with educational administration, again. So, we had three women and one male principal. The male principal left after the first year, he couldn't take it. We put in another male principal on the team without changing the females. After the first nine weeks it was clear he wasn't going to make it. To support the team, I have a behavioral mental health person that comes to work with my administrative team every month. I have worked with him here for a long time and he comes to give us strength and to help with solving problems or brainstorming

solutions to personal issues. Early winter, after meeting with the team, he came into my office and said, "If you don't put two guys out there as principals, you're going to lose this one too because he can't ... you're sending him to the wolves because those girls cannot get along out there," and they really couldn't. So, I ended up moving, one of the female principals up to the district office and she wasn't happy, she didn't want to be a district curriculum director, again. So, a few months later she left. I left the strong operational principal at the school and allowed her to rebuild her team. And we actually hired two men and did some reorganizational things and that shifted the culture. It was an amazing transformation.

Female to Female sabotage and conflict is real. When I asked Martha about being a female rural superintendent she said that she never thought about it in terms of gender, being a woman or being a man. She was determined to explain how she has perceived her role as the superintendent as a behind the scenes, relational role; not one of power and authority. She has never felt as a person who has networked with many people. Martha proclaimed that her mentors (three were men and two were women) have helped her tremendously throughout her career. She confirmed that her male mentors taught her how to navigate the "man's world," of administration.

Furthermore, I asked Martha about the uniqueness of leading a rural school district as a female superintendent. She proclaimed:

When you think about a farm in a rural community, people have pure hearts and strong traditions. They are set in their beliefs and their values. This is their core, who they are. When you walk into somebody's house, they're going to get you food, coffee, sit down at the kitchen table and talk with you. Right? Have a meaningful conversation. They wouldn't expect any different. If you needed something like a pick-up truck to haul something, air in my tires - they're going to take care of you and want nothing in return. And I think that's why some people fail in the role of rural superintendent. You have to be genuine. Now some people do really well in rural communities because they grow up in it and share the same values, beliefs, and traditions. I've always lived in rural communities but I have never owned a farm.

Martha mentioned a few challenges as a young music teacher in a rural community and I believe that she has faced others as well. However, she has not attributed any of her challenges as a rural female superintendent to being a female. She has had great success as a female rural

superintendent with her leadership style. She is a fit in her community and most likely this is why she has lasted as a female rural superintendent for ten plus years.

Vignettes

In response to the vignettes Martha revealed her loneliness as a superintendent:

I think the hardest thing to think about as a superintendent is to realize that you're lonely. So, you know that you're alone but when you can come to the realization that it's more than being alone at the top, it's being lonely at the top. By lonely, I mean, the feeling I had after the strong female superintendents that I worked with left. That's when I knew that it's lonely as a female superintendent in a rural community. There's no one to call, there's no one to network with. There's no one who's been working on these projects and breaking down barriers. Everything has changed. When you take on the superintendency, you know you're alone. I mean, you lose your name as your name is on the district. So, it's like someone told me when I took this position, you're the superintendent, your name is the autograph of the district. So, it's your autograph on everything, whether you did it or didn't do it. It can be lonely if you do not have your community behind you.

Additionally, Martha affirmed that in a rural district one does not have the depth of help. She said, "whether you have 200 kids or 20,000 kids, the compliance work is still the same, your resources are very limited so your knowledge in a lot of different areas has to be more." On another vignette, Martha discussed that she may have been treated differently as a woman but believed that some of the very same things would have happened to a man. For example, she told a story where she was going to be hired for a principalship and they hired the superintendent's family member instead. She said this made her stronger because she set off to prove them wrong and worked on developing her own strengths in leadership. Man or woman, the family member would have gotten the job.

As Martha discussed female rural administrators she posited:

I think, women in rural communities in leadership positions are a little rarer. So, when they get the title and power, it's not like in a city community. If this title and power matters, it can be more challenging in rural communities.

Martha's advice to future female rural superintendents

Martha said it short and sweet. Her advice to any future rural superintendent was:

Remember, it is not about you. It's not about your age, it's not about the longevity in education. It's about the kids and making a difference for a community. If you can't make arguments that are valid and kid centered, it doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter if you're a male or a female. You have to have a deep passion for the students and the community.

Summary of Findings

Generally, each female rural superintendent encountered similar situations. Likewise, they experienced dissimilar situations in their rural communities. Each superintendent faced many challenges from the intersectionality of leadership, gender and rurality. Five major themes materialized throughout this research. The majority of female rural superintendents experienced the following five themes:

- 1) The District Must be the Right *Fit*
- 2) Other Women (Female Saboteurs)
- 3) The *Good Old Boys' Club*
- 4) Loneliness
- 5) An Ethical Fighting Spirit of Determination, Grit, and Resilience

These themes will be detailed in Chapter 5. Figure 2 illustrates the general commonalities found with each female rural superintendent. These commonalities were not explored in depth or used to search for a phenomenon because this qualitative study was conducted implementing narrative inquiry. The main purpose of this story was to explore and uncover the hidden stories found through the voices of female rural superintendents in the twenty-first century.

BACKGROUND COMMONALITIES AMONG THE SIX FEMALE RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS

Female Rural Superintendents	Was a female rural superintendent in the 21 st Century	Grew up in Rural / County Community	Transient as a child (participated in more than one district during (K-12) schooling)	Had Supportive Husbands	Began the Superintendency after children grown or without children	Master Degrees +	Mentored by Men	Coaching Experience
Milly	X	-	X	Divorced	X	Doctorate	X	-
Ruth	X	X	X	X	X	Master	X	X
Sarah	X	X	X	X	X	Doctorate	X	-
Alice	X	X	-	Divorced	X	Master	-	X
Martha	X	X	X	X	X	Doctorate	X	-
Liza	X	X	X	X	-	Master	X	-

Figure 2 – O’Keeffe Visual Representation of Background Commonalities Among Six Female Rural Superintendents from this Research Study

As seen in Figure 2, the six female rural superintendents had several background commonalities for example: five out of six grew up in rural towns; were students of more than one school district as children, began the superintendency after their children were grown or did not have any; and were mentored by men. Four out of six had supportive husbands whereas two were divorced; four did not have coaching experience where two did; three had a doctorate degree and the other three had a master's degree. The research demonstrates that most female superintendents do not begin the superintendency until they are in their fifties and their children have *left the nest* (Sharp et al., 2004), many are divorced (Robinson, 2016) or have very supportive families, and most have higher level education degrees such as doctorates (Wallin, 2005b). "Taking time to rear their children may be the main factor in this delay. Typically, the male superintendent will enter the superintendency in his early to mid-forty's; the female superintendent will not enter until she is around fifty (Ramsey, 2000)" (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 25).

One characteristic that could be studied further is the fact that all of these female rural superintendents had lived their childhood, at one time or another, in a rural community. I propose that this may have helped them in some of their successes as female rural superintendents but also a reason that they may have felt comfortable to apply for a rural superintendency. In addition, five out of six female rural superintendents moved from district to district when they were young. Moving from one school district to another school district requires resiliency because one has to learn new sets of expectations, acquire new friendships and deal with the loss of stability. This could be the making of grit. According to Pankake and Beaty (2005) resiliency is shaped from childhood experiences. "The development of resiliency for the women in this study began long before they were in educational leadership positions. Experiences early in their lives appear to have offered them opportunities to deal with adversity" (Pankake & Beaty, 2005, p. 36). Therefore, I ascertain that these women have the capacity to handle tough situations and confront obstacles because of their resiliency, learned from their transience as school-aged females. I believe supplementary consideration to this commonality should be studied for future research.

This chapter has revealed the professional, gendered experiences of six female rural superintendents and has provided a lens into the intersectionality of females, leadership, and rurality. *As the researcher, I stand in awe of these women – they are true trailblazers of the feminist movement (whether they know it or not) and I am so proud to know them and have had*

the opportunity to write history with them. Chapter 5 will provide an in-depth analysis of five common themes that emerged from these interviews and responses to the vignettes.

Chapter 5

There are times it is a chess game, and the best female administrators know their audience and know the best way to approach them.

– Alice, Female Rural Superintendent Participant

Emergent Themes

The data collection afforded various common themes which surfaced from conducting qualitative, semi-structured interviewing. The female rural superintendents who participated in this study conveyed the following five themes:

- 1) The District Must be the Right *Fit*
- 2) Other Women (Female Saboteurs)
- 3) The *Good Old Boys' Club*
- 4) Loneliness
- 5) An Ethical Fighting Spirit of Determination, Grit, and Resilience

This chapter details these five themes. Each individualized narrative provides a window into the professional gendered experiences of female rural superintendents of the Midwest in the twenty-first century.

The data collected was analyzed through the framework consisting of feminist standpoint and intersectionality theories. Each woman, due to her own stance in life, has her perception and view of the world which intersects with her role as a female superintendent in a rural community, establishing multidimensional societal truths (Lutz et al., 2016). “It is a women’s unique standpoint in society that provides the justification for truth the claims of feminism while also providing it with a method with which to analyze reality” (Hekman, 2004, p.225).

Theme 1: The District Must be the Right *Fit*

The theme of *the right fit* was shared by each female superintendent that interviewed for this study. Four out of the six female rural superintendents felt that their chosen rural districts were a match. They shared similar values, beliefs, and desired outcomes as their rural districts. Their statements examined their success and failures. They demonstrated success by progressing their districts because these districts wanted a superintendent with forward thinking, a visionary; they too wanted to be moved into the twenty-first century. These similar ideals made the

superintendent and the district a natural *fit*. Alice spoke of this natural *fit* with one of her rural districts prior to becoming a superintendent.

That's how I got my foot in the door. And again, I was still coaching on the sidelines. I knew all of the administrators and I knew that I would probably have a foot in the door once I got my degree. That definitely helped. I was available, I liked kids, and I wanted to coach and work with junior high and high school students. I mean it was just a natural *fit*.

In addition, Alice spoke candidly about being the right *fit* as an elementary principal, "And so I went down for the interview and it was a very, very good *fit*. I interviewed with a ton of people. Like a big roundtable. *And it was just fun. I liked it.*" Like Alice, Milly conferred her *match* with her rural school district as a female superintendent and said:

The *fit*, the *match*...Oh, I knew it that night after our first interview. I mean, the camaraderie between me and the board members, it was awesome. *If you don't have it, chances are you won't succeed.* That's pretty strong language coming from me. I know. Additionally, Sarah claimed how she was *not a match* for her district. No matter how hard she tried, no matter how much she cleaned up and fixed for the district, no matter what she did to progress the district forward and be the right *fit*, she just was not. It was not her fault, she and her board thought she was a *perfect match* when she was hired because of her prior experience and knowledge that would help this district achieve their current goals. However, she mentioned her *non-fit* and one of her employee's *non-fit*.

They had to win; that's what the community wanted. The coach that we hired, who was a lovely man, good to the young men, he wasn't winning enough. I think he went 500 the first year and less than 500 the second year. But he knew *this isn't a good fit*. So, I remember him saying, "You need to get out of here because I'm getting out too." I'm like, "Okay."

Ruth had grown up in rural communities most of her life, understood the rural cultures and *fit* well with rural, conservative communities. Ruth was mentored by some of the *Good Old Boys* who encouraged her to pursue the superintendency. Ruth mentioned, "So rural communities were really my experience and *my comfort zone*, I guess." Ruth maintained that rural schools *fit* her because they truly were a part of who she was; the environment she has

always loved. Moreover, Ruth stated the importance of *fit*. She chose where she resided as superintendent. The district did not choose her; she chose it.

Ruth ascertained that she had to ensure her district's values and beliefs matched those of her community supporters. For example, she gained funding from local, international companies by demonstrating how the values of the school matched the values of the company. She stated the following about the importance of *fit*:

I knew I was moving to a very conservative district and I don't talk politics with people. But I did have to interact with *movers and shakers* in the community, several of whom gave substantial donations to the school and that was awesome. This rural district is kind of a company town where the international headquarters (for company not mentioned) are stationed. So, I had regular meetings with the owners and CEOs there. They never interfered, but we did talk a lot about what the needs of the school district were and how those needs *fit* their philosophy and foundation. So, when their foundations and philosophy *fit* a need for the school, they were very willing to get involved. Not politically, just helping us financially.

Martha stated, "And I think that in any job, in any role, it doesn't matter if you're male, female, it doesn't matter if it's rural or city, it's got to be a good fit." Martha continued as she discussed how she fit her rural school district as the superintendent:

When I came to this county there were two school districts with superintendent vacancies. The first place I interviewed was not a good fit based on the conversations with the board. The second I interviewed for my current position, it was a fit from day one with the board, with everything. However, there were and would be challenges. I trusted them and they trusted me. I think when you lead, it has to be a fit. If you can't affect your culture and you don't fit, you're not going to have success. So, how long do you want to do something that is just not the right fit? Everything is about fit. You should never feel like you have to take a position; you want to choose it; don't let it choose you. Personally, I don't ever want to be in a position where I have to do something because that is my job or it is a mandate. I'm here because this is a great place; I'm here because I care about our community and our students. We are doing amazing things and we're moving forward.

Liza did not directly speak to *fitting the district*, like the other five female superintendents did. Nonetheless, Liza sensed that her rural school district was aligned to her leadership style. Her personality and values *matched* those of the rural district. Liza expressed:

Working in rural districts has been very rewarding for me. The rural, small, close-knit communities allowed me to build relationships and really know people which is more aligned to my leadership style than leading from afar. Knowing staff, students and parents alike was a real blessing.

Theme 2: Other Women (Female Saboteurs)

It is always so ironic to me that some of the worst back stabbing and sabotaging of females in administration occurs by other females. It is probably one of the biggest disappointments I see occurring.

– Alice, Female Rural Superintendent Participant

“Women are socialized to *compete* with other females – men are socialized as team players” (Wallin, 2005a, p. 36). Female saboteurs transpired while these female superintendents were on their journey to attaining the highest position of power, the CEO of the district. Additionally, there were several instances when women continued to be unsupportive of their female rural superintendents while on the job. Sarah ascertained that another woman said to her, "Not everyone felt that way about you. We really did appreciate a lot of the things you did." So, it's like, okay, but they never let me know.” Thus, women who were supportive never spoke up to support their female leader; hence, unsupportive. Brock (2008) described the need for women to have an equal status relationship. When the status of one woman changes in a relationship the other woman may commit sabotage because she feels threatened. Brock explained:

If an aspect of a friend's status changes, disequilibrium occurs and the friendship may deteriorate. Examples of status changes that may jeopardize a friendship include one of the friends getting married, having a baby, obtaining a degree, a new job or promotion, losing weight, getting a divorce, or gaining in wealth or popularity. Unless the friends can re-equalize the status so neither feels inferior or inadequate, the friendship may end. However, if neither woman feels threatened by the change in status, they can have widely different attributes, acquisitions, and life situations, and continue to remain friends (Barash, 2006). (Brock, 2008, p. 213)

It was discussed in Brock’s research that females have an inherent need for relationship equity

and that society has taught women to act surreptitiously when addressing conflict. I believe Brock's (2008) research to have validity as proven through the female rural superintendents; experiences found in my research study. For example, Milly directly stated that females were threatened by her.

Women didn't like me. They were threatened by me. And, oh, this hurts my gut.

Women wanted me to go away. Women, they didn't even want to compete with me.

They just wanted me to disappear and they were not always kind. They would give me the cold shoulder, of course.

Furthermore, Brock (2008) explained that sabotage may be triggered when women assume a leadership role or become a supervisor of another woman. Additionally, Brock (2008) ascertained that if a female is content in her role without desire to attain a higher position, degree, or improve her work quality that she may instigate malicious behavior towards a woman who does desire to be more. The female saboteur instigates this behavior because it makes her feel as though the actions of the woman who wants more, highlights her personal and professional shortcomings. According to Milly, this was very a part of her much her experience:

Some of the women who were educational leaders who maybe were supervisors above me would find demeaning words to say to me. Or if they had the power, they would withhold certain assignments from me to kick me out of the picture. They would not put me in a lead role. They would push me back in line so that I didn't have a chance to shine.

I suggest that a woman who aspires to become a leader in a rural district may encounter sabotage from fellow females for two reasons. The first reason being that in rural communities, traditional female roles are encouraged and far more prevalent than in other communities; thus, making females who want to be leaders both stand out and optimal victims for female sabotage. My second reason is that often, in communities of poverty, the majority of community members do not hold degrees higher than high school. For these aims, they do not always see the value in attaining higher education. If men, who frequently hold the dominant, patriarchal decision-making roles, do not need higher education then, there is even less value for women, who often hold the traditional role of mother and housemaker, to obtain higher education. Therefore, women, who hold authoritative positions that require higher education, go against the norms, traditions, and values of the rural community; unknowingly they have positioned themselves

above the men. They are an oddity almost disvaluing the norms of the rural community because they may make the women in the community feel devalued; angered for themselves and angered for their husbands. This is an example of how the female gender intersects with rurality causing inadvertent obstacles to overcome on her journey as a female rural superintendent and a mark for female sabotage. Sarah's story is a prime example of how women spread vicious rumors and make fun of other female's appearances in order to lower the other female's status. Sarah stated:

It was a tough gig. I got accused for having an affair with a board member to the point where some people believed it. I was and I am happily married. It was this one, nasty woman who kept the rumor going through writing letters to the editor. Another situation happened when they talked about my hair. There was a female sub and she was eating lunch with one of the board member's daughters and this teacher says, "Did you see Sarah's hair?" I had it crunched up or whatever and I had a full staff meeting. She said, "What was going on with her hair today?" It's like, okay, that never happens to men. Right?

Sarah's stories are supported by the research completed by Brock (2008) as noted:

Girls are more likely to use passive aggressive behaviors, or indirect aggression, such as malicious gossiping, staring and giggling, ridiculing, writing anonymous notes, forming cliques, and excluding someone in response to conflict with peers (Chesler, 2001). Passive-aggressive behaviors learned in childhood are likely to continue in adulthood and assume the form of sabotage and similar forms of guerilla warfare. (Brock, 2008, p. 213)

Alice confirmed that female sabotage existed in her career as well.

There was a tiny crack between the walls of my office and another office. The one good board member would enter my office and say, "I just got a call from this board member. How would he have heard that, Alice? How would he have heard what we were talking about in your office?" And I'm thinking, "Well, I haven't told anybody. It was just him and I in there." So, we kind of started putting two and two together. And then my building and grounds' supervisor, who was just a phenomenal guy, came in and he said, "Alice, they're probably bugging this room." And I'm like, "Oh for God's sakes, this isn't the Pentagon. This isn't Law and Order." He's like, "I'm telling you." And so, he went over to the next office, and he found the tape. I'm like, "You've got to be kidding." I

mean it was like, who does that? This is not high security stuff here, this is not life or death – it's a little town. It's that kind of drama put on by women. I bought a little noisemaker because again, I'm like, okay, now you know it. So, what are you going to do about it? Women, taping me, unbelievable!

Alice commented on a vignette regarding sabotage from men and women. Alice discussed her experiences as a female superintendent, intersecting with rurality:

It is always so ironic to me that some of the worst back stabbing and sabotaging of females in administration occurs by other females. It is probably one of the biggest disappointments I see occurring. The best person, female or male, should be supported and encouraged. Women have spent a long time trying to break through a glass ceiling and if she is the best person for the job, then she must be supported, applauded and emulated. As a female superintendent I have experienced mediating or addressing some of the bigger disciplinary issues and personnel grudges occurring between women.

It is ironic that before dealing with (women) involved, I would devise the best strategy for addressing each. When a situation involved men...honestly, it would be so much *easier*, because it was less emotion and more factual. This made me feel a little frustrated and disappointed, as I firmly believe women should do everything we can to support and encourage other women. Whether it's jealousy, or a competition, women do NOT like being told what to do, even when it's about their job. My experience has been that men may not like it, but do not hold onto their frustrations, months later. Being a male or female does not entitle one to special privileges or expectations while in a position of leadership. Being a leader requires good interpersonal skills and managing emotions on a daily basis.

Another example of female conflict in the educational leadership career was described by Martha, a current female rural superintendent. Martha voiced that some of her most prevalent conflicts were leading with other women.

In general, all district personnel with the exception of the treasurer, are all women and have conflict often. I don't know why that is and it is not always a bad thing; we are better and stronger at the end of the day. So, I think my experience as a female leader has been struggling with leading other powerful, dominant, talented women.

The female rural superintendents who participated in this study depicted the unfortunate

nature of other females who tried and take them down during their professional stent in a rural community. It was difficult for them to truly understand themselves because they think of themselves as women advocates. For example, Alice stated, “Some of the worst backstabbing has been female to female in my career. I don't understand that. I am the biggest advocate and champion for women or for anybody that loves kids. But especially women because it's hard.”

Theme 3: The Good Old Boys' Club

The good old boys' club has dominated the workplace in American culture and reared its obnoxious head in educational leadership when women began gaining more administrative positions (Blount, 1998). These clubs networked with community members holding high-level positions and government officials (local, state, and national) which provided them support to gain district superintendencies and other educational administrative roles. These *good old boys' clubs* kept women from gaining a foothold in educational leadership. As time has progressed from women's rights movements and government equity laws, this *good old boys' club* endures and executes power in the twenty-first century (Wallin, 2005). “The general belief is that much progress has been made in the dismantling of *the old boys' network* in the US or at least lessening its influence. However, many statistics and studies show a reality that is much less optimistic” (Gamba & Kleiner, 2001, p. 101).

In rural communities, where conservative ideals remain as shown by the responses from our six female rural superintendents, *good old boys' clubs* survive and influence the superintendency. Milly referred to navigating *a man's world*. She affirmed, “I was a pretty woman in *a man's world* and that made it even more difficult. Milly described being a beautiful woman in a world dominated by men. She said that men flirtatiously tried to seduce her and she was expected to comply. She quickly realized that she would not jeopardize her morals and therefore, knew that she had to look for another job in a different school district. Milly exclaimed:

The men would hit on me and when I wouldn't comply, I would get the cold shoulder and in now order to get promoted, I had to move on to different jobs. It kept me moving to different systems. Because I couldn't stay there and overcome the situation. Because when your boss is a man and you've turned him down, unless you step out there and make it known and live through all of the backlash from a situation like that,

there's nothing else to do, but hang your head and go. And I would recognize the problem and understand that I could go nowhere in that particular school district. So, I would leave, I would leave and it happened again and again.

It is important to denote that Milly experienced sexual discrimination after Title IX, making sexual harassment in the workplace illegal (Galles, 2004; Stromquist, 1993). Lovett and Lowery (1994) commented on the power of the *good old boys' clubs* regarding female coaches, depicting how the *good old boys* covertly besieged women in the coaching field. I draw the conclusion from the literature presented in my study that coaching in the education realm was originally established to entice men to the educational field because "coaching" was *manly* and the *good old boys* like to keep things the way they have always been, tradition. Allowing females into coaching realm opposed why coaching was formulated in the first place. Therefore, gender discrimination remains in the field of education and the coaching of high school sports (Weiler, 1994; Rousmaniere, 2013b; & Blount, 1998). "Two reasons given for the dramatic decline in the percentage of women coaches since the passage of Title IX have been the effectiveness of the *good old boys' network* and the lack or ineffectiveness of the *good old girls' network*" (Lovett & Lowery, 1994, p. 27). My research does delve into the *good old girls' club* ideal because it was not a common theme among these six rural female superintendents. However, it is worth further study in the field of education and how it relates to female educational leaders.

Milly chose not to *blow the whistle* on her male counterparts and bosses that mistreated her due to her gender and beauty because she knew that would destroy her career in education. Milly had a goal, and that goal was to become the CEO of the organization, the superintendent. Therefore, she endured the *good old boys' club* and continued on reaching for the stars as she attained her goal. Milly had more to say about the *good old boys*, she referred to them as the *big boys' club*.

You can't force your way past or into the *big boys' club* and one day, I actually walked into a group of men and I threw my arms around some of their shoulders and I said, "Okay, how do I join this *big boys' club*?" And their eyeballs came out of their heads. And I said, "Well, I guess if you won't let me in, I'll just have to go form a *girl's club*. *The good old girls' club*. And that they just got a big kick out of that. So, I made a joke out of it. Personally, sometimes I would call their bluff, but I would do so kindly. I would do so not rudely and not offensively, but I would say, "Hey, if you thought about what you

just said or could you do that a different way? Or what do you think about this?" So sometimes just addressing the issue in a non-confrontational manner would help me to break the ice, but boys are trained to be like that sometimes and we girls are trained to be the way we sometimes act and sometimes we have to get out of both of our roles in order to make a situation work in the way that it should. But you can't fix it if you don't talk about it and you can't scream your way through.

In this quote, Milly referenced how girls are socialized differently than men, confirming the history of societal norms and expectations for gender roles, "we girls are trained to be the way we sometimes act and sometimes we have to get out of both of our roles in order to make a situation work in the way that it should." Milly bestowed with this statement, that women and men act differently and that both genders have to learn to get out of each other's way and work together.

Milly discussed two ways she dealt with the *good old boys' club*. She would approach them, make a joke about it, that said, "Hey boys, here I am. Include me because I have value to add to your group. But I am not going to suffer by curling up into a ball... No, I will create a powerful *women's club*. And oh boy, men don't want a *girls' club* encroaching upon their happiness and ways of doing business." This is my interpretation of what she said in a non-threatening, witty manner. It worked for Milly because these good old boys let her in to their club...just like that and she was finally valued when she was the female superintendent of her rural school district. Another way she handled men, who said things or did things that were potentially inappropriate or offensive, was to address the situation but in a nonconfrontational way in order to salvage their egos. This style worked for Milly. Milly demonstrated what Blount (1998) reported on women who inserted themselves into the *good old boys' clubs* to gain equality and a voice at the table.

Sarah had an entirely different challenge with the *good old boys' club*. Her community had been run by them and she was the first female superintendent. Many things went swept under the rug with a community attitude of *oh.... Boys will be boys*. A quote from Sarah's story supported this theme:

These three or four girls come walking down the hallway. I was standing with the high school principals and the assistant principal who was not politically correct on most days. As the girls approached the assistant principal said, "Oh no, here comes those

bitches." And the high school principal agreed with him. And I looked at both of them and said, "Don't you ever use that word in my presence again."

The audacity of these two administrators, educational leaders, who are supposed to be moral role models for youth were making derogatory comments towards adolescent female students. In their *good old boy* minds, they thought that was totally okay. This is the way they had done business with men leading at the helm. Sarah later said that she was so shocked that she addressed it but could not believe that these men would say that about girls but most importantly, say that in front of their boss who happened to be female too. Sarah was discriminated by *the good old boys* in her own rural community. "They said they were going to hire a *goddamn woman* and I can't believe it." No, he said, "**GODDAMN WOMAN.**" And then he said, "And here you are." And I said, "Yep, I am a woman."

Another incident involved a male teacher and two football coaches, *the good old boys*, who participated in their students' video project. This project discussed a product that would "suck the gayness out." The entire video was offensive, socially unjust and posted on YouTube. Here is what she said:

My second year I get a phone call on a Sunday night, "Hey, get on YouTube and look at this video these seniors posted," and the seniors completed a persuasive commercial project. I don't remember what course it was, history or something. The unit was, the Influence of commercials. So, these boys make a video about *the gay vac* and *it'll suck the gayness right out of you*. So, I look at this video and I'm like, this is when the ACLU shows up in your town, this is national headlines stuff right here. So, I go into school the next day and I get the high school principal, the same one that thought it was okay to call female students, *bitches*. I said, "You need to convince these boys to take this down immediately because their names are on the credits and if this ever gets picked up, it'll impact their college scholarships, and future jobs. Someone's going to find that video on them." Later, the teacher thought I was abridging his first amendment rights, freedom of speech. I told this teacher, "You're never allowed to do this project again. You're not doing this project again. These are senior boys who thought this was funny and we're not standing for this. You find another project, but we're not doing this one again." I made myself clear. I was told that the year before he had kids sitting in the back of a pickup truck *with rifles hunting immigrants*. Yeah, *it'll suck the gay right out of you*. Oh wait, I

forgot to tell you the best part. Two of my football coaches were in the video. One comes across and goes, "*Yeah, I was gay until I got the gay sucked out of me. Now I'm straight- and he does this muscle man thing.*" A grown adult, a teacher, he thought this was appropriate? It's in the video, two teachers. Yeah, they're teachers and coaches. Now the one I wrote up, he took it like he should have. The other one filed a grievance on me. Like we had no right to reprimand him. He didn't know what the boys were going to do with that video. "*Hey, Coach, walk across the room. Act gay at first and then don't act gay.*" *But you didn't know what was going to be in the video?"* Oh, Lord.

It is my opinion, that anyone with a sense of morality would realize how inappropriate and offensive this video was. Instead, this rural community, where *machismo* was accepted and revered, thought nothing was wrong with this video. One of these men had the nerve to file a grievance on his female rural superintendent for an outright, offensive wrongdoing that he committed. If it had been a *good old boy* sitting in that seat, Sarah highly doubted that a grievance would have been filed. Or, it would have been swept under the rug and ignored as if nothing offensive had occurred. Another man committed a heinous crime and was angry with Sarah for acting in the best interest of her school community (this was previously discussed in her story as well).

We're at a volleyball game and so, there he was. An iconic teacher, he was masturbating outside of his car during a volleyball game where his daughter was a player and the JV girls are outside in the parking lot. I don't know if he was drunk or whatever, but an eye witness saw all of this. A little girl, said, "Daddy, what's that man doing over there?" He is not to be on school premises and not at any sporting events. So, long story short, one day I walk into a different volleyball game and there he is - he's a line judge. I'm like, holy shit. His daughter's playing volleyball, he's a line judge. You would've thought that I just sentenced him to death. So, the board acted to work on his termination without pay, put him on leave, no pay, and they're going to terminate his contract. It went to the third court of appeals. I mean, this guy was masturbating in front of minors in a school parking lot at his daughter's volleyball game, hello? So, one of the men who was my supporter, he kept saying "Sarah, they don't believe any of this," referring to the community and teaching staff. He said, "But I did you a favor and the board a favor," he made copies of the actual arrest file and the deposition from the mediator, which is all

public record, and he put it in everyone's mailboxes and all of laid them on all of the teacher lounge tables. Like read this, read what this says and you will see the board had no option but to do this. But yeah, that was bad. His wife was our teacher, one of our teachers.

Apparently, this iconic teacher was a former *good old boy*, untouchable- or so he thought, until Sarah came to town. The community and board, full of *good old boys*, could not and did not believe that one of their own, a coach, would have done such a thing. Nor did they want to deal with it.

Alice faced the *good old boys' club* in her small rural community as well. Alice exclaimed:

And I know now that one of the board members wanted me on because he thought he was going to be able to control me. We got that in writing. And he had been on the board for almost thirty years. And his wife was a teacher, the whole nine yards.

There is no doubt that this was gender discrimination (Collins & Bilge, 2016). One might ask how was this related to the *good old boys' club*? The hiring of a female rural superintendent for this board was so that the men of the town could *control* the happenings of the school. In rural communities, schools are often the center of the community and the community's greatest resource (Schafft, 2009; & Tekniepe, 2015). This specific board member (and later Alice detailed how it was many men in her community and several board members) thought that a woman was *weak minded* and easily controllable allowing him to impose his agenda on the school district, keeping her interests for the community pushed aside (or so he thought), distinctly what *good old boys' clubs* were established to accomplish (Wallin, 2005b).

Another instance of a *good old boy*, who was well-intentioned, mistakenly told Alice how to dress in her new, conservative rural community. Alice told her story as follows:

One of the most intelligent board members I had, he's one that said to me right at the get go... Because I called each one of them, introducing myself. What do you want to see me do? What's working here? What's not... And he said, "Well, I just want to give you a piece of advice." And I'm like, "Okay." He said, "Don't ever wear a dress or a skirt here." He says, "Because nobody will take you seriously." I thought he was kidding. He wasn't. And that's so not true. But I wanted to say number one, I don't really wear a lot of skirts or dresses because if I'm on a playground or at a bus accident or whatever, I don't want to

be flashing my lady bits. But he really thought he was helping me. And I'm thinking, oh my God, this is 2011 and I'm being told that I won't be taken seriously if I wear a dress or a skirt ... And I thought holy moly.

This incident related directly to femininity as weak; indirectly broadcasting that masculinity was the all-powerful, all-knowing, best-suited decision maker. This comment took us back to the mid to the late 1800s when Catherine Beecher advocated for women to become teachers because they were meek and mild, nurturing caretakers, and of course, would work more for less in order to have the sole opportunity to be considered as worthy (Blount, 1998; Abowitz & Rousmaniere, 2007). Moreover, Rousmaniere (2013b) highlighted how male traits have been deemed the most valuable in the American culture. This research has supported the themes found within these narratives of female rural superintendents. Alice continued:

Like some of the *good old boy* comments, a minister told me this. In a levy meeting, this man (an avid KKK member) who I blatantly told that the Klan isn't going to be recognized as anything here. He said, "Well, the two of them (referring to me and my female treasurer). They both have dark hair; dark eyes and they both always wear those dark suits. That must mean they're lesbians."

Wow, here is the *damned if you do and damned if you don't* metaphor in action, live, from a twenty-first century rural, Ku Klux Klan (KKK) member (Wallin & Crippen, 2007; Blount, 1998; Blackmore, 1999). Alice was warned not to be too feminine by wearing skirts or dresses because she would not be taken seriously. And now, she was called a lesbian for wearing dark suits, with dark hair and having a female treasurer (who the board hired) working beside her. This was blatant discrimination and I believe very unique to rural communities because in what city have you found avid KKK members call women lesbians for wearing suits? It is as if this rural community of the twenty-first century (less than ten years ago from writing this research) had never left the late 1800s as confirmed by Blount's research from 1998 where women were ridiculed for being human.

Liza commented on having similar experiences with the *good old boys' club* by having been the first female superintendent in rural districts. She encountered sexism and gender inequality just like all of the other female superintendents who have mentioned this prevailing theme of the *good old boys' club*. However, she did not want to highlight this portion of her superintendency because she had so many wonderful learning and leading experiences.

Nevertheless, she confirmed that these few negative, sexist, *good old boys'* comments lingered with her almost like a muse, pushing her to prove them wrong. Liza postulated:

I have experienced some antiquated thought processes such as..."don't wear a skirt/dress to work, as you won't be taken seriously" (quote, board member). I have experienced occasions of sexism, when individuals realize they are not going to get their way..."when the treasurer and superintendent dress in blue or black suits, they must be lesbians" (quote, board member). However, the ignorance and offensive comments made have been few and far between, but you certainly don't forget them. As stated, I am blessed and confident with the colleagues I have worked with over the years. Being able to share war stories helps keep a sense of humor. The negative and sexist comments or situations I've endured as a female in administration made me feel more determined to prove why I was in the position I was hired for. Maintaining an outwardly calm demeanor and sense of humor while being furious on the inside is very hard to do, but essential. Like other leadership skills, it does become easier. Being able to calmly redirect or address the provocative comments is also a skill that has to be developed.

Liza shared more of her strategies for interacting with the *good old boys' club*. Liza was well aware of the club and found ways to fit in. Her approach was much like the approach taken by some of the women who were climbing the social ladder trying to infiltrate men's networking clubs in order to gain women's rights in the 1920s (Blount, 1998). Furthermore, to be a successful rural female superintendent she had to find a way to both navigate the *good old boys' club* and develop skills for dealing with these type of men and/or women who had the ideals of old traditional thought. She knew the club existed and she knew she had to work twice as hard to prove herself. Liza confirmed:

I do think I have experienced a few individuals who didn't respond to me as well as to be expected because I was female, but to be honest, I think this has been few and far between. When I listen to older female superintendents tell their war stories, I am grateful they went before me and paved the way. I definitely ran into the *good old boys club* but they knew I knew they were the *good old boys*. They played their part and they included me like an honorary member. At the end of the day, they knew they were in their club and I was in mine and that was okay.

Ruth did not feel as though the *good old boys* bothered her or kept her from accomplishing her district goals. However, she mentioned *an amusing anecdote*, as she put it. She did receive a little pushback from male community members. Ruth described her encounter:

One of the *good old boys* that was on the school board every morning went to the same town diner for breakfast. The people there were really curious, "Okay, John, where are you in picking this superintendent?" And so, when he went up there and said that they had hired Ruth, they laughed and thought it was a joke that they had hired a female. It's just, they'd never had a female. There wasn't a female around here at all and they just couldn't ... Some of the older generation and more conservative men could not understand that a female could lead a district.

Ruth was the school district's first female superintendent; she understood the politics of the community, it was a conservative town. The comment made about her did not even phase her, she did not internalize it or take it personal.

Like Ruth, Martha found ways to work with these *good old boys* and she gained their respect. Martha mentioned in an earlier quote that there were a few men who would not speak to women in authority positions. Instead, they would talk to her through her board members who were all men. Nevertheless, she affirmed that she gained their respect and they are now some of her greatest advocates in the community. How did she do this? She went directly to their businesses and called them out. She earned their respect by standing on her own two feet, as the district's fearless leader. She would not be held captive by their *good old boy* games.

How have the *good old boys' club* managed to rule the roost of the school superintendency? By doing what they did best, formed alliances with other high-powered men, mentored each other, often known as creating younger *proteges*, and emulated and conformed to society's perception of men as the best gender for leadership and business and women as the gender for nurturing students, husbands, and children (Blount, 1998; Blackmore, 1999; Brescoll, 2016; Wallin, 2005b).

As I mentioned earlier, I believe that the *good old boys* do not always act in malice. Often, I think they act in tradition and do what they love (often, talking business on the golf course or chatting about other sporting events and things boys like (or so what society tells us they like) to do. Due to this, they may not realize that they are excluding women *who do not talk their talk or walk their walk*. It may not always be a conscious effort; however, it does exclude

women and in a socially just society they would realize this and begin to include women and update their activities. Wallin & Crippen (2007) demonstrated how male superintendents frequently left their female counterparts out of the conversation:

Some of the women respondents spoke of the impact their gender had on the working relationships between them and other administrators. One female superintendent found that male administrators acted awkwardly in her presence: There was no joshing with me, you couldn't talk to me about golfing because I didn't golf, you couldn't talk to me about the hockey game because you weren't sure if I watched hockey. So, there was never any of that kibitzing before you actually started in on that dialogue ... maybe I was perceived then as being too professional to be engaged in that ... but I didn't want to be perceived as a threat. (Wallin & Crippen, 2007, p. 28)

Like it or not, the *good old boys' club* did and influences the female superintendency. As noticed, rural communities are more likely to be ruled by tradition and *good old boys*, impacting professional experiences of female rural superintendents (Wallin. 2005b).

For all of these negative *good old boy* encounters, each of these women experienced positivity with men who may have been a part of these clubs. All of the female superintendents except for one were mentored by males and encouraged to take on leadership positions. Additionally, most were hired by completely male dominated school boards (on one hand because they felt they hired the best candidate for the job and on the other hand because they thought they could control their female superintendents).

Furthermore, once they became female rural superintendents they mentioned being highly supported by the national, regional, and state superintendent organizations which were typically led by men. However, for this study, the *good old boy* theme was chosen and illustrated as a barrier because these women experienced a preponderance of hardships due to the *good old boys'* presence in their rural communities; be it community members, staff members, colleagues, and / or board members. Moreover, it is imperative to consider that this study has been framed from feminist standpoint point and intersectionality theories, depicting each feminine narrative as a unique reality of truth intersected by rurality and leadership to best interpret the professional gendered experiences of female rural superintendents.

Theme 4: Loneliness

Loneliness; being alone was a theme mentioned by four out of the six female rural superintendents. As illustrated by Wallin's (2005a) study of female rural administrators in Texas, loneliness and isolation were often experienced due to the challenges of the job based on rural conditions. This theme of loneliness as female rural superintendents arose in this study several times. Women felt lonely because they had to harbor their opinions, personal lives, and they lacked genuine companionship. Four out of the six mentioned the loneliness. Polka, Litchka, and, Davis (2008) posited the loneliness theme for female superintendents, "The female superintendents identified the loneliness impact of the position as well as the added stress associated with being a female superintendent in contemporary America (Polka & Litchka; Davis)" (Polka, et al., 2008). For instance, Milly detailed, "So I lived a very, very lonely life. The pain of being alone. It's very difficult." Throughout Milly's interview, she discussed how she had to maintain her personal life private because the traditional values of her rural school district would find it inappropriate for a single, divorcee to have a boyfriend. Moreover, she discussed how she had to choose her words wisely and keep her personal thoughts to herself because she felt that a misstep of conversation or actions of personal values other than those of the rural community would have cost her, her career.

Another female rural superintendent, Martha, considered the pure feeling of being alone. She commented on her ability to match her persona with the situation she was in, depending on *the players*, as the rural school district's superintendent. Often, she described herself as a *behind the scenes* leader, winning people over one-on-one through relationship building. I ascertain that her ability to become a *chameleon* (in order to progress the district forward for the betterment of all children and the county) sometimes caused her to feel isolated and alone because she could not demonstrate her *true* self, all of the time, to the community. Martha posited:

I think the hardest thing to think about as a superintendent is to realize that you're lonely. When I accepted the position as the superintendent, I knew I would be alone. You just are at the top. But... there is a difference of knowing that and actually experiencing it. As a superintendent you are alone and lonely; when you come to that realization, I think it's a big breakthrough because you can begin to accept it and learn how to navigate the murky waters of loneliness. When you take the leap into the superintendency, accept that you will be alone.

Liza, mentioned an entirely different aspect of being alone. She talked about her struggles and challenges of the daily duties of a rural superintendent. As exhibited in other studies (Wallin, 2005a; Copeland, 2013) superintendents of rural school districts have several more roles and responsibilities than superintendents of urban and suburban school districts which tend to be larger with much more *man power*. However, Wallin (2005a) claimed that women administrators are expected to complete many more tasks than their male colleagues.

Many of the respondents relayed instances of inequitable treatment that was due more to their gender than to their abilities. This included such things as being granted more administrative tasks than males, being held accountable for *paperwork* when male administrators were not reprimanded for their refusal to complete it, and being deliberately isolated from discussions with male colleagues until “the guys really need something, especially knowledge about something.” (Wallin, 2005a, p. 36)

Liza, ascertained:

My own struggles were: to remain as the directional leader, to avoid *the weeds*, and to keep myself inspired and full of energy and belief. This was important to me so that others could see that. Our team members can smell exhaustion and apathy a mile away. The superintendency is lonely. Finding ways to refuel and be connected are tough because no one in the organization can deeply relate to my work.

In addition, this assumption of more role responsibility is rooted in American history of how women were held to hire standards than men in the same role (Blackmore, 1999; Blount, 1998).

The theme of being alone was embedded in Sarah’s story. She never directly stated that she felt lonely or was alone; nevertheless, she referred to being *by myself*, which infers there was no one around for her support. Sarah detailed:

My board said, "Sarah, they'd like you to be more visible after these games." I said, "I am not walking into a bowling alley bar *by myself* as a woman at night. I'm not doing that. That would just go crazy in this town." But it was like I couldn't find my place. I just couldn't, I didn't fit. They needed a man. They've had men since me and it's been fine.”

Later, Sarah demonstrated her loneliness by her following statement.

I remember we had this speaker one day and I'm sitting in the auditorium *by myself* because I've got cooties and the speaker says, "Yeah, the life term of the superintendent is

usually three to five years at any one district," and the people behind me said, "Oh good, we only have one more year." I'm like, oh, God, I can't win in this job.

First, this quote depicts Sarah's perception of loneliness because she refers to herself as "having cooties" and has no one to sit by her. This quote shows that she did not choose to sit by herself, rather no one chose to sit by her because it was almost as if she had something wrong with her, even though she was the moral figure head of the district. Moreover, this quote demonstrates the feeling of her community – they could not wait for her to leave her superintendency and she deemed that she could not win; she did not fit in her community.

Loneliness and the female superintendent role are not a new phenomenon. A qualitative study conducted by Robinson (2016) found that many females were superwomen who gave up their families. Many female superintendents took the position at the expense of their family and their personal health. Several of these women had to live apart from their husbands and children, were divorce or widowed, and/or had children that were older (i.e., in high school or college) (Robinson, 2016). An excerpt from this study highlights the feelings of the six rural superintendents that were interviewed for my study:

Some of the women explained their *weekend/holiday marriage*. Other women noted that their weekly *dates* with their spouse involved attending high school sporting events. Many of the superintendents realized that they would be losing family time unless they incorporated their family into their job. The biggest metaphor for living a lonely life was one woman's description of the house she lived in, "I bought a home within a month of my appointment. I never put any furniture in it." (Robinson, 2016, p. 16-17)

Ruth was a complete outlier and said that she never felt lonely:

I didn't feel lonely because of the support I had with the Midwest Superintendent's Association and the support I had with local superintendents around here who met at a monthly basis. I mean they were wonderful and I had good principal leaders in my district. Not all of them were excellent, but they were all good. I loved my job and I never felt alone.

Five out of the six rural female superintendents felt the job was lonely, especially in a rural setting. In a rural setting, the loneliness of a female superintendent is exasperated by the isolation of geography, absent friendships and mentors, imposed rural ideals, high levels of stress, the *wearing of several hats*, and an overall lack of time for self and her family.

Theme 5: An Ethical Fighting Spirit of Determination, Grit, and Resilience

Grit, resiliency, perseverance and determination are characteristic of the female rural superintendents who were interviewed for this research study. I believe that in order to survive the rural superintendency and drive the district forward as a woman one must be equipped with a fighting spirit. According to Hadden (2019) Resilience is a must in order to survive the superintendency and be successful. Moreover, Hadden (2019) ascertained:

A resilient leader that possesses personal efficacy can bounce back from situations that are considered a crisis. Resilience is a requisite for superintendents in order to overcome the adversities that are destined to occur at any point in time within a school district. In order for the school administration to be successful, they will have to be able to recover from adversity and learn from the situation. (Hadden, 2019, p. 3).

Milly and her spirit of ethical determination shone brightly:

I knew that if I empowered the adult community in the right way, the children would get what they needed. There were situations I walked away from by choice because I felt like in the long run, I had more to lose. You have to exercise a keen sense of judgment in those situations, but there are times when you just have to stand up for what is right. When “right and wrong” is staring you in the face, you sometimes have to make very difficult decisions and you have to be willing to go into battle or risk the loss of a job, or the loss of a friend, those things happen when you're in the world of administration.

Milly’s entire narrative regarding her journey to becoming a female superintendent and the adversities that she faced revealed her strength of character. Without determination and resiliency, I do not believe that she would have pursued or accomplished her goal of becoming a superintendent. She experienced bouts of sexism, female sabotage, and even put her personal life on hold. Nevertheless, Milly’s ability to be resilient and courageous, with passionate persistence, never losing sight of her dream gained her the position of CEO and made her tenure at a prominent rural community very successful. She left us with powerful insight:

You are thrown into it before you realize it. When I became a superintendent that is when I realized, *Oh my gosh, I'm a politician*. I think that hit me like a ton of bricks within the first month of the superintendency job. It didn't hit me when I was an assistant superintendent. It didn't hit me when I was a principal, when I was a superintendent, and I stepped into rooms, and I stepped up on podiums, I realized,

“Holy crap. This is all up to me. I've got to say the right thing. I've got to do the right thing. I've got to be the right person or this thing could come crashing down on any given day.”

Moreover, Milly had quite the cognitive strength as she was a doctor of educational leadership. Pankake and Beaty (2005) confirmed that women with cognitive strength have the capability to persevere tough school district challenges. In this study of female rural superintendents, I found that each of them possessed cognitive strength. Every woman had achieved a minimum of two higher educational degrees. Three out of the six attained their doctorate degrees. Thus, half of the female rural superintendents interviewed for this study had a doctorate degree. This suggests that each of the female rural superintendents embodied cognitive strength, persistence and determination to be able to follow through with degree completion. This is a common trait among women who have high aptitudes of diverse thinking abilities (Pankake and Beaty, 2005).

Alice is an example of another woman of cognitive strength and high regard for taking an ethical stand to do what is right, no matter what. Alice endured her small rural community for four years. Most superintendents would have left after one or two years with the situations that she confronted. Alice opposed the KKK, had men trying to control her decisions and she encountered illegal bribery along with other threats from the *good old boys* in her community. She did not let any of those things stop her; she was a fighter – a woman of genuine fortitude who stood up to what was right in the name of children. Alice declared:

It was a true trial by fire. And thank goodness I had my high school principal and my middle school principal, they were men of steel. They were men of integrity. They were kind of those silent but deadly types. They were loyal; they we're not perfect but we had to be able to stand by our word. And we had to do things the right way.

Alice affirmed that during her four years as a female rural superintendent and because she the power of her team full of integrity and on her side, that she was able to persevere and drive her district forward:

I stayed there for four years by the end, I had a completely different board. There were only two left of the original five. The other ones had pretty much been run off or just health-wise couldn't take it anymore. And so, once again, other than one of my principals, the entire team left, including the supervisor of buildings and grounds.

We can't work like this, under these conditions. This is not how it's supposed to be. And

I mean that's why I said, I think when you find people that have integrity, that are willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with you that's how you can do this job.

Similar to Alice's experience, Sarah's leadership term for her rural district was another example of struggle and strife. She was a no-nonsense woman, holding a doctoral degree, with a strong leadership disposition. She would always do what was right, that was the only path for a superintendent to take. It was her duty. She dealt with the *good old boys* sweeping issues under the rug and ignoring them, had vicious and fictitious rumors that marred her representation within her community, and found many illegalities occurring that needed to be rectified. Sarah remarked:

I was pushing forward things that could be done right. So, I remembered the special education director saying to me, "No one has ever allowed me to do these things." So, I said, "Go for it. Go do whatever you know is right by law and what's good for these children." I walked into one special education classroom and they were cutting coupons for the teachers in the whole building, not participating in appropriate curriculum. So, I'm like, "Yeah, no, we don't cut coupons for teachers." I told the special education director, "Well, just keep going, spin forward. So, this happened in the middle of football season and," I have a guy come up to my shoulder like this and he just says, "I hear we've been breaking special education laws all this time and I'm glad we have been because I don't want those kids in my kid's class."

This was the type of ignorance Sarah had to navigate in this rural town. First, she had staff in the position of educational leadership who had not been permitted to do right by children. Second, Sarah had to use her cognitive strength, courageous and ethical spirit to do what was right because the consequences, the impact on children were too great to stand by on the sidelines. She had community members recognize that her decisions were right by federal and state law yet they mocked her and demonstrated a discriminatory attitude.

Ruth by nature was a lioness. Nothing stood in her way and if it did, she would tell it to go right to "hell" and remind it to return with a smile, a right attitude and a bouquet of flowers. Ruth loved her role as a rural superintendent and *fit* the mold. She had been trained by men and became the first female principal in the state to head a Career and Technical Center as well as be the first female superintendent of her rural community. Ruth had a background in sports and coaching, was tall, girly, and had a contagious sarcastic sense of humor. When asked about how

she would hire a coach she stated, "I could always say, "Well, I was a volleyball coach and I was on our athletics committee. So, I spent years with that in my background." Ruth was strong she demonstrated her willingness to be as good as a man if not better.

To show the community that I was the right woman for the job, I made sure to be in every morning lab and I was in every afternoon lab. I had my own welding helmet, I had my own hard hat, and I had my own safety glasses. They taught me how to weld. I mean I just went up to the kids and said, "Hey," I asked with the instructor's permission, "Can I have him show me how to weld a line?" I did that, and I was in industrial mechanics and he was replacing a toilet seat. I think that I replaced a toilet seat. I could do this job just as good as any man could.

Liza illustrated her determination and "fighting spirit" through her description of why she became a superintendent:

Frustrated by leadership and having a propensity to believe "I could do anything," along with a deep desire to change adult lives in order to affect more student lives, I started my master's work and became a Curriculum Director. Then, I completed my superintendent's license and moved into the position of superintendent. This is my tenth year as a superintendent.

Martha's fighting spirit was depicted through her ability to maneuver the turbulent waters of being the only female instrumental music director in the county when she first began. She withstood the president band parent (a man) take a swing at her. As a rural superintendent she has endured ten years when typically, a superintendent lasts two to five years in any given district. She has had several victories and her "fighting spirit" is more of an undercover, camouflaged, private dauntlessness. Martha won people over one-by-one, behind the scenes. She explained:

One of my board members who has been with me since my second year talked to me about that *the guy*, the man no one thought I could or would win over. He told me, "Just so you know, I'm getting off the board but if you ever need anything, *the guy*, is your greatest advocate and he will fight for you. He will tell anybody where to go if they don't think that you're doing your work because he respects you." I thought, to have his respect is one thing. But to have his respect as a woman is even better.

On another note, Martha claimed the following:

When people tweet about me it's very casual. For example, they use my initials or they give me a nickname (nothing ugly). Even the bad tweets, I can handle them because this role is about, being a moral and ethical leader. This position is about doing what is right for kids – always. It is a mindset.

Again, Martha, like all of the female rural superintendents interviewed for this study, has done, the morally, ethically, right thing. During Martha's interview, she discussed her ability to break through years of tradition in her rural school district and progress them to improve services for her students and community. She is a woman of patience, virtue and determination. She lets nothing stop her. Her leadership style is *behind the scenes* by building relationships with people one-by-one. Additionally, she won them over by gaining their respect with her competence, follow-through, know-how, and grit. Every female rural superintendent interviewed for my study demonstrated courage, fearless leadership capabilities, and a responsibility for leading their districts with high morals and standards of ethics. These women are the trailblazers of the twenty-first century for the female rural superintendency.

COMMON FEMALE RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS' PROFESSIONAL GENDERED EXPERIENCES

Female Rural Superintendents		Equated success with the "right district fit"	Encountered or witnessed female saboteurs	Experienced the "Good Old Boys"		Expected / Encouraged to join the Rotary	Felt and experienced "loneliness"	Demonstrated a fighting spirit of "determination, resiliency, and grit" to do the right thing	Felt that some professional experiences were influenced by their Gender	
Retired	Current			Negative Encounters	Positive Encounters (with men)				Before and During the Interview	Not until after the interview and though... maybe it was because I was female...
Milly		X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	
Ruth		"was her comfort zone"	-	-	X	X	-	X		X
Sara		"they needed a man"	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Alice		X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	
	Martha	X	X	X	X	-	X	X		X
	Liza	-	-	X	X	-	X	X		X

Figure 3 – O’Keeffe Visual Representation of the Common Female Rural Superintendents’ Professional Gendered Experiences of this Research Study.

Summary of Emergent Themes

Overall, five principal themes surfaced concerning the female rural superintendency.

These themes were:

- 1) The District Must be the Right *Fit*
- 2) Other Women (Female Saboteurs)

- 3) *The Good Old Boys' Club*
- 4) Loneliness
- 5) An Ethical Fighting Spirit of Determination, Grit, and Resilience

Figure 3 depicts the commonalities found among the six female rural superintendents who participated in my study. In sum, five out of the six superintendents stated that the district had to be the right fit, meaning the values and beliefs of the district must match those of the superintendent; four out of the five women encountered female saboteurs; all six females experienced the *good old boys*; five felt loneliness in their positions, and all six female superintendents exhibited a fighting spirit to do what was right and ethical. Two out of the six were asked to join the local Rotary club which is a possible outlier for rural communities; and most importantly only three of the six female superintendents knew they experienced certain situations in their communities because they were female. The other three superintendents pondered the possibility of having experienced gender issues only during the interview.

The thought of gender issues had not crossed their minds; this could be due to a lack of gender issue awareness. Often, women do not realize they live out a day-to-day existence that has been prescribed to them by society. It is my hope that this study unveils the truth for women. *For when they are blind they do not know what they do not see and therefore are unaware of the need for social justice and change.* These emergent themes have illustrated the unique professional gendered experiences encountered in rural communities by these six female superintendents in the twenty-first century.

Unanticipated Findings

Prior to this study I had not anticipated to hear some of the stories told from women leading rural communities. For example: their encounters with the Ku Klux Klan, being secretly tape-recorded, dealings with men completing illegal sexual acts and approving and starring in discriminatory student videos, some districts' complete disregard for federal and state laws pertaining to social justice, and the sabotage and malicious rumors created to destroy a leader professionally and personally. These events could occur to anyone, anywhere, no matter the leader's gender; however, for so many of these events to have happened in the same district to the same person makes it subject for quandary. Not to mention that a state university (the same state university) researched two of these rural districts due to the existing atrocities. It is my

belief that because female superintendents wanted to do the right thing, these underlying, hidden socially unjust acts were brought to light because the *good old boys* were no longer at the head of the organization.

Limitations

It is imperative to explain my positionality as the researcher which clearly identifies bias. I am a female administrator who has dealt with the *good old boys*, been overworked, overlooked, underpaid, fallen victim to female sabotage, and towards the end of this research, I acquired a leadership position in a rural school district. Nevertheless, throughout my analysis of the responses to the interviews and vignettes, I constantly asked myself, “Is this what I think because of my experiences or is this what they experienced?” By constantly reflecting on my positionality I conducted what is called, reflexivity. This method is affirmed to limit bias by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006). Additionally, I asked each of the respondents to examine my findings and interpretations to ensure that I was clearly representing their story, their standpoints through the process called member checking (J. Creswell & D. Creswell, 2018).

It is no mistake that the thorough literature review I conducted to support my research and the female rural superintendent’s individual narratives have delivered incredible insight into the rural culture in which I now work and lead. Each community is unique, embodying its own set of values and beliefs. I continue to have much to learn.

Another limitation to this research study is the sample size because it was limited to six female rural superintendents. Moreover, this study was restricted to the Midwest which hinders the generalizability to the rest of the United States.

Due to the political nature of this topic, feminist perspectives in male dominated communities, I had to protect all female participants. Also, it is possible that because of the political nature I believe that the participants were truthful. However, I cannot be certain I received the full stories. I ensured the protection of all participants by giving them pseudonyms and I did not mention the name of any county, district, or other potentially revealing characteristic. Although this protection existed, I believe that some participants maybe did not provide me as much detail into the professional gendered experiences as they could have. Nonetheless, I am of the opinion that they were forthright.

This study was conducted under time constraints. It does not produce longitudinal data. However, it does open a window into the professional lives and gendered experiences of female rural superintendents and adds their voice to history.

Conclusions

Feminism attempts to illustrate the lack of female voice and perspective in all caveats of life in order to advance social justice for the marginalized (Kiguwa, 2019). The six female rural superintendents interviewed for this research afforded their voice and added their experiences to history through their narratives. Their responses to the semi-structured interview and vignettes provided a window into the professional, gendered world they navigated as female rural superintendents. These women have divulged deeply personal and professional experiences as rural superintendents originating from their individual feminist standpoints; each one standing as truth. From the perspectives of these women who have led their districts exhibited strength in character; they represent resilience. The emergent themes found in my research were:

- 1) The District Must be the Right *Fit*
- 2) Other Women (Female Saboteurs)
- 3) The *Good Old Boys' Club*
- 4) Loneliness
- 5) An Ethical Fighting Spirit of Determination, Grit, and Resilience

These themes begin to reveal the professional gendered experiences of female rural superintendents in the twenty-first century.

My research shows the complexities found within rural communities. Each rural community is unique with its own set of challenges and culture as depicted from each of the six female rural superintendent's experiences. Literature regarding rural school districts was confirmed through my research because these communities were, for the most part ignored. I have come to this conclusion because of the wild atrocities that occurred in the twenty-first century were disregarded until the female superintendents stepped in and wreaked havoc on old rural traditions, often enacted by the *good old boys*. For example, some of our female superintendents encountered with: KKK, bribery, being hired to be controlled, male administrators calling female students bitches, a male teacher conducting sexually explicit actions on school grounds, destructive rumors, hidden personal lives, being threatened by

community men, assumed to be lesbians because they wore suits and refused to give in, being swung at, and much more. Not all women depicted such outright, overt gender discriminatory events. However, each woman described dealings with the *good old boys*, female saboteurs, and loneliness.

This study revealed that there is not much female mentorship or specific training for women who aspire to become rural superintendents. Our society continues to perceive women as the weaker sex which impedes their ability to lead. Nevertheless, the female rural superintendents overcame the obstacles they faced; they withstood all of the barriers they faced and despite certain challenges, managed to achieve success.

Rural communities deserve to be recognized. This study focused on the professional gendered experiences of female rural superintendents but it did not reveal the beautiful qualities of rural communities. This study strictly looked into the lives of women through a feminist lens who lead rural school districts and their communities. This leaves an entire world to be studied concerning rural communities and school districts. Rural communities are often left untouched by the world at large- this is both a blessing and a curse. Some of female rural superintendents interviewed expressed their absolute adoration for their rural communities. This research does not only unveil injustices occurring to female superintendents in the twenty-first century, it calls attention to rural school districts. It is of the utmost importance to value rural school districts, and to provide them with specific programming in order to improve the current conditions.

Recommendations

In order for social justice to prevail for female superintendents in rural communities, we must continue to tell their stories. Many women do not believe it is a gender thing and other women are not given the opportunity to tell their stories. They must be asked so that we can add their voice and uncover the hidden dimension of gender issues found in the realm of educational administration, especially in rural communities. Moreover, it is necessary to conduct further studies in rural communities regarding schooling. The female superintendents experienced both positive and negative encounters with the *good old boys' club* and women. The females who were threatened by the female rural superintendents, who aspired to break the mold of the rural cultural perception of what women are supposed to be, should recognize that traditional gender

roles are equally as important as women who break the mold. It is not a competition. This world needs both.

Future research should surround female superintendents of Educational Service Centers (ESCs). Ruth, one of the female rural superintendents who did not feel lonely in her role or believe she was successful or unsuccessful because of gender stated in her interview that had I asked her to discuss her professional gendered experiences as a female superintendent of the ESC, she would have given me an entirely different perspective on the *good old boys*. In her words, she experienced them negatively in her role at the ESC but did not feel that she experienced them much as a rural female superintendent. Therefore, I believe a future study of the female superintendent of an ESC would be beneficial, especially from a feminist perspective.

Milly mentioned the *good old girls' club* in her interview when she jokingly threatened the *good old boys* if they did not let her into their club. This illuminated the potentiality of researching the *good old girls*. Do these clubs exist? Because my research found that women tend to sabotage instead of mentor or build other women up which makes me wonder how incredibly powerful a *good old girls' club* could be for the female rural superintendent. Therefore, future research regarding the good old girls and the ESC female superintendency could greatly benefit the realm of female educational leadership. Lastly, it was men who influenced many of these women to take on leadership positions; the *good old boys*. This makes me ask the question, why? I believe this would be another incredible study that would offer another female vantage point to history that society could learn from.

My study has taught aspiring female rural superintendents to buckle their seatbelts and get ready for a wild ride. Female leaders must be resilient, be prepared to face challenges and be ready to lose their job at any point in time in order to do the right thing for the betterment of their community and students. We learn from these six female superintendents that one must choose the district based on *fit*; the values, belief system, and cultural norms must match that of the superintendent. Otherwise the journey will be strenuous and the superintendent may not endure. The most important lesson learned from this study is that morally excellent female leaders must come forward and be courageous enough to lead rural districts out of the past and into the future.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Consent Form (Adult Interview; Adult Vignette Commenting)

Introduction/Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Erica O’Keeffe from Miami University. The purpose of this research is to add women’s voice to history, representing the authentic experiences of female superintendents in rural communities. Participation in this research is restricted to persons 18 years of age or older and to people who identify as female.

Procedures: As part of this study, you are asked to take part in a semi-structured interview and vignette commenting. Participation involves being interviewed by a researcher from Miami (Erica O’Keeffe) as part of her dissertation research. The interview should last approximately 1 hour. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio recording of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. There may be a possibility for a follow-up interview. Also, there is a section of 5 vignettes for commenting. In this section there will be female educational leaders’ experiences in the form of brief stories or quotes and you will be asked to respond to these scenarios. This section will take approximately 45 minutes to 1hr.

Risks/Benefits: Precautions will be undertaken to maintain anonymity. However, the number of participants is limited in this study, which raises the possibility that a published quotation could be attributed to you. There are no direct benefits to you from participation. Nevertheless, you can be assured that your participation is aimed to add female voice to history in an understudied area, shed light on the plight of the female superintendent, and demonstrate the importance of the rural school district, in the 21st century. This study aims to improve social justice for females as educational leaders in the United States.

Confidentiality: Your responses will be confidential. Results (including data analysis) will be presented in a way that individuals will not be linked to sensitive opinions. Each participant and all potential identifying information will be assigned a pseudonym/code (e.g., participant names, names used in their stories, for the school districts and counties mentioned in the interviews or vignette commenting, and any other information that could identify the research study participant). Also, each participant will have the opportunity to review their comments and provide feedback prior to publishing these results. All research records will be kept in a locked file in a locked office and digital research records will be kept on a personal, password and firewall protected computer. Digital records will be deleted after one year.

Voluntary Participation: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You do not need to participate. If you decide to take part, you are also free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Also, you may elect not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

Contact and Questions: If you have any questions about this research or you feel you need more information to determine whether you would like to volunteer, you can contact the researcher, Erica O’Keeffe at (614) 205-0502 or okeeffel@miamioh.edu. In addition, you may contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Lucian Szlizewski, at szlizela@miamioh.edu. If you have questions or concerns about the rights of research subjects, you may contact our reviewing body: Research Ethics and Integrity Office at Miami University at (513) 529-3600 or humansubjects@miamioh.edu.

- I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects at Miami University
- I have read and heard the explanation provided to me. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- I have been given a copy of this consent form. Participant

Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant Email: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B

Vignettes and Protocol

These vignettes are quotes from real-life, female leadership experiences used in past female research studies. Please read the following scenarios (vignettes) and respond to the statements that follow each vignette.

Vignette 1:

Judy commented: The last two years have been pretty terrible. Disruptive with a lot of people under stress. Halfway through I felt as though I had hit a brick wall. I suppose it is a matter of working pretty hard and feeling as though I had lost the big picture. Everything was crowding in on me and I was still forced to get down to the nitty gritty daily things that I didn't want to do. I felt as though I was losing direction. Probably too tired and not functioning well and letting little things get to me... But it is also modifying your expectations and being realistic about what you can do. What is important and where your skills are best utilized. Others can focus on specific programs. You can no longer control one area. . . everyone has to share and that is hard. I find it hard keeping on propping people up when one lacks the desire to go on oneself. It has got even more lonely – particularly with the performance pay thing. If you are friendly with anyone it looks like favoritism. (Blackmore, 1999, p. 165)

1. From the perspective of a superintendent, this passage reminds me of . . .
2. I relate / do not relate personally/professionally to this passage because . . .
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Vignette 2:

When I dressed ‘properly’, I was more likely to be heard: My long hair had to be up . . . but I didn’t wear lipstick. It was helpful that my [female] coworker was older, looked straight and fairly senior . . . Up to that time I had been able to dress and act as the maverick. (Blackmore, 1999, p. 176)

I don’t want to look too dressed up for a sports day, but you cannot go in a track suit. I was surprised how the women on the parents’ day dressed up, and responded accordingly. (Blackmore, 1999, p. 176)

I am able to look them in the eye. It is far more difficult for me, individually or collectively, to ignore me when I can insert myself between them when talking in groups and physically, but subtly, demand acknowledgment of my presence. Smaller women are, because of their stature, forced to speak ‘up’ to men, often using their voices to claim attention in a more overt fashion, and thus appear loud and shrill. As a tall woman it is possible for me to speak softly and be heard. (Blackmore, 1999, p. 177).

I am 1 of 2 females in a group of maybe 50 male superintendents. I am also the only female out of 10 of us who are the executive committee of the group. In that group when I have an idea, I will say that this is something we need to consider, and no one pays any attention. The group just goes on to the next idea. But there is a superintendent in the group who has noticed this on his own and chuckled about it. So, when he notices it happening, he takes my idea – like one time he actually read it off my article – and he put it out there. Then it was welcomed and discussed, and that was the direction we went. And later, the two of us sort of looked at each other – and he knew why it had happened. (Brunner, 2000, p. 102)

When I was first in administration, I found myself mainly in the “quiet persistence” category. All of my colleagues were the good-old-boys type males. They didn’t know how to deal with me. So, I found that what was most useful was to sit and listen. Then quietly persist in getting my point across. For example, I would say, “We talked about doing so and so, and if we should . . .” And I would repeat what I wanted to say – persistently pursue – what I thought was important. It is a case of choosing your wars carefully and staying out of battles. (Brunner, 2000, p. 98).

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Vignette 3:

Well it was the old boys' club, you know. And then we had school council parent representatives who were mums of kids of families that have gone through this school for ages. They idolized the vice principal and just followed him and did whatever he said. (Blackmore, 1999, p. 178).

I was at a community dance when one of the older members of the village came up to me and instead of congratulating me on my recent appointment as principal, just asked what I was going to do if I was 'having trouble with one of them big boys in grade 12?', No 'congratulations', no 'well done', just the implication that I couldn't maintain control. (Moir, interview, 1998). (Sherman, 2000, p. 135)

I thought it was great. I did wonder if it was a bit much too soon (having a female administrator). There are a lot of guys on the staff who have been here for many years for whom it will be extremely threatening. They already are highly threatened by the ministry restructuring. But having a female . . . is closer to home. I think it may be the last straw and they will not be able to handle it (Kay, leading teacher). (Blackmore, 1999, p. 183).

They [some male principals] are used to the old way of hiring principals when all you needed was a penis and a hockey stick. It bothers them that they can't influence the decisions like they used to and get their friends or brothers positions in administration. (Martha, interview, 1998) . . . One woman described how she was actively discouraged from applying for an advertised position and told 'to wait her turn' (Martha, interview, 1998). She later found out that the man's brother was applying for the same position. (Sherman, 2000, p. 136)

It is expected. . . that we will want to sit around and talk about 'women's things' and so they don't even ask us to join them. I suppose that we need to demand to be included but then we have to endure the comments about either our lack of golfing ability or the fact that we 'whined' about it. It's difficult to develop strong friendships when some of the men still have those kinds of attitudes. (Alice, interview, 1998). (Sherman, 2000, p. 136-137)

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Vignette 4:

Many of the younger female staff felt they were not listened to by the principal, and she withheld information. She actively undermined those women who were absolute dynamos by not recognizing and valuing what they did, yet propped up an inadequate male teacher. She responded to women's teaching strategies as 'all new-fangled stuff. This is the way I've done it and this is the way you'll do it'. There was this jealousy thing about female senior teacher who had extensive networks and was very knowledgeable as the younger women staff beat a track to her door. (Blackmore, 1999, p. 192)

They displayed an absolute determination not to have anyone challenge them. They actually like being the only woman, not in a sexual way, but the only woman at the centre, of some curiosity, of acclamation as to how wonderful that a woman has got to the top. And they are the ones who are most ruthless in their condemnation of other aspiring women (John, manager). (Blackmore, 1999, p. 192)

Report after report was given to the principal about me, but I never quite knew where they were coming from. After calling in sick one day, I was subsequently reprimanded by the principal because, according to the department chair, I had not left any work for a substitute as was required. I knew I had left the work, so I went up to school in the evening when none of them were there and found it, stuffed in the back of a drawer in the department chair's cabinet. (Brock, 2008, p. 219)

I discovered that not all females were supportive when I was appointed a principal after only 4 or 5 years of teaching. Women who had been assistants for 2-3 years were very angry because I skirted the usual pathway. Also, I was the youngest person to become principal. Tongues wagged and jealousy was apparent. The female teachers in the school made comments, 'The superintendent must LIKE YOU,' adding incredulously, 'I can't

believe he appointed you. . . . Looks must have had something to do with it.
(Brock, 2008, p. 220)

One female teacher was clearly used to 'running the place.' Her nose was in the air looking down at me. I finally had to tell her not to refer to me by my first name. She engaged in backbiting, telling the faculty that I was too young to do the job; wondered aloud what the district was thinking when they selected me; told teachers to continue to do things the way they always did because 'she won't be here for long.' She attempted to sabotage my efforts at change and even re- fused to attend social events.
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Vignette 5:

We were at an administrator's meeting and the topic of teacher evaluation came up. The chair of the meeting, the assistant superintendent was called out of the room as I was making a suggestion about annual evaluations. Once he was out of the room, the men attacked my idea but once he returned and it became apparent that he was in favour of regular supervision, another male principal put forth my idea as his own and the male majority voted in favour of it! (Elsie, interview, 1998). (Sherman, 2000, p. 139)

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