Breakthrough Women: The Lived Experiences

of Women's Navigation to the Superintendency

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of Women's Navigation to the Superintendency

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Abstract

Public school leadership has been described as a paradox, dominated by men while a majority of the teaching profession are women. Although women have made their way into educational leadership roles, the reality of the superintendency is that most studies have shown few women hold the position. The number of women securing a superintendency has increased over the last two decades; however, progress continues to be sporadic and not all statistics show encouraging numbers for aspiring female leaders. This qualitative, narrative study examines the lived experiences of five female superintendents and explores how they were able to overcome challenges and successfully secure a superintendency in a male-dominated field. The supporting research questions allow for an in-depth examination of their stories, the influential people they met along the way, and the impact of their experiences in gaining access to a position traditionally held by men. The results indicate that broad exposure to administrative experiences can build capacity for the superintendency, mentors and networks are influential resources, and a strong self-perception and internal drive are essential skills to overcome challenges and achieve career goals.

Keywords: school superintendent, female leaders, mentors, networks

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Chapter I

Introduction

The latter half of the 20th century revealed a significant rise in women's involvement in the workforce ("Women in the Labor Force: A Databook," 2017). By 1999, women constituted 60% of all workers in the United States, a statistic that has held steady well into the 21st century. Women continued to excel in other areas as well. Educational attainment for women ages 25 to 64 showed upward trends with 11% holding bachelor's degrees or higher in 1970 to 42% in 2016; in comparison, men's attainment of a college degree had doubled during that same time span. A comparison of men's to women's wages also showed growth for females. In 1979, women with full-time positions made 62% of what men earned, and by 2016, women earned 82% compared to their male counterparts.

Despite constituting over half the workforce, women continued to lag behind men in leadership positions. In the 21st century, women were trapped in lower-level management positions, where upward mobility was less likely to occur (Lang, 2010). Similar equity issues exist in the educational world as the progress of upward movement for aspiring women leaders continues to move at a slow pace. In an era of high-stakes testing, accountability, and global competitiveness, the need for exemplary leadership is more critical now than ever before in public education. Women teachers represent 72% of the educational workforce and 54% of elementary principals but only 24% of the top job of school superintendent (Domenech, 2012). Ohio statistics have shown that the disparity between female teachers (75%) and female superintendents (16%) is even greater ("2019 Ohio by the Numbers," n.d.; Ohio Department of Education, 2019). The school

superintendent plays one of the most influential roles in a school community; all qualified leaders should be considered, and no one individual should be excluded based on race or gender. Women constitute over half the talent pool in education, so why are they missing in the school superintendency? (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). The ongoing absence of women leading our nation's public schools has prompted researchers to investigate reasons that so few of them have attained the top job (Brown, 2014; Davis & Bowers, 2019; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Wyland, 2016).

Research on various aspects of leadership has verified the absence of female leaders. Some researchers have investigated the role societal norms play with regard to gender and the expectations for a superintendent (Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000), and others have shown how cultural beliefs, ideological practices, and gender-based policies have negatively affected women's entry and longevity in the superintendency (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Women have pursued top-line positions in education but have faced the challenges of a cultural stereotype in which they are better suited for the classroom (Noel-Batiste, 2009).

In addition to norms, biases, and beliefs, factors in the search and selection process appear to show that school board expectations of candidate qualifications differ by gender (Glenn, Hickey, & Sherman, 2009; Maranto, Carroll, Cheng, & Teodoro, 2018; Superville, 2017). "Terms such as the glass ceiling remain in the literature, and there is a fuller understanding of the power and influence of the old boy networks that appear to remain in place" (Grogan, 2000, p. 124). To advance more women to the superintendency, examining the lived experiences of female superintendents may assist

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aspiring women leaders in identifying which factors are most influential in their ability to secure the position.

Although the number of women securing a superintendency has increased over the last two decades from 13% in 2000 to 24% in 2010 (Kowalski et al., 2011) to 27% in 2015 (Ellerson et al., 2015); progress continues to be sporadic; furthermore, not all statistics show encouraging numbers for aspiring female leaders. Current statistics in the state of Ohio show that approximately 16% of women hold the position of school superintendent (Ohio Department of Education, 2019). Without the presence of female superintendents, their influence is limited in critical areas that impact the educational process. This study was intended to provide an overview of women's access to the superintendency through a review of related literature and the stories of breakthrough women who have succeeded in securing the position.

Statement of the Problem

Public school leadership has been described as a paradox, dominated by men while a majority of the teaching profession are women. Considering that 77% of K–12 teachers are women (Taie & Goldring, 2017), one could reasonably assume that a majority of individuals in the superintendency are women; however, the reality of the superintendency is that most studies and databases show very few women hold the position, reported over time as 24% (Domenech, 2012), 27% (Ellerson et al., 2015), and 16% (Ohio Department of Education, 2019). The comparatively low number of women in leadership roles may indicate that a glass ceiling or a leaky pipeline still exists for women aspiring to lead public school systems (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Wallace, 2014; Wyland, 2016). Those in the feminist movement focused their attention on the

underrepresentation of women leaders and actively tried to increase their numbers in school administration; despite these efforts, however, female superintendents remain few (Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Wallace, 2014). A review of current literature has shown much attention to the barriers aspiring women leaders face (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010; Munoz, Pankake, Ramalho, Mills, & Simonsson, 2014) and to gender stereotypic views of leadership (Ayman, & Korabik, 2010; Glenn et al., 2009; Kim & Brunner, 2009) with little attention given to the way female superintendents overcome challenges in successfully securing a school superintendency (Brown, 2014; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Wallace, 2014).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative study was to understand the lived experiences of five female superintendents and explore how they were able to overcome challenges and successfully secure a superintendency in a male-dominated field. Understanding how these women were able to overcome challenges and navigate the process successfully may support other women who wish to pursue a superintendency. This study supports female administrators by providing much needed information on factors that can increase the probability of securing a superintendent position. In addition, understanding that mentors and networks are important connections who can assist with career path decisions, help women successfully respond to the internal and the external challenges they face as school leaders, and provide women with strategies to overcome adversity in achieving personal and professional goals.

Theoretical Framework

Theories of feminism, social networking, and gatekeeping provided the framework for the study. Feminist theory was applied to introduce gender and to contribute to the discussion of the experiences of women in superintendent positions (Grogan, 2000), and an outline of the four waves of feminism provides a historical context for the study. Intersectionality and feminist standpoint, two influential theories that emerged during the second wave of feminism, are included as part of the framework. Intersectionality was introduced to explain how race and gender overlap to compound the issues of discrimination and oppression for Black women (Crenshaw, 1991), and feminist standpoint theory was included to emphasize the importance of the relationship between the political and social powers that produce an imbalance in the social positions of men and women (Wallace, 2014; Wood, 2009).

Social network theory was applied to explore the relationships among people, authority, and power and to emphasize the importance of aligning with influential networks that can increase access to superintendent positions (Deal, Purinton, & Waetjin, 2009; Muñoz et al., 2014). Networks have been known to produce both opportunities and constraints for individuals in an organization (Deal et al., 2009). Gaining access to a superintendent position requires the successful navigation of power structures that can be influenced by professional norms, dominant societal values, and gatekeeper criteria established by search firms and boards of educations (Tallerico, 2000).

Lewin's gatekeeping theory of 1947 was used in this study as the primary means to explain how biases impact the upward mobility of individuals in an organization. After World War II psychologist Kurt Lewin proposed the theory of gatekeeping, widely used

in communication research as well as in other fields of study (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001). Researchers have also used this theory to show how race, gender, and other characteristics can influence the selection of a school superintendent (Brown, 2014; Davis & Bower, 2019; Tallerico 2000).

Rationale and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of five female superintendents and to explore the ways they were able to overcome challenges and successfully secure a male-dominated position. Although women have made their way into educational leadership roles, the reality of the superintendency is that most studies have shown few women hold the position. Researchers have explored the career paths of female superintendents (Davis & Bowers; Wallace, 2014), the barriers they encountered (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010), and reasons they left the position (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015). This study was designed to identify the patterns in the experiences of five female school superintendents in successfully securing a school superintendency.

A type of qualitative research known as narrative methodology was implemented to invite the reader into the stories of five female superintendents. A narrative approach allowed for an in-depth examination of their stories, the influential people they met along the way, and the impact of their experiences in gaining access to a position traditionally held by men. This study provides information that may be useful to the parents of females, K–12 educators, single-gender K–12 schools, supervisors of women, institutions with leadership development programs, single-sex leadership programs, and most

importantly, women who want to pursue leadership roles in education, particularly the superintendency.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study and were designed to elicit stories of the experiences of five female school superintendents. The central question for the study was as follows: What can be learned from the lived experiences of women who advanced to the superintendency in Ohio's public school system? The following subquestions were used to support the central question:

1. How did gender and race affect the search and selection process for five female superintendents?

2. What role did networking play in advancing the five women to the position of superintendent?

3. What barriers did the five female superintendents encounter as they pursued the superintendency?

4. What attributes of the five female superintendents allowed them to overcome barriers?

5. What internal drivers motivated the five women to pursue leadership positions?

Operational Definitions

The following section provides operational definitions that describe the specific way they are used in this research study.

Board of Education: Elected or appointed representatives serving on governing bodies located in the communities served by public schools (*Glossary*, 2014)

Career pathway: Decisions made, roles held along the way, and the level of employment that influence the probability of entering the superintendency (Davis & Bowers, 2019)

Challenges: Any factors or obstacles that hinder career advancement to the next level in administration or management (Shakeshaft, 1998)

C-Suite: The collective titles of top senior staffers beginning with the letter C—for "chief" as in chief executive officer (CEO), chief financial officer (CFO), chief operating officer (COO), and chief information officer (CIO) ("C-Suite," n.d.)

Feminist theory: A theory of the nature of gender inequality emanating from a method constructed from personal experiences (Yu, 2011)

Fortune 500: List of the 500 largest U.S. manufacturing corporations, ranked by revenue, and annual rankings derived from data, including firm assets, net earnings, earnings per share, number of employees ("Fortune 500," 2020)

Gatekeeper: A term used to describe superintendent search practices by professional search firms or boards of educations, a process where candidates navigate through a series of gates influenced by professional norms, dominant society values, and gatekeeper criteria (Tallerico, 2000)

Gender bias: The preference of one gender over another, career and promotion pipelines shaped by narrow gender norms (Maranto et al., 2018)

Glass ceiling: A discriminatory barrier preventing women and minorities from advancing to upper-level positions or positions of influence in an organization (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000)

Glass maze: A metaphor used in place of the better-known "glass ceiling," which suggests a single, unvarying obstacle; used in the current literature because women face a complex and varied series of challenges in their quest for career success; also "glass labyrinth" (Stern, 2015)

Intersectionality: A concept that represents the ways in which race and gender overlap to compound the issues of discrimination and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991)

Line position: Jobs in corporate America considered less flexible than staff jobs, accompanied by more pressure and exposure to power networks (key decision-makers) and more opportunity for upward mobility; typically held by more men than women (Barsh & Yee, 2012)

Motivation: The inner strength that powers an individual's growth and persistence toward achieving personal and professional goals (Barsh & Yee, 2012)

Network: Key players, such as mentors and sponsors, who are crucial in increasing access to leadership positions (Muñoz et al., 2014)

Social network theory: A theory involving how people interact within an organization and how leaders successfully negotiate their way through various networks in achieving personal and organizational goals (Deal et al., 2009)

Staff position: Middle management jobs in corporate America that are more flexible than line positions, have less exposure to upward mobility, lack the benefit of power sponsors, and are considered attractive for women who must balance work and family (Barsh & Yee, 2012)

Stereotypes: Cognitive shortcuts or generalizations [used] to make sense of our complex social world. Shortcuts that help to differentiate among different groups of people, and in the case of gender stereotypes, between women and men. Gender stereotypes can be problematic, as they tend to over-simplify reality, especially when it comes to complex social behaviors. (Catalyst, 2007, p. 4)

Superintendent: Top executive (CEO) in a school district, the liaison to the board of education; manages the daily operations of the school district by making day-to-day decisions on educational programs, finances, personnel, and facilities; acts as the lead communicator on behalf of the district on school matters (Meador, 2019).

Participants

The population in this study comprised female school superintendents in the state of Ohio. Qualitative research involves purposeful sampling, but the small sample size makes generalization of results unlikely (Merriam & Tisdell, 2106). The main criterion for the sampling in this study was that the participant was a woman currently serving as a superintendent in a public school system in Ohio. The selection of participants was made from various regions in the state of Ohio as defined by the Ohio Department of Education's topology codes.

Research Design

A qualitative research design and narrative approach were implemented to study the phenomenon of women successful in securing a superintendent's position in a male-dominated field. A qualitative research design was fitting for this study because qualitative researchers are interested in individuals' interpretation of their experiences (Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and a narrative approach helps the researcher explore the

life of an individual by using storytelling as a source of data to address a problem or issue (Creswell, 2013). A narrative approach helped the researcher to explore in-depth the decisions that helped or hindered career progression in securing a superintendent position, the individual challenges faced by women leaders, and the internal drivers that motivated these women during their journey to the superintendency.

Primary data from the study derived from the transcription of participant interviews with additional data from the researcher's notes and reflexive journal. Interview questions were developed by selecting emerging constructs in the literature reviewed to include influential factors women encounter in securing a superintendency, such as career paths, gender bias, networking, challenges, and motivation. The interview questions demonstrated strong reliability and internal validity resulting from their repeatability across participants. The data analysis for the study was conducted with both deductive (predefined themes) and inductive (emergent themes) methods. Data were coded by themes the researcher used as a constant comparative method; analysis of the data was completed for one interview before moving on to the next interview. This method allowed the researcher to compare one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences among the participants' responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data were then grouped by similarities, given a temporary name, and emerged as a category.

Accuracy and credibility of research findings are critical to the validity of a study (Creswell, 2012). To ensure the authenticity and trustworthiness of this study, the researcher used the following strategies: a purposeful selection of participants, triangulation, reflective commentary, and advisor and peer scrutiny. After participant data

were gathered and analyzed, the researcher employed a member checking process to ensure the answers given matched the true beliefs of the participants (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2106).

Limitations of the Study

In qualitative research, the researcher plays a vital role as the human instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study an interview method was used to collect narrative data from five female superintendents in Ohio. As with any research study, some limitations exist. The interview, a commonly used method in the collection of data in qualitative studies, has both inherent challenges and limitations. In this study, semistructured interviews were used as the primary collection of data to understand the lived experiences of the five women in securing a superintendent position.

A limitation in using this method is that the researcher has to rely on the ability of the participants to articulate and recall their stories with accuracy. A second limitation is that the information gathered in this study is also dependent on the willingness of the participants to be open and honest about their life experiences. In this study, the researcher, a currently employed superintendent, assumed that a bond could be forged with each participant, leading to a more open and honest conversation about their experiences; however, Maxwell (2013) cautioned that the type of bond developed between the researcher and participant can either facilitate or hinder the completion and the quality of the research study.

The interpretive framework used in this study can also result in a limitation—the accuracy with which the researcher can retell the stories of the participants. The

background and personal life of the researcher can cloud the lens through which she or he views the stories of participants, then retells and interprets them (Creswell, 2007).

A fourth limitation is the site location of the research. Conducted in Ohio, this research was limited to one geographic area of the country that may not be representative of female superintendents from other states or representative of all superintendents, including males. A final limitation is the small size of the study. Because its aim was to understand the experiences of women who attained a superintendency, the sample size was limited to five female school superintendents. The researcher made the decision to keep the amount of data analyzed manageable, but the small sample size precludes the generalizability of the results from the study to a larger population.

Summary

This study provided an overview of women's access to the superintendency through a review of related literature and the stories of breakthrough women who have succeeded in securing the position. A review of foundational literature informing the study included theories of feminism, social networking, and gatekeeping; related literature dealt with studies about women leaders, career paths, gender bias, intersectionality, networking, challenges, and motivational factors.

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative study was to understand the lived experiences of five female superintendents and explore how they were able to overcome challenges and successfully secure a superintendency in a male-dominated field. The intended outcome of this study was (a) to support female administrators by providing needed information on career path decisions that can increase the probability of securing a superintendent position; (b) to support women with the understanding that mentors and

networks can assist with career path decisions; (c) to help women successfully respond to the internal and the external challenges they face as school leaders; and (d) to provide women with strategies to overcome adversity in achieving personal and professional goals.

Chapter II

Literature Review

In the K–12 arena the number of women in overall educational leadership positions has increased, but women are still proportionally underrepresented in the superintendency (Grogan & Shakeshift, 2013). According to the 2015–16 National Teacher and Principal Survey, 77% of teachers and 54% of principals in elementary and secondary schools were women (Taie & Goldring, 2017). Although women dominate the teaching ranks, their numbers decline in leadership roles. According to *The Study of the American Superintendent: 2015 Mid-Decade Update,* only 27% of superintendents in the United States were women, a relatively small 2% increase from the 2010 update (Ellerson et al., 2015). Ohio statistics showed that the disparity between female teachers (75%) and female superintendents (16%) was even greater (*2019 Ohio by the Numbers*, n.d.; *Ohio Department of Education*, 2019). The number of women in superintendent positions stands in direct contrast to the number of women working in the female-dominated teaching profession.

As leaders of educational institutions, superintendents must bring a level of expertise to the teaching and learning process and successfully engage internal and external stakeholders to gain the support needed to achieve district goals. Given the prior experiences of women as classroom teachers and building principals, the lack of women in the superintendency seems a contradiction. The low percentage of women employed as public school leaders suggests that barriers still exist for aspiring female leaders. The results of two studies conducted to measure the success rate of men and women in attaining the position of a school superintendent showed a stark contrast in the success

rates of male and female candidates: Male candidates (70%) were able to secure the position at a much higher rate than their female (30%) counterparts (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Muñoz et al., 2014). Findings from both studies showed that race, gender, and the period between certification and securing the position differed for men and women; specifically, they showed that men's career trajectories took a more direct route to the superintendency than women's. The most common pathway for men was directly through a principalship (41.32%), but for women it was through a district level position as an assistant superintendent (23.83%) (Davis & Bowers, 2019).

The first section of the literature review covers the theories that provided the framework for this study: feminist theory, social network theory, and gatekeeper theory. The major contributions of these theories to the discussion of the superintendency included the dimension of gender and the importance of power relations in gaining access to leadership positions. The purpose of the second section of the literature review was to illuminate the phenomenon of the lack of women superintendents by providing a review of women leaders, the position of superintendent, barriers, career paths, internal drivers, and the importance of role models, mentors, and networking in accessing the superintendency.

Theoretical Framework

Theories of feminism, social networking, and gatekeeping provided the framework for the study.

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory, often associated with personal experiences, has been shaped by four waves of the feminist movement (Yu, 2011), in which feminists from each wave

tried to improve upon the preceding one, "the vision of each more international in their concerns and more progressive in the sensitivities to race, class, and sexual politics than [that of] earlier activists" (Hewitt, 2012, p. 661). Regardless of the wave, one point the feminist movement has clarified was that women could not succeed unless the power structures of dominant ideologies and sociocultural values of American society were addressed or challenged (Hewitt, 2012).

First-wave feminism. Focused on political change, the first wave of feminism commenced with the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention of 1848 and ended with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 (Hewitt, 2012). First-wave feminists were typically White, middle-class women focused on specific political goals. The representation of this movement brought criticism because of the movement's narrow political focus, and its noninclusive effort that focused on the voting rights of educated White women.

Second-wave feminism. The second wave arrived during the 1960s, lasted several decades, and focused on issues of equality and discrimination (Biklen, Marshall, & Pollard, 2008). This wave was considered more inclusive than the first because the needs of a broader scope of women were addressed. The impact of this wave reached women on welfare, the working class, boardroom leadership, and academia. Sex roles and a surge that put women into the workforce characterized the second wave (Diamond, 2009), during which a focus was placed on women "talking back" to allow the voices of the oppressed be heard through personal experiences (Yu, 2011). The transformative nature of this wave raised issues still well debated in contemporary American society, including equal pay for equal work, affirmative action, Title IX, the politics of

housework, the glass ceiling, men's only clubs, Domestic Workers Unite, date rape, and Roe v. Wade (Biklen et al., 2008).

"The personal is political," a slogan coined by Carol Hanisch in 1969, became the central motto of second-wave feminism in the United States, emphasizing the connection between personal experiences and greater social and political structures (Yu, 2011). The slogan conveyed an acknowledgement that the private sphere is both "publicly and politically constructed by patriarchal ideologies and it is there that power relationships based on sex and gender are played out" (Yu, 2011, p. 872). The argument that the personal is political placed focus on the power of the state, and the movement turned its attention to public policies (Biklen et al., 2008). Feminists focused their activities on crafting policies that created opportunities for women and applied pressure on political leaders to enforce existing policies that limited the advancement of women. The second wave greatly influenced theory and research on women and concentrated on the connection between knowledge and power.

Third-wave feminism. Third-wave feminists emphasized the personal experiences of women and placed a value on personal narratives as well as the relationship between their own stories and their connection to political issues (Yu, 2011). The tone of third-wave narratives differed from that of the previous wave because these narratives were used as a method for women, particularly women of color, to document their lived experiences and to reconstruct their truths while refuting misconceptions about their lives. These narratives also brought comfort to women in the knowledge that their lived experiences of oppression and discrimination had not occurred in isolation.

Third-wave feminists were characterized as a younger generation of women who emphasized the body as personal expression (Yu, 2011). One of the primary objectives of this movement was to establish a new position in the meaning and identity of young women and to discount any misconceptions that may have emerged about feminism from the previous wave. Third-wave feminists were deliberate in their actions in refining the understanding of feminism "so that racism, sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, and classism all become integral to the meanings attached to 'feminism'" (Yu, 2011, p. 882). The promotion of diversity within the feminist community became a central focus of the third wave, in which the personal and political experiences of women could help unite them as a community.

Fourth-wave feminism. As the fourth wave of feminism entered into the 21st century, it brought a contemporary view of feminism focused on spirituality and community (Wrye, 2009). Although some feminists have considered this movement the fourth wave, others have described it as one continuous wave that "combined politics, psychology, and spirituality in an overarching vision of change" (Diamond, 2009, p. 213), a movement that would be defined by social responsibility.

Reflecting on the third-wave generation who tried to "do it all" in a man's world, fourth-wave feminists recognized the pressure and the toll the approach took on women (Wrye, 2009). As a result, fourth-wave feminists turned their focus from professional achievements, breaking gender barriers, and pressures to conform to an emphasis on service to all, a shift from a concern for self to a concern for others. The most notable alteration was the modification of power, redefining the control of "nation over nation" to power defined through service and collaboration.

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The fourth wave continued to emphasize (a) personal stories and experiences as a means to help other women reflect and (b) the manner in which gender and diversity intersect to support social change through their stories (Diamond, 2009). Although fourth-wave narratives continue to unfold, feminists must "integrate the unfinished issues and contradictions of the last three waves in an overarching vision that combines spiritual practice with political action and economic power and the insights derived from psychoanalytical theory and practice" (Diamond, 2009, p. 216). Theoretician Hedda Bolgar proposed balancing women's internal conflicts with the conflicting desires inherent in being a woman (Diamond, 2009). Feminist theorists introduced the idea of gender and contributed to the discussion of the inequalities women faced in both their personal and professional lives. The feminist movement focused attention on sex discrimination; however, this was only one layer of a more complex problem for Black women. In reality, some women faced multiple forms of discrimination: Their lives are not dominated by a single-issue struggle; this concept is known as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991).

Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American lawyer, civil rights advocate, and university professor, developed the theory of intersectionality to explain the oppression of Black women and to contribute to the understanding that not all women experience the same challenges (Gordon, 2016). Crenshaw (1991) used the concept of intersectionality to represent the many ways in which race and gender overlapped to shape the enormity of Black women's experiences. The motivation for her legal advocacy work was her desire to raise awareness that the experiences of Black women did not occur within the

traditional boundaries of the current understanding of race or gender discrimination. Crenshaw "meant intersectionality as a critique of the limitations of a legal regime in which sex discrimination and race discrimination were two separate wrongs" (Gordon, 2016, p. 341), explaining that the interests and experiences of women of color were often marginalized because society reacts to one or the other, failing to recognize intersectional identity as both a woman and person of color. She furthermore presented intersectionality as a way to frame the interactions of race and gender and to describe the position of women of color in overlapping systems of subordination, feminism, and antiracism.

Traditionally, women's studies have concentrated on the connection between racial and gender identities and how racism and sexism mutually form a person's experiences (Muses & Griffin, 2011). At the time of this writing, Crenshaw's intersectionality was well-known in women's undergraduate studies and had become a general term of young progressive activists, who used the term to remove questions of power and applied "it as a prescription for diversity, representing human beings of different types and/or identities" (Gordon, 2016, p. 346). Others explained intersectionality as a directive to place more individuals of color, women, or feminists of color into influential positions. Currently, intersectionality (a) represents an understanding that women are not monolithic and (b) calls for the recognition of a broader group of identities, "bringing together blacks, Latina/os, feminists, lesbians, gays, and transgender, . . . [to a place] where each group will not accept the suppression of their own identities, interest, and priorities" (Gordon, 2016, p. 354). Adherents of intersectionality have consciously challenged White and elite assumptions about women and gender, assertions found in some 1970s feminist discourse. Crenshaw's original

intent in intersectionality was to reconstruct assumptions that produced laws and policies that could not adequately react to injustices as individuals with multiple identities experienced them (Gordon, 2016). To continue the intent of Crenshaw's work, scholars should move away from using intersectionality as a term or slogan and to use it instead as a guide for research questions.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

A specific focus of feminist standpoint theory is "identifying cultural values and power dynamics that account for the subordination of girls and women" (Wood, 2009, p. 1). Feminist standpoint theory emanates from the idea that less influential people experience an alternative reality because of their social location (Swigonski, 1994). This theory supports the notion that our society is organized by power relations that produce imbalanced social positions (Wood, 2009). Feminist standpoint theorists do not believe that knowledge comes from critical characteristics of a particular gender; instead, they try to explain why certain activities are assigned based on gender and why those less valued are typically assigned to women.

> Feminist standpoint theory calls attention to the knowledge that arises from conditions and experiences that are common to girls and women . . . and the circumstances they find themselves in are not . . . natural but are a result of social and political forces. (Wood, 2009, p. 1)

Wallace (2014) illustrated this point by drawing attention to the disparity in leadership representation of male and female superintendents compared to the high percentage of women found in the teaching profession and school principalships.

The position of a school superintendent has been characterized as a position of power, and feminist theory draws on an awareness of power relations (Grogan, 2000). By studying both subordinate and dominant group members in a network, one can better understand subordinate experiences, dominant group practices, and ways to overcome those practices that produce the disparity (Wood, 2009).

Social Network Theory

Social network theory involves the relationships of individuals in an organization, the linkages among them, and the networks that advance and constrain those individuals (Deal et al., 2009). Depending on the type of relationship, "networks themselves can represent different structures—social, political, economic" (Deal et al., 2009, p. ix). What can be gained in studying social networks is an understanding of people, relationships, and the influence of power networks on individual and organizational outcomes. Social network theory has also been applied to understand how various types of organizations operate, such as those in business and in government sectors.

Not all networks are homogeneous; if they were, changes would come swiftly. In reality "school communities are made up of a plurality of social networks" (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2013, p. 117). When pushing out new ideas, leaders must be able to identify their supporters and nonsupporters as well as fence-sitters and to identify the power players who can accelerate the change process (Deal et al., 2009).

> Power-players control resources, set agendas, pursue parochial interests and influence others through manipulation, control of scarce resources, or sheer clout. [Principals and superintendents are in positions of authority and wield power but]

have little power over the people they are charged to lead if they do not work the

web, form alliances, or make deals. (Deal et al., 2009, pp. 78–79)

If school leaders understand social networks, they can advance new ideas, promote

positive school climate, support teachers with professional growth, and work through the

day-to-day challenges to establish an appealing and gratifying organization.

The leadership style of contemporary superintendents necessitates an extensive

skillset to deal with political realities, economic constraints, and social problems (Glenn

et al., 2009). Superintendents interact daily with a diverse group of stakeholders, and

their ability to motivate, build trust, and influence others in collaborative decision-

making is key to the effectiveness of their organization. When educators move into

superintendencies, unlike their prior experiences, they then play in multiple arenas, where

they face the demands of various interest groups. Meeting the demands of these interest

groups will require school superintendents to navigate through their organization by

constructing various messages, leaving them, at times, feeling more like a politician than

an educational leader (Deal et al., 2009). Gaining access to the superintendency will

require successful navigation of power structures, in which organizational norms and

professional routines are influenced by certain powerholders and gatekeepers (Tallerico,

2000).

Gatekeeper Theory

Psychologist Kurt Lewin proposed the theory of gatekeeping during his post-

World War II research. This theory, widely used in communication research, has made its

way into other fields of study over time (Shoemaker et al., 2001). Lewin's original intent

in gatekeeper theory was to explain how food consumption could be manipulated. He

contended "that the social life of organizations flows through many channels . . . composed of gates, any of which can preclude an individual or thing from progressing through an organization, or even entering it in the first place" (Davis & Bowers, 2019, p. 6). Lewin's theory implied that food comes from different places and goes through a series of gates before approval for the table; he suggested that these gates were further divided into sections in which food items could be manipulated before they entered the public sector (Shoemaker et al., 2001).

Gatekeeper theory, now a part of communication research, has been widely used to explain what news is reported (Dimmick, 1974). To fully understand the application of gatekeeper theory, the scope of research must surpass bias and selection perceptions and move to "a recognition of the organizational context in which gate-keepers work. . . . [As] an input–output or gatekeeping system, the news organization maps events in the environment into inputs and then maps these inputs into outputs" (Dimmick, 1974, pp. 7– 8). The news media has a limited number of stories that can be broadcast or make it to print. A journalist or news editor can act as the gatekeeper of the news, making decisions about what is reported. Various methods can be used to select news to be published or broadcast; however, the gatekeeper can also be the one who sets the criteria for selection. To further illustrate a gatekeeper's control, the flow of information through a gate may be selected to validate the gatekeeper's viewpoint of what is important and what is not.

Gatekeeping and hiring practices. Lewin's theory of gatekeeping has also been used by to make sense of superintendent search practice and the influence of race, gender, and other characteristics on attaining the position (Brown, 2014; Davis & Bower, 2019). Tallerico (2000) described the applicability of gatekeeper theory in superintendent

searches: "Accessing the superintendency is influenced by gatekeeping decisions based on power-holders' personal criteria, the routine practices that characterize headhunting for superintendents, norms embedded in the educational administration profession, and dominant ideologies and sociocultural values of American society" (p. 21). The search for a school superintendent is a multistep process in which a Board of Education typically engages a search firm to oversee the search and selection of potential candidates. An initial step in the process is to post the open position on professional websites at the local, state, and national levels. Interested candidates either self-nominate or are recruited by a consultant to apply for the job. In self-nomination an interested candidate completes the application process without contact from a search firm consultant (Davis & Bowers, 2019). How an applicant applies for the position can affect the starting point or channel from which they proceed through the hiring process (Tallerico, 2000). Candidates who self-nominate are not considered "preferred" candidates and may have to go through additional steps to advance in the process in comparison to those candidates recruited by a headhunter.

To begin the process, the search firm will develop a candidate profile based on both formal and informal criteria defined by the local school district (Tallerico, 2000). During the screening process, interested candidates will either advance or be dismissed based on the developed profile. Search firms can also impose paper-screening gates where some candidates may never make it to the initial screening based on the consultant's assessment of "fit" between the interested candidate and open superintendent position.

Timeline for hiring. A timeline to conduct a superintendent search can be developed to align with requirements of individual school districts. Ideally, a period of three to four months from inception to conclusion is considered an appropriate amount of time to conduct activities for a thorough process. Table 1 provides an overview of a typical superintendent search process, as outlined by the Washington State School Directors' Association (Boring, 2011).

Table 1

Superintendent Search Process

First Month
• Board approves decision to search for a new superintendent;   • Search firm selected;   • Planning meeting between board and consultant;   • Timeline developed for search and selection process;   • Meetings with district and community stakeholders to seek input; and   • Open superintendent position posted at local, state, and national levels.
Second Month
• Applications accepted;   • Recruitment of candidates; and   • Screening of candidates.
Third Month

• Application period closes;
• Screening process completed and list of candidates given to the board;
• Selection of second round candidates;
• Interviews of second round candidates; and
• Selection of final candidates.
Fourth Month
• Finalists interviews conducted;
• Finalists visit district;
• Discussion and debate on finalists;
• Offer position and announcement of selection;
• Negotiation of the contract; and
• Approval of the employment contract.

In the theory of gatekeeping, Lewin maintained, the "social life of organizations flows through many channels, and . . . is ruled by gatekeepers, whose attitudes and decisions about the individuals before them are subject to bias" (Davis & Bowers, 2019, p. 6). Despite existing laws and mandates for equality in the workplace, women continue to encounter gates in their pursuit of leadership roles. Gatekeeper theory, seldom used in educational research, may help to explain how biases impact the upward mobility of individuals through the ranks of educational administration (Davis & Bower, 2019).

Leadership and Women

More than 30 years after women accounted for 50% of college graduates in the United States, a vast majority of men are still the ones who experience the view from the

top (Sandberg, 2013). Despite the abundant contributions of women leaders, women in high-ranking positions are still an anomaly in most countries (Grogan, 2010). Researchers have referred to the dominance of male selection as the "think leader–think male" mindset (Schein, 1978, 2001; Sczesny, 2003).

In the early 1970s, Schein's (2001) empirical studies of managerial sex-role stereotyping "revealed that 'think manager–think male' was a firmly held belief among middle managers in the United States" (p. 676). This belief led to the perception that managerial success was likely to be experienced by more men than women, ultimately leading decision-makers to select male candidates over female candidates vying for the same position. Being regularly passed over can produce psychological barriers in the advancement of women where the "think manager–think male" phenomenon can also foster bias in the selection, placement, and promotion of women to leadership positions. For executive and leadership positions that are usually associated with men, a "lack of fit . . . between the perceived requirements of the job and the abilities typically attributed to women as a group . . . can be responsible for gender-biased judgments or behaviors" (Sczensy, 2003, p. 354). Thus, prejudice against female leaders mainly occurs in situations where a strong perception of incompatibility exists between the feminine gender role and the leadership position.

Images of Leadership

A review of the literature on women's studies, organizational behavior, and leadership during the 1990s and 2000s suggested that the traditional view of leadership associated with men was problematic for aspiring female leaders (Wheat & Hill, 2016). On one hand, feminist scholars have contended that the widely accepted "image" of

leadership has given men an advantage over women because traits associated with the latter did not quite coincide with the more accepted view of leadership (Dean, Bracken, & Allen, 2009). On the other hand, some have argued that (a) no reliable differences exist in the leadership styles of men and women because the supposed differences in style are socially constructed, (b) men and women are less likely to practice gender-stereotypical behaviors as part of their leadership roles, and (c) gender differences are more prominent in leadership self-assessments and laboratory studies than in reality (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Regardless of the stance, the leadership styles of men and women continued to be an area of study and debate.

As more women assumed leadership positions, discussions of differences in the leadership behaviors of men and women arose, in which agentic and communal attributes were used to describe the sex differences and similarities in leadership styles (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Agentic attributes, associated more with men than women, include "assertive, ambitious, self-confident, and forceful. . . . In employment settings these behaviors might include speaking assertively, influencing others, and making problem-solving suggestions" (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001, p. 783). Communal attributes, associated more with women than men, involve the welfare of others and include "affectionate, helpful, interpersonally sensitive, and nurturing. . . . In employment settings these behaviors might include speaking tentatively, supporting others, and contributing to the solution of relational and interpersonal problems" (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001, p. 783). When female leaders demonstrate the agentic requirements of their leadership role and fail to show the collective behaviors more

associated with women, female leaders can be negatively judged for exerting male-associated actions.

Stereotypical views of leadership. For decades, most leadership positions were held by men, creating an understanding of leadership based on the results of studies of White men in the United States (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). In order to gain a wider understanding of leadership, gender and culture must be included in research studies. Studies of gender and leadership emergence have focused on two main areas: (a) the sociodemographic definition of gender and (b) gender-role orientation. The more popular of the two, the sociodemographic definition involves the gender of the person *selected* as the leader. This view of leadership has prompted researchers to examine how men and women differ in their leadership style, their behavior, and their effectiveness as leaders. The less prominent but a significant understanding of gender and leadership is gender-role orientation, which involves who *emerged* as the leader. Regardless of the focus, many of the results indicated that "traits related to leadership are not culturally universal, and . . . because traits have an impact on the way that men and women are perceived as leaders, gender can affect access to leadership positions" (Ayman & Korabik, 2010, p. 162). For women such access can be hindered when decision-makers rely heavily on perceived leadership characteristics based on a stereotypic view of leadership.

Sex typing: Masculine and feminine traits. Emphasizing the differences between males and females has served as a way to classify the roles of individuals based on gender; thus, boys and girls are expected to gain gender-specific skills or develop self-concepts based on the male and female characteristics defined by the culture in which they live (Bem, 1981). Societies may differ on the specific tasks they give to men and

women; however, all societies assign adult roles based on gender and typically pass associated beliefs on to their children.

> The process by which a society thus transmutes male and female into masculine and feminine is known as the process of sex typing, . . . and as children learn the contents of the society's gender schema, they learn which attributes are to be linked with their own sex, and, hence, with themselves. (Bem, 1981, pp. 354–355)

Accordingly, sex-typed individuals are not seen for the degree of masculinity or femininity they possess but whether or not their self-concepts and behaviors are based on gender.

Sex-role inventory. Sandra L. Bem, an American psychologist known for her work with andrology and gender studies, created the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) during the mid-1970s. She developed the BSRI to measure how an individual identifies with traditional masculine and feminine qualities (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017). An instrument that sex-types individuals based on their self-ratings of their characteristics (Bem, 1981), the BSRI contains a total of 60 attributes with respondents rating themselves on a 7-point scale of masculine and feminine qualities. The attributes included in the survey are not known by or defined for the respondent prior to taking the inventory. The inventory is divided into three sections: 20 attributes that reflect the culture's definition of masculinity (e.g., assertive), 20 that reflect its definition of femininity (e.g., tender), and the remaining 20 that serve as filler items (Bem, 1981). Upon completion of the inventory, each respondent receives both a masculinity and femininity score.

Since the inception of the BSRI, researchers have used it in numerous studies to examine and explain peer-rated and self-rated leadership traits, more recently to reevaluate its applicability in view of societal changes (Auster & Ohm, 2000). One such study compared the mean desirability rating of the BSRI from 1972 to 1999, involving the relative ranking of both masculine and feminine traits. Overall results showed that despite changes in male and female roles and changes in the workforce, the desirability ratings remained constant because "respondents still believed that traditional images of what traits are desirable 'for a man' and 'for a woman' . . . in contemporary American society" (Auster & Ohm, 2000, p. 526). The researchers concluded that if desirability ratings conflict with essential ratings as defined by society's view about gender expectations, people will continue to experience tension in both personal and professional lives.

Gender expectations. A growing body of research has suggested stereotyping, a central reason for gender gaps, has become an influential and unseen threat to women in the workplace (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). In summer 2018, the Pew Research Center conducted a study of women and leadership, which revealed several reasons that women respondents perceived their lack of representation in executive roles. Sixty percent of the female participants expressed they had to do more than men to demonstrate their qualifications. Approximately 50% thought gender discrimination was a major barrier, and many women revealed that companies were just not ready for a female leader. The survey also showed that Americans differ on what traits or characteristics are beneficial or detrimental for men and women seeking leadership positions in their organizations. Traits compared in the study included assertiveness, ambition, physical attributes, and

emotions. Results showed assertiveness and ambition as favorable for men and unfavorable for women; physical attractiveness was more beneficial to women's success and showing emotions was equally harmful to both men and women. In answer to the question of whose journey to the top was more difficult, public opinion was that the climb was easier for men (Pew Research Center, 2018).

The Executive Task Force for Women in the Economy at the *Wall Street Journal* and McKinsey & Company conducted a robust study of nearly 60 Fortune 500 companies. Its purpose was to facilitate an understanding of the development, retention, and advancement of women in the workplace (Barsh & Yee, 2012). Gender diversity was valued in many of the companies in the study, but few women actually held CEO positions. Results of the study revealed four common barriers to the advancement of women to the C-Suite; more specifically, the combination of these barriers exacerbated the problem. Barriers identified in the study were structural obstacles and lifestyle choices as well as institutional and individual mindsets, all so entrenched in the organizations that they stifled the advancement of women in corporate America. The interviews in the study also underscored the difficulties women experienced accessing the power players and networks needed for advancement. Institutional mindsets inclined toward "successful executives being—and acting like—men, and leaders expecting women to model the same behavior" (Barsh & Yee, 2010, p. 7) were also found to be challenges that female executives had to overcome. The final identified barrier derived from the individual mindsets of the women interviewed. They stated that these mindsets had blocked their professional growth, preventing them from seeking the power sponsors who would challenge them or considering the jobs that would stretch their abilities

necessary to climb the corporate ladder (Barsh & Yee, 2012). To succeed in dealing with challenges women faced and to promote more women into leadership roles, the pipeline argument was offered as a possible solution.

Leadership Pipeline

Proponents of the pipeline argument, introduced some 30 years ago, suggested that over time, more women in lower-level positions in organizational hierarchies would lead to a significant number of women rising to higher-level jobs (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). The problem with this argument was the presumption of the following four concepts: (a) once in the same system, women and men would rise to the top at equal rates, (b) gender bias would be absent and no gender stereotypes would hinder progress, (c) organizational structures worked as well for women as they did for men, and (d) women's presence at the top would occur over time. Decades of lived experiences for women in academic medicine, the corporate world, and in educational leadership have, however, proven that more women in the pipeline will not necessarily result in more of them at the top (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017).

The absence of women in leadership has been well documented and long examined over the past 30 years (Bjork, 2000; Carnes Morrissey, & Gelleret, 2008; Grogan, 2010; Sandberg, 2013; Schein, 1978). Women appear to have a good start: They constitute 55% of the top 10% of high school graduating classes, achieve an overall average GPA of 3.42 compared to 3.28 for boys (College Board, 2012), earn 55% of college degrees (Wang & Parker, 2011), outnumber men in most graduate and doctoral programs (Jaschik, 2010), and represent 77% of teachers and 54% of principals in elementary and secondary schools (Taie & Goldring, 2017). If women have a good

running start, why do they fall behind in professional leadership roles? Researchers who have studied this phenomenon have attributed the absences of female leaders to leaks in the pipeline caused by external and internal factors (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Shapiro et at., 2015). Conflicts between (a) work expectations with the realities of work–life balance for women and (b) internal factors relating to their desire for leadership have continued to cause leaks in the pipeline in the advancement of women in their organizations (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). Despite its challenges, the pipeline argument is still considered a preferred solution to help more women secure higher-level positions; yet some will contend that if women and organizations do not take action to address the leaks, the leadership pipeline will be nothing more than a pipe dream (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017).

The promise of the pipeline argument has not been fully realized in the areas of government, medicine, academia, or the business world. When examining the career trajectories of aspiring female leaders, researchers have shown two common themes: (a) a woman's path to the top is not likely to occur in a straight line as a man's, and (b) leaks in the pipeline tend to occur because of conflicting priorities and biased views (Rochon, Davidoff, & Levinson, 2016). Despite the steady progress of female leaders, the disparity in the number of women who enter the pipeline compared to those who make it to the top suggest that the leadership pipeline continues to result from narrow gender norms (Maranto et al., 2018).

Leaks in the pipeline: academic medicine. Carnes et al. (2008) studied women in academic medicine hitting the same glass ceiling experienced by those in other fields, specifically examining "the historical linking of the advances in women's health with

women's leadership in academic medicine, the slow progress of women into leadership in academic medicine, and indicators that the advancement of women's health has stalled" (p. 1454). In researching these areas, they looked to address the impact of unconscious gender-linked bias and ways to create institutional environments in which women's health professionals were valued as well as issues related to women's health.

In examining the progress of women in medicine, Carnes et al. (2008) reviewed data from two of the most influential organizations in the U.S. medical system: The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) and the American Medical Association (AMA). According to a 2005 AAMC report women represented 49% of medical school students, 42% of residents, 17% of tenured professors, 16% of full professors, 10% of department chairs, and 11% of medical school deans at U.S. academic medical centers. A second report by the AMA showed the AMA Board of Trustees had only a 19% female representation; although progress was in evidence, the level of advancement of women into leadership roles has been slower than expected for the number of them in the medical field (Carnes et al., 2008).

Nearly 10 years later, the AAMC continued to report both low rates of female faculty as professors and in overall leadership positions (Ellinas, Fouad, & Byars-Winston, 2018). An AAMC survey entitled "2013–2014 State of Women in Academic Medicine: The Pipeline and Pathways to Leadership" indicated that women accounted for approximately 46% of students entering medical school and 38% of full-time academic medical faculty (Lautenberger, Dandar, Raezer, & Sloane, 2014). The underrepresentation persisted for full-time women associates and full professors (34% and 21%, respectively) in academic medicine, and the percentage of permanent female

department chairs (15%) and deans (16%) at U.S. medical schools remained low. The data from the report indicated that women were poorly represented in key leadership areas, such as department chairs, senior faculty, and medical school deans (Lautenberger et al., 2014).

Justification for female physicians' lack of advancement in academic leadership centers on three main ideas: "Women have not been in the field long enough to have reached leadership (pipeline argument), women do not compete for leadership positions for family reasons, and women lack the requisite leadership skills" (Carnes et al., 2008, p. 1456). Data, however, showed that women have been in the field long enough to reach leadership positions; two such areas are pediatrics and psychiatry. Women have numbered near 50% of the field for the past 25 years yet are still underrepresented in leadership roles (10%) as department chairs in these fields. If women have been in the medical pipeline for over two decades, other leaks apparently continue to cause the disparity between men and women as department chairs and for other leadership positions in academic medicine.

Leaks in the pipeline: business world. The perception that men make ideal leaders still persists in the business world, demonstrated by women as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) representing a mere 6.6% of the group as a whole in Fortune 500 firms (Zillman, 2019). As for Chief Financial Officers (CFOs), the number of women leaders is hardly better. In the United States, more than 50% of accounting graduates and 61.3% of accountants and auditors are women; however, despite the strong representation in this field, only 12.5% of CFOs in Fortune 500 companies are women (Stuart, 2017). The underrepresentation also occurs in certified public accounting firms. Women account for

51% of full-time workers in these firms but only 24% of partners and principals (Wilson-Taylor Associates, 2018). Overall, women represent nearly 50% of the workforce; despite their presence, they find themselves trapped in lower-level jobs and lag behind in leadership roles compared to their male counterparts. The representation of women in the labor force resembles a pyramid, in which few of them rise to senior-level management or CEO positions (Lang, 2010).

The Wall Street Journal–McKinsey report entitled *Unlocking the Full Potential of Women at Work*, noted above, included the number of women holding entry-level positions in the 60 Fortune 500 companies participating in the study. It revealed encouraging numbers with more than 325,000 women in the pipeline in entry-level positions; however, aggregated numbers showed that many women had chosen to take staff roles, considered low risk, middle-management positions, where upward mobility opportunities were less likely to arise (Barsh & Yee, 2012). Women tend to gravitate toward staff positions and avoid taking risks because they find their peers and supervisors less understanding of their mistakes; thus, they discount their leadership potential based on stereotypic expectations (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). The study further revealed that men and women in corporate American took different career paths in the pipeline. Early stages in the journey showed even levels of men and women across line and staff positions; however, as they proceeded through the pipeline,

> women begin a steady shift into staff roles by the time they reach the director
>
> level. Structurally, women do not have the same opportunities to benefit from
>
> sponsor discussion, and so they lack support to stay in the line. Line jobs are less
>
> flexible than staff jobs, so as women form families, staff jobs look more

appealing; well-intentioned leaders often do not even ask mothers to consider a

tough assignment. And women know that line jobs carry greater pressure. (Barsh

& Yee, 2012, p. 6)

To help overcome the barriers that institutions and women place in the way of career

advancement, corporate America continues to research ways to unlock the full potential

of women at work, provide better odds for promotion, and help more women reach the

top of their organizations. Over the past few decades, leaders in the field of education

have also tried to understand how to develop and advance more women so they are able

to secure leadership roles.

Research on Women in Educational Leadership

Since the 1970s a variety of research has been conducted to explain the

domination of men selected to lead school districts (Bjork, 2000; Skrla et al., 2000). To

help explain this phenomenon, researchers have focused on "sociocultural (i.e., sex-role

stereotyping, gender bias, and discrimination) and structural (i.e., informal power

structures, networking, and mentoring) categories of theories. [However, all of these

theories] offer incomplete explanations for the continued underrepresentation of women

in the public school superintendency" (Skrla et al., 2000, p. 47). Traits associated with

leadership are not culturally universal and can affect how men and women are seen as

leaders (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). For decades researchers on women and gender in

administration have tried to fill the gap in professional knowledge about the effectiveness

of women leaders; they "have noted women's exceptional abilities as school leaders,

frequently rating them more favorably than men administrators" (Bjork, 2000, p. 10).

Common attributes of women leaders identified in studies conducted over the past

30 years confirm the notion that women approach school leadership differently

than men do and that their characteristics tend to correspond to emerging demands

for school reform. For example, they tend to be caring and child-centered; they

have an understanding of child development and student achievement; and they

are experts at instruction and knowledgeable about learning, teaching, and

curriculum. Women tend to be facilitative and collaborative in their working

relationships, and they tend to use democratic leadership styles and power, which

contribute to achieving high levels of job satisfaction among staff. (Bjork, 2000,

p. 10)

To gain an understanding of female leaders, several phases of research were conducted to

help explain how women accessed, established, and performed their roles as school

leaders (Bjork, 2000).

The first three stages of research on women began during the 1970s and 1980s

and focused on women and gender in educational administration (Bjork, 2000). Early

stages of the research were focused on the number of women serving in building- and

district-level administrative positions and the disparity in the number of men and women

serving as school superintendents. In the second phase researchers explored and

recounted the lives of women who were successful as school superintendents. This stage

of research provided considerable insight into women as school leaders and sparked

debate on the role of women in the superintendency. In the third stage researchers

detailed the obstacles aspiring women leaders faced in accessing the superintendency.

The fourth stage, which began during the 1990s, was guided by views women of their

experiences in administrative positions; specifically how female superintendents accessed, established, and performed their roles in a male-dominated profession. The fifth stage emphasized female administrative behaviors performed in school settings and the manner in which these behaviors impacted the organization as a whole. The culmination of research conducted "on women and gender in educational administration has illuminated how culture and professional norms have created masculine myths of the existence of the one best way of leading and have perpetuated expectations and gender bias in the superintendency" (Bjork, 2000, p. 14). Women who have aspired to leadership roles have encountered challenges as they pursued superintendent positions. Studies have been conducted to understand how these challenges have produced barriers for women in their advancement to leadership positions.

Barriers experienced by female educators. Both internal and external barriers affect female educators' access to school superintendent positions. Derrington and Sharratt (2009) were interested in identifying the barriers and determining whether the perception of these barriers had shifted between studies conducted in 1993 and 2007. The participants in both their studies came from the Washington Association of School Administrators' professional job listing service. In both studies they considered barriers in the advancement to a superintendent position from the female perspective. Results from the studies indicated a shift in opinion from the 1993 study to the one completed in 2007. Some of the responses ranked at the bottom of the 1993 list had made their way to the top of the 2007 study.

Derrington and Sharratt (2009) described the shift in the perception of leading barriers, which

according to the 1993 survey, appeared to be more likely perceived as

institutionalized and rooted in societal discrimination practices. For example, sex-

role stereotyping and sex discrimination headed the top of the survey back then.

Thirteen years later, a response that had ranked at the bottom of the list in 1993

had moved up to become one of the two highest: Barriers to securing a

superintendent position are often self-imposed. (p. 9)

Analysis of the responses indicated these self-imposed barriers were a result of women

self-selecting out of jobs because of internal conflicts of balancing the demands of a

superintendency with family responsibilities and a reluctance to relocate because of

family or a spouse's job. With regard to family responsibilities and social and cultural

norms, expectations appear to differ for men and women because "males are perceived as

championing their family struggles by aspiring to leadership jobs, [and] power exerted by

society shows females as abandoning their families when pursuing leadership positions"

(Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 772). Others studies on barriers for women have shown that they

"have not broken into the ranks of educational leadership because the institutions (i.e.,

family, schools, and churches) that have contributed to their socialization process also

have stood as their greatest barriers" (Noel-Batiste, 2009, para. 2). Aspiring female

leaders are faced with the challenge of overcoming a culture in which women are still

believed to be better suited for the classroom (Noel-Batiste, 2009).

Career paths to the superintendency. Since 2000 researchers have examined

career paths to the superintendency. Because men have been predominantly selected to

the school superintendency, "their career paths have become the template for success"

(Brunner & Kim, 2010, p. 285). Research has shown that a majority of superintendents

come from the ranks of secondary school principals, a majority of whom are men. By contrast, women hold a majority of elementary principalships, a position that has not been the customary track to the superintendency (Superville, 2017).

Kim and Brunner (2009) studied the career paths of individuals, specifically the way they move both vertically and horizontally throughout their careers. They reviewed a secondary analysis from studies conducted in 2000 and 2005 by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) to assess the career movement of both men and women educators. The first study, conducted in 2000, included 2,232 (1,938 men and 294 women) respondents who held the position of superintendent. The second study included 723 female superintendents and 543 women who held central office positions. Overall findings from these two studies showed that career paths to the superintendency differed for men and women based on positions held and the size of the school district. Specifically, the research revealed that men's work experiences as assistant principal, secondary principal, and central office administrator provided more mobility to the superintendency than the elementary school positions held by a majority of women.

Career decisions. In research conducted to identify both personal and institutional factors school leaders used to make career decisions, participants in the study included those pursuing master's degrees in educational administration, licensure, and doctorates at Youngstown State University from 2002 to 2007 (Jeffords, 2008). Responses came from 88 male and 102 female participants who completed a survey on factors that affect career advancement decisions. Responses were then categorized into six conceptual perceptions: economic, educational, ideological, physiological–psychological, political,

and sociological (Jeffords, 2008). Analysis of the results identified several perceptions that contributed to the low number of women represented in school administration. One such perceived barrier was the lack of opportunity in gaining critical work-related experience for leadership positions. This identified challenge would support what other studies have shown about the attraction of women to staff positions that are more flexible but offer less exposure to the work-related leadership opportunities needed for career advancement.

Data from that study also showed that career progression opportunities for women are influenced by political elements in the selection process (Jeffords, 2008). Decision-makers, such as those on boards of educations, can limit administrative opportunities for women when they perceive them as weak managers or inept with finances or believe that they allow their emotions to influence their decisions. "Subtle biases in how school boards and search firms recruit candidates . . . [and] negative stereotypes about women's abilities to lead large institutions are still pervasive" (Superville, 2017, p. 15). For example, the primary reason "given by boards of education for hiring men is that men know about finance and budgeting, while women do not. Some of this can be credited to women's preferred . . . career paths of curriculum and instruction versus finance and maintenance" (Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 772). Jeffords (2008) recommended that district leaders provide women the same work-related experiences as men to create career opportunities in their advancement to administrative positions in their school districts.

Career mobility: opportunity and power. Two elements that affect career mobility for individuals are opportunity and power (Kanter, 1977). The opportunity to move vertically in an organization is defined by the way people involve themselves in

their work, where power is defined as the accumulation of experiences and alliances gained by an individual. Furthermore, career movement is "closely related to concepts such as visibility, exposure, and connections to powerful persons or core leadership in an organization" (Kim & Brunner, 2009, p. 79), where opportunity in career mobility is partitioned into two categories: line and staff positions (Kim & Brunner, 2009).

The second element Kanter (1977) identified as affecting career mobility is power. Secondary principalships, considered positions of increased status, leadership, and power in a school district, are traditionally held by more men than women; whereas, a majority of women can be found in central office coordinator or supervisor positions or elementary principalships, positions considered to have less power and status than those of secondary principals (Kim & Brunner, 2009). "Power plays an important role in changing individual behavior and status of positions in organizational career mobility" (Kim & Brunner, 2009, p. 80). How power affects career mobility for school leadership positions has also been the subject of study. Muñoz et al. (2014) examined the motivation of aspiring female leaders, concluding that power and empowerment were two major influencers for applying for a school superintendency. Their study showed that men were more willing to apply for the position numerous times after a rejection, that women tended to give up after an initial rejection. They concluded that a lack of perseverance shown by women suggests that their ability to access the superintendency may be inhibited by struggles related to power.

A second large-scale study was designed to examine the career paths of 4,813 Texas educators who received their first superintendent's license between 2000–2001 and 2014–2015 (Davis & Bowers, 2019). The researchers were "interested in determining

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how individual and contextual characteristics [were] associated with the odds of becoming a superintendent" (Davis & Bowers, 2019, p. 32). Gatekeeper theory was included as part of the theoretical framework to study any difference in the time period men and women secured their first superintendency after receiving their initial superintendent's license. General findings concluded that race, gender, and time between certification and obtaining the position differed between men and women. More specifically, the results showed the following:

> The largest group (36.94% of those under study) that eventually became superintendents were principals in the academic year when they first obtained superintendent certification and in the year before they first entered the superintendency. . . . [Women] and educators of color [, however,] were more likely to have obtained superintendent certification and accepted their first superintendency position while employed as assistant superintendents. (Davis & Bowers, 2019, p. 32)

These findings suggested that women and educators of color are held to a higher standard, requiring a district-level position before attaining the position of a school superintendent (Davis & Bowers, 2019).

The study of female central office administrators and their aspirations to the superintendency by Muñoz et al. (2014) showed a stark contrast in the success rate in attaining a superintendency in male and female candidates. Female participants were successful less than one third of the time when interviewed for a superintendent position, compared to a 70% success rate for male candidates. Davis and Bowers' (2019) study of career paths to the superintendency also showed that men secured the position faster than

women. They found that women took longer to reach the superintendency as a result of holding more positions (building and district level) than their male counterparts and identified the assistant superintendent position as the most common pathway for women at a rate of 23.83%, compared to 41.32% of men securing the position directly from the principalship (Davis & Bowers, 2019).

Most men moved to the superintendency through line positions as secondary teachers, coaches, assistant secondary principals, and secondary principals; by contrast, women held more staff positions as elementary teachers, club advisors, supervisors, elementary principals, and directors or coordinators (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Analysis of the 2000 and 2005 AASA studies showed more men than women held line-role positions that (a) provided opportunities to move vertically, (b) created more exposure to leadership skills, and (c) provided the opportunity to work with organizational leaders; in comparison, women traveled to the superintendency through staff positions that moved them horizontally through the organization with fewer opportunities for upward mobility (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Despite the barriers and other factors that affect career advancement, some women have successfully navigated the glass maze and entered the leadership ranks.

Successful Navigation of the Glass Maze

Women, leadership, and the barriers they encounter in balancing their personal lives with their professional careers have been well documented. The literature highlights the accomplishments of women who have successfully navigated the glass maze to achieve high-ranking positions in their perspective fields. These women, who have

reached the top of their organizations, offer lessons from their overall experiences, their competition with men, and their personal struggles with self-imposed barriers.

Wendy Levinson, professor and a past chair from the Department of Medicine at the University of Toronto, is one such leader. As department chair, a primary responsibility was to recruit faculty members to serve as departmental division chiefs. Levinson reported that men had an immediate advantage over women because men were more transparent about wanting leadership roles. Their willingness to openly share their desires contributed to their increased access to open leadership positions (Rochon et al., 2016). During her tenure as department chair, Levinson described the recruitment of women as nearly impossible (Rochon et al., 2016). To encourage female faculty to apply for leadership positions, Levinson shared the joys of holding a leadership role, listened to their concerns, and offered mentoring; however, she frequently received the following responses:

- I prefer to focus on my scientific work and not take on that role.

- I don't think I would be good at it.

- I have too many commitments to my kids and parents, so I just don't have the time.

- It doesn't seem like the right time in my career—maybe later. (Rochon et al., 2016, pp. 1053–1054)

Despite Levinson's efforts, most women showed little interest in taking on leadership positions in the department; however, when Levinson approached men for leadership positions, they rarely turned down the opportunity to be a departmental division chief (Rochon et al., 2016).

To help facilitate the recruitment of women into leadership roles, those in medical academia have implemented sponsorship programs modeled after what occurs in the corporate world (Rochon et al., 2016). Sponsors differ from mentors in that the former hold positions of power or influence that can help interested individuals navigate their organization and advocate for their advancement. Sponsorship programs have shown promise as a way to support women who want to pursue higher-level executive positions in academic medicine (Rochon et al., 2016).

Some women have successfully navigated the glass maze in the corporate world as well. Facebook CEO since 2008, Sheryl Sandberg has achieved C-Suite status. In her best-seller, *Lean in: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead,* Sandberg (2013) recognized the advancements of women in the United States in recent years but documents their failure to achieve equality in senior-level leadership roles. She stated that "career progression often depends upon taking risks and advocating for oneself—traits that girls are discouraged from exhibiting" (p. 15). The pipeline that supplies an educated workforce is replete with women at the entry-level; however, that same pipeline employs men in leadership roles at rates significantly higher than women (Sandberg, 2013). Sandberg noted that individual women are as professionally ambitious as men, yet data in each profession showed that men collectively aspired to senior-level jobs more often than women. The same 2012 Wall Street Journal–McKinsey survey of more than 4,000 employees showed that 36% of men want to reach the C-Suite compared to 18% of women (Barsh & Yee, 2012). Sandberg identified fear as a root of many barriers that women face with work–life decisions, describing those fears as follows: "fear of not being liked; fear of making the wrong choice; fear of drawing negative attention; fear of

overreaching; fear of being judged; fear of failure; and the holy trinity of fear: the fear of being a bad mother/wife/daughter" (p. 24). To support the advancement of aspiring leaders at Facebook, the organization had to create a culture in which people were encouraged to take risks without fear of failure. Based on her own experiences, Sandberg concluded that if the fear factor were absent, women could pursue both professional and personal success.

Another study by Freeley and Seinfield (2012) examined factors that could better position aspiring leaders for leadership positions. They examined the career pathways of four retired successful school superintendents. These leaders stated that access to the superintendency was not so much the positions they held before becoming a superintendent but the personal qualities and skills that improved while in those positions. Other factors these leaders believed central to their success included mentors, role models, and connections with influential individuals they met along the way.

Role models, mentors, and networking. Mentoring for school leaders should be viewed as essential in the development of effective leadership and as part of the socialization necessary for leadership positions (Daresh, 2004). Connecting women with mentors and role models can enhance self-perception of their ability to lead organizations (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010). Studies on women's leadership development have shown that talented women in current administrative positions achieve such a position because of the "life transforming impact of an individual who saw potential in them that they had not seen in themselves" (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010, p. 255). Role models, mentors, and networking played an essential role that helped aspiring women secure superintendent positions; however, not all mentors are created equal (Muñoz et al., 2014). A study of

female central office administrators showed that the type of mentor for women who held the position of a superintendent differed from that of aspiring female leaders.

It appears that the women in the superintendent group were more apt to have highly influential mentors who identified their leadership attributes and then recommended that they take a superintendency. Conversely, three out of four aspiring superintendents spoke of their mentors as gatekeepers to the office of the superintendency. It appeared that their mentoring networks were functioning under limited capacity or were lacking key players crucial to establishing the influential networks necessary to guarantee them access to the position. (Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 775)

More attempts have been made to understand how women in educational leadership positions experience mentoring opportunities. Sherman, Munoz, and Pankake (2008) researched the mentoring experience for women. Their study included four female assistant superintendents and six female superintendents. Analysis of their responses established the following five themes on mentoring: identification of mentors, lack of women role models, passive mentoring, confidence boosters, and networking. In the study, the participants could quickly identify an individual as a mentor; however, the support was described as a voice of inspiration, and defined as a more passive type of mentoring than active. The lack of female mentors was evident in the analysis of the data, especially for secondary principals and school superintendents. A majority of the women in the study acknowledged that they had mentors or had been mentored, described their mentors as giving various forms of praise, and defined their networks as a mentoring

body; furthermore, the balance between work and family continued to be a significant reason that more women were absent from leadership roles.

Sherman et al. (2008) recommended the following ways to improve the mentoring experience for women: (a) create networks that give women access to the power players that will help them reach leadership positions, (b) develop formal future leadership programs, (c) promote action-oriented support from experienced school leaders, and (d) encourage aspiring women leaders to be proactive about choices that can lead them to their career goals. Several professional organizations exist to help women advance their skills and improve their outlook in obtaining leadership roles. One such organization, the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, has provided programs and workshops to assist aspiring women gain confidence and the skills needed to access leadership roles. The association also identified networking and mentoring as gateways to gain senior-level positions and encourages women to align themselves with individuals who are experienced as senior-level leaders (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010). In addition to the external factors that supported their career advancement, these breakthrough women identified the foundational strengths that fueled their growth in stepping out of their comfort zones to secure leadership positions.

Determination, perseverance, and resilience. Career decisions, professional experiences, mentors, and exposure to influential networks are all elements that can advance individuals to leadership positions. Research has also been conducted to understand what internal drivers can have a positive impact on aspiring female leaders. These studies revealed that despite encountering considerable barriers in both their professional and personal lives, these breakthrough women, demonstrated a healthy

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balance of determination, perseverance, and resilience on their way to the top seat (Christman & McClennan, 2008).

 Determination. A strong determination and an iron will have characterized women who have succeeded in breaking the ranks of male-dominated professions because they have to "fight harder, wait longer, and survive more scrutiny to become a superintendent" (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009, p. 10). Women who have made it to the top of their organization have identified several strengths that powered their growth: (a) a robust work ethic with a propensity for doing more than what is expected; (b) results orientation, never taking their eyes off improving the organization; (c) resilience, an ability to go the distance despite obstacles; (d) a growth mindset, seeking feedback to improve their performance; and (e) an ability to inspire and motivate others toward self-improvement, with a common goal of improving the organization (Barsh & Yee, 2012).

 Perseverance. Determination is the willpower that fuels one's commitment; perseverance is the staying power that helps one to overcome obstacles that may interfere with achieving success (*Merriam-Webster dictionary*). Studies have been conducted to measure the level of willingness and perseverance needed to secure a school superintendent position. In Iowa, researchers examined reasons that the number of female superintendents in the state continued to decline at a rate higher than the national average (Olsen, 2006). The research method included interviews from three major search firms in the state, interviews with female superintendents, and a statewide quantitative survey to determine what perpetuated the discrepancy. A portrait of female superintendents was developed to reflect the attributes required to become a superintendent. Many of the traits identified in the portraits showed similarities between men and women. One result of the

study showed that regardless of gender, "perseverance, business acumen, and 'grit' were pinpointed as necessary traits to access a superintendency successfully" (Olsen, 2006, p. 8); however, additional results showed that women needed to demonstrate more strength than their male counterparts in areas where they were stereotypically perceived as weak, such as in math and business.

Research was conducted in the state of New York to identify predictors to secure the top seat (DiCanio et al., 2016). Surveying 70 women and 79 men, the researchers designed their study to measure the willingness of assistant superintendents to compete for the superintendency and the degree to which their desire was influenced by personal variables, professional variables, and volition. In this study, volition was defined as "the willingness of assistant superintendents to appear for multiple interviews, give up their current position, be interviewed by search firms, build alliances within the community, and the desire to lead a district" (DiCanio, 2016, p. 73). Results indicated that volition, district size, and mentorship were significant predictors of willingness to advance to the superintendency. Specifically, volition affected both men and women equally in their professional perseverance to aspire to the top job. Results also showed that the type of mentor and proximity of the mentor influenced the level of willingness for a candidate to apply for the position. A superintendent in the assistant superintendent's district was shown to be the most influential type of mentor; in addition, the influence of this type of mentor was more significant for women than for men. The results indicated that women were 29 times more likely to increase their willingness to advance if their mentor was a superintendent in their district; men were reported only 6.5 times more likely to increase their willingness for advancement (DiCanio et al., 2016). Results of the study implied

that a mentor within a district played a crucial role in influencing the volition of female assistant superintendents' willingness to seek a superintendent position.

Resilience. Accessing the superintendency is one step in the journey for women to lead; sustainability in the position requires resilience. A study completed by Christman and McClennan (2008) showed how women overcame difficult situations in accessing and sustaining leadership roles in higher education. Christman and McClennan, who began their study with the mindset that the female participants would provide clear reasons for accessing and surviving the ranks of educational leadership, discovered something much different from their initial understanding. They stated:

> We believed that our extraordinary women in higher education administration would reveal how women can make it in leadership roles. This is what we expected, but it was not what we got. We came metaphorically with our gloves, bats, and balls, only to discover that our resilient women administrators were playing a different game altogether. (Christman & McClellan, 2008, p. 4)

Christman and McClennan (2008) expected these women to model feminism and share how their feminist leadership of nurturing and caring "had contributed to their professional resiliency" (p. 4); however, this was not what they found in the results of their study. What they learned was these women recognized the complexity of their leadership roles and described their resilience as the ability to

> move lithely between two socially constructed gender norms, . . . a leadership that defied being categorized as one of two genders or somewhere in between the two . . . a balance between feminine and masculine behavior and where they never

become too much one way or the other. (Christman & McClennan, 2008, pp. 20–

21).

Christman and McClennan suggested that the demands of our complex society required a

balance of feminine and masculine traits where a multidimensional gender approach to

leading can help meet the needs of a diverse society. The same holds true in K–12 public

education. To meet the complex demands placed on public school governance, the role of

the superintendent has had to evolve to meet the demands of 21st-century learners and the

school communities that they serve.

The Evolving Role of the Superintendency

Local boards of education existed long before the position of the school

superintendent arrived in public education. As the number of children attending public

schools increased and the complexities of school governance deepened, the role of a

school superintendent emerged (Moody, 2011). Although the position of superintendent

is considered relatively new, a lack of detailed history has prompted historians to explain

the various roles of the school superintendent. Before 1970 the school superintendent

conceptually played four different roles: teacher–scholar, business manager, statesman,

and applied social scientist (Callanhan, 1966).

Initially, many school boards were hesitant to hire a superintendent because they

feared the superintendent would gain political power at their expense (Kowalski,

McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011); those hired in the early years from 1865 to

around 1910 were predominantly male teachers who had been successful in the classroom

(Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). After 1910, the superintendent as business

manager emerged and remained the primary type of superintendents for over 30 years

(Kowalski et al., 2011). Professors and large-city superintendents were critical in institutionalizing the business management concept through which boards of education emphasized a superintendent's managerial skills. Because of concerns with the centralization of control and the notion that community members have an influential voice in public education, the position expanded to accommodate the role of educational statesman. By the mid-1950s, however, that role was criticized as inadequate to deal with issues of a complex society; thus, a new role emerged: the superintendent as an applied social scientist, who could help solve social problems in a diverse democratic society (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). Even that notion was short-lived; by the early 1960s, superintendents as high-level experts in their field would lack understanding of the needs of their community necessary to build coalitions for a shared future (Callahan, 1966).

Twenty-First Century Superintendents

Decades after Callahan (1996) detailed the various roles of the superintendency, Kowalski (2005) suggested that a fifth role emerged: the school superintendent as effective communicator. The arrival of the 21st century brought a wave of reform movements with No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) ushered in the new century. In order to advance educational agendas from these reform movements, superintendents must possess effective communication skills and demonstrate a relationship-enhancing communication style instead of the traditional top-down dicta when dealing with stakeholders. Moving reform policy from the national level to local school districts has also magnified the importance of superintendents connecting with the community and understanding institutional cultures.

Reform in educational institutions today involves more than aligning curriculum and refining instructional practices; it requires organizational and cultural change, in which a superintendent provides direction for the organization. The importance of a top executive's ability to effectively communicate has been reinforced by studies outside education, where struggling chief executive officers were rated as ineffective communicators (Perina, 2002). Superintendents in the 21st century must work within the framework of an information-based and reform-minded society using relationship-enhancing communication as an effective means to initiate and sustain change professionally and politically (Kowalski, 2005). In addition to demonstrating effective communication skills, the contemporary superintendent must wear many hats: They must balance their responsibilities among instructional, executive, and political demands, all while leading their school communities.

Today, public school leaders must compete for students and school funding, all while adapting district policies and practices affected by ongoing legislative changes. External accountability systems and mounting political pressures have made the superintendency a more complex and one of the most demanding jobs in the United States today (Hendricks, 2013). The top school job has evolved from school manager taking care of finances, bonds, and building to a 21st-century leader expected to be experts in collaboration, community engagement, and instructional outcomes (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Instructional leadership. School reform movements driven by political and social influences like NCLB and ESSA have intensified the importance of the superintendent's instructional role. Superintendents are expected to lead reform

movements in their districts through annual testing and to measure the academic progress

of students based on state report card metrics. These reform movements have produced

political challenges for school boards, superintendents, and the communities they serve

because superintendents must negotiate with various stakeholders to gain support for

district funds, resources, and programs.

A superintendent's influence on the academic success of students comes through

the articulation of an instructional vision and the building of the organizational supports

needed to achieve that vision. Examination of findings from a meta-analysis of 27 studies

conducted since 1970 on the influence of school leaders and student achievement showed

that effective school superintendents focus on creating goal-oriented districts, specifically

in the following areas: (a) collaborative goal-setting from internal and external

stakeholders, (b) nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (c) board

alignment and support of district goals, (d) monitoring goals for achievement and

instruction, and (e) the use of resources to support achievement and instructional goals

(Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Superintendent–board relations. Researchers have indicated that the type of

relationship established between a superintendent and board members is crucial to the

success or failure of the superintendent with many factors influenced by personal and

political motives (Petersen & Short, 2001). The structure of governance between a

superintendent and a board of education presents its own set of challenges: "The current

configuration of school governance in America—incorporating a locally elected school

board with a hired superintendent of schools—is a phenomenon unique to the United

States" (Moody, 2011, p. 78). Over time boards of education established the position of

superintendent, not merely to improve the educational system but also to meet the needs of the board (Moody, 2011).

School superintendents must recognize that their relationship with school boards can be unpredictable when board members change or when political issues emerge. Moody (2011) described the potentially volatile relationship between a board of education and its superintendent based on the following factors:

> (a) school boards by their very nature are made up of lay members that generally are elected rather than appointed; (b) board members generally serve part-time and for limited or no pay; (c) board members are not usually professional educators, and as such they tend not to be especially erudite in the nuances of pedagogy and school administration; and (d) the information base from which school board members must operate is often provided (skewed?) by either internal or external stakeholders. (p. 80)

The success of superintendents in overseeing and executing change relies on the relationship they forged with their school boards. Best intentions and the value of a superintendent's expertise can diminish quickly as a result of ineffective communication with board members (Kowalski et al., 2011). At times, the relationship can become strained by external pressures from high stakes testing, school spending, and local political issues. To strengthen the relationship and build sustainable change, a school superintendent must connect with board members and engage community members in a shared vision of their organization.

Collective leadership. Public schools today are a community of diverse learners, and school leaders are responsible with advancing the success of all students. In order to

do so, school superintendents must engage internal and external stakeholders while building trust through meaningful interactions. Visible and accessible superintendents who are open and transparent with their communities will help build trust among stakeholders (Gordon & Louis, 2013). An essential first step is to engage community members in the development of a shared vision for their school district. Leaders who establish, articulate, and implement the vision of learning for their organization will help to promote the success of all students (Greenleaf, 1977). Developing a shared vision for the district through community engagement, the superintendent plays a crucial role in engaging the community, bridging the gap between internal and external stakeholders, and displaying effective communications through active listening (Chadwick, 2004).

Collaborating with stakeholders requires understanding by a school superintendent who knows the types of networks (task, friendship, power, and cultural) that exist in a school community and is skilled in using those networks to meet district goals (Deal et al., 2009). Understanding the types of networks is not only crucial in achieving district goals but can become critical to the personal success or failure of a school superintendent.

Political leaders. Those who become superintendents have typically operated in educational arenas. As they progress through the ranks and into the role of school superintendent, their work requires them to function in many complex arenas (Orr, 2006). One that can impact the longevity of a school superintendent is the arena of political power with its boards of education, civic leaders, labor unions, and state organizations. To be successful in the position, a superintendent must understand the politics that

accompany the role as well as have the ability to negotiate with political groups in a larger arena.

Ferris et al. (2005) described organizations as inherently political arenas:

For years, scholars and practitioners alike have acknowledged the existence and importance of politics in organizations. Indeed, theory, research, and practice all have considered the types of strategies and tactics people employ in efforts to behave politically. What we know less about are the characteristics that enable one to exercise influence in ways that lead to success. Some have referred to such qualities as interpersonal style, "savvy," "street smarts," and "political skill." (p. 127)

To measure one's political skillset, Ferris et al. developed a political skill inventory that assessed four key areas: (a) a social astuteness that involves an accurate understanding of social situations and the ability to interact appropriately, (b) an interpersonal influence capable of adjusting behavior in order to elicit the desired response, (c) strong networking ability in developing and using a diverse network of individuals; and (d) apparent sincerity, others seeing her or him as having a high level of integrity, authenticity, and genuineness.

In dealing with political powers, school leaders must also draw from two power bases that influence their work with stakeholders: expertise and referent power (Glenn et al., 2009). "Expertise is described as the power of knowledge, and referent [power] is the power of human relations or interpersonal skills" (Glenn et al., 2009, p. 19). As superintendent candidates move up the leadership ladder, their technical skills may change to adapt to their new position; however, the need for strong interpersonal skills

becomes a critical prerequisite for obtaining and successfully sustaining the position. In the age of school reform and legislative accountability, a school superintendent must be politically savvy to deal with conflict with all political divisions (Alsbury, 2003).

The complexities of the job and the many roles superintendents play requires aspiring school leaders to amass a wide range of experience and skills. Career development for those who desire the position is also dependent on career opportunities afforded to those who seek the position. Well documented, women's career development is more complicated than men's because of the number of barriers that present both challenges and limits to women's career choices and advancement in their field (Coogen & Chen, 2007).

Reshaping the view of leadership in education. Aspiring female leaders face a complicated situation: how to break through to a position that has been socially constructed as male by society (Skrla et al., 2000). Research on women in educational leadership has been conducted to offer new ways to view school leadership in challenging the status quo and to show that the female style of leading is more aligned with the demands of school reform and inclusive practices needed by contemporary school leaders (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2013). Although Shakeshaft's (1987) groundbreaking research was conducted decades ago, her analysis of the way women work in school settings provides a solid foundation for effective school leadership today. Her analysis revealed the following female perspective of school leadership: "(a) relationships with others are central to all actions of woman leaders, (b) teaching and learning are the major foci of woman administrators, and (c) building community is an essential part of a woman administrator's style" (pp. 197–198). Women leaders are drawn

toward different types of collective leadership because this type of leadership "seems to be consistent with the trend in leadership literature that focuses on shared leadership, cognitive leadership, sense-making, and the way an educational organization works" (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2013, p. 112). Grogan (2010) suggested that one way to reshape the perception of others' views of the single best way to lead is to learn from the narratives of women who have gained access to leadership positions. As more women move into leadership roles as principals, superintendents, college deans, and university presidencies, they have earned the right to challenge the status quo and have the influence to redefine their profession (Grogan, 2010). Finally, research conducted by women on women in leadership positions can be beneficial. In particular, qualitative studies of the experiences of women will encourage future inquiries, support improvements in the field, and reshape the view of a position that has been socially constructed as male by society.

Summary

Women have made strides in breaking barriers, yet too few of them are positioned at the top of their organizations. Regardless of steady progress, more can be learned to help women break through and succeed in a male-dominated leadership culture (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010). To understand the inequitable representation of women leading, the literature review above covered theories of feminism, social networking, and the influence of gatekeepers. Feminist theory, often associated with personal experiences and characterized by waves, made one thing clear: Women could not succeed if power structures of dominant ideologies and sociocultural values in American society were not challenged (Hewitt, 2012; Tallerico, 2000; Yu, 2011). The feminist movement focused its attention on the underrepresentation of women leaders,

and adherents actively tried to bring more women into school administration but fell short of making significant movement in the promotion of women into leadership positions (Tallerico & Blount, 2004).

Accessing the superintendency requires successful navigation of a process that typically involves a search firm's selection of potential candidates, influenced by a local board of education (Tallerico, 2000). Lewin's theory of gatekeeping, which emerged in 1947, has been used to understand superintendent search practices and to investigate how accessing the position may be influenced by race, gender, and other characteristics (Brown, 2014; Davis & Bower, 2019; Tallerico, 2000). Women face power and political systems that live in educational, medical, and corporate institutions; what ties social network and feminist theories together is the awareness of the power relations and the acquisition of skills needed to overcome the practices that produce the disparity (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2013; Wood, 2009).

Related literature and studies on female leaders, aspiring female leaders, and barriers for women also informed this study. A substantial amount of research on the barriers that affect women's access to leadership roles indicates that the first step of overcoming any barrier is recognizing that one may exist, be it self-imposed or enforced by others (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Bjork, 2000; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Muñoz et al., 2014; Pew Research Center, 2018; Wyland, 2016). The pipeline argument has been offered as a solution to help women overcome these barriers but has not proven to guarantee attainment of the top seat. Researchers who have studied this phenomenon have attributed the absence of women leaders to leaks in the pipeline caused by external

and internal factors (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Shapiro et at., 2015).

Career decisions and personal factors can increase the likelihood of women's access to leadership positions inside and outside their organization (Christman & McClennan, 2008; DiCanio, 2016; Jeffords, 2008; Muñoz et al., 2014; Olsen, 2006). Findings from several studies showed that career paths to the superintendency differed in men and women: Men tend to take the customary track to the superintendency through secondary principalships, and a majority of women are positioned in a nontraditional track as elementary school principals (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Kim & Brunner, 2009). Role models, mentors, and networking were identified as influential factors for women who succeeded in accessing the top job. These breakthrough women identified mentorship as important, but more importantly, having the "right" mentor helped them navigate norms embedded in their organization in accessing the superintendency or senior-level positions (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Freeley & Seinfeld, 2010; Muñoz et al., 2014; Sherman, Muñoz, & Pankake, 2008). Finally, personal factors such as internal drivers like determination, perseverance, and resilience were identified as motivators for women in dealing with personal and institutional challenges in attaining leadership positions.

Although the foundational and related literature discussed in this chapter have provided valuable information, further research is necessary to obtain insights into how women become school superintendents. Learning from the personal narratives of women who have been successful in overcoming challenges and breaking barriers can be the foundation for action and change for other women. Given the preceding review of the

literature and current research, the next chapter provides a review of the methods used to understand the lived experiences of women who have gained access to the male-dominated school superintendency. Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the research methodology, conceptual framework, data collection and analysis, limitations, and ethical guidelines.

Chapter III

Methodology

In this study I used a qualitative narrative design to explore the experiences of five female superintendents to capture the lived experiences of women who had successfully secured a school superintendency. My primary reason for conducting a qualitative study was to acquire an understanding of a specific phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because the aim of this study was to understand the experiences of breakthrough women who had attained the superintendency, I selected a nonprobability purposive sampling, which allowed me to collect in-depth information from each participant, gain insight, and learn about the phenomenon directly from those who had experienced it. Research questions emanated from themes emerging in the literature related to factors that can advance or hinder the process of securing a school superintendency. These factors included challenges, career pathways, networking, and gender bias (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Glenn et al., 2009; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Maranto et al., 2018; Muñoz et al., 2014; Tallerico, 2000).

Theories of feminism, social networking, and gatekeeping provided the framework for the study. Chapter 3 opens with the research purpose and the research questions followed by the research methodology; the rationale for using a qualitative research design, specifically a narrative approach; and the researcher's role and its potential to affect the research. Subsequent sections describe the sample design, data collection, data analysis, evidence of validity, and limitations of the research.

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of a conceptual framework, which connects concepts, beliefs, assumptions, biases, and theories to investigate the phenomenon under consideration, is to explain the focus of any research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The phenomenon of interest in this study was how female superintendents secured their positions in a male-dominated field. I inserted feminist theory into the discussion of the superintendency by including gender and by presenting the experiences of women in the role (Grogan, 2000). I used Lewin's gatekeeper theory as the primary means to explain how biases impact the upward mobility of individuals and social network theory to draw attention to power relations and the influential networks necessary to increase access to the position (Muñoz et al., 2014).

Proponents of the pipeline argument, introduced in the 1990s, suggested that a substantial number of women entering the pipeline over time would lead to a significant number of women rising to higher-level positions in their organizations (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). The review of the literature has shown, however, that as women move through the pipeline, they encounter factors that can either advance or hinder their progress in securing a superintendency. Challenges, career paths, networking, and gender bias are the influential factors appearing in Figure 1 as key constructs in the pipeline. Figure 1 also illustrates that the potential for women to attain leadership positions is promising because they constitute a majority of the teaching ranks, yet despite their aspiration to leadership roles, they encounter hurdles from both internal (personal) and external sources. Notably, women face inherent challenges as they struggle with internal conflicts and their desire to pursue leadership roles (Diamond, 2009). For many women,

the job is unattractive because the demands of the position can conflict with family responsibilities. Conflicting desires can result in both self-imposed barriers and career-path decisions that put women at a disadvantage in securing school superintendencies (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Muñoz et al., 2014). A comparison of men's and women's career pathways to the superintendency showed that the secondary-school path taken by most men creates more work-related experiences and visibility for career advancement (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Figure 1 shows that women occupy 54% of principalships in K–12 education; however, of those female principals, 68% are elementary principals and only 32% are secondary principals. The importance of these numbers is that the elementary-principal career track is not the customary track to the superintendency. Secondary principalships are considered line positions that provide more exposure to power networks and job-related experiences that lead to a faster track to the superintendency. Elementary principalships tend to carry less clout in a school district, are considered staff positions, and tend to provide little access to the same networks, resulting in a less direct route to the superintendency and necessitating more jobs on the path to the position.

More leaks in the pipeline can occur when women align themselves with networks functioning under limited capacity or are unable to access influential networks because of the administrative position held. Networks with limited capacity lack the influential players necessary to help women secure the position, and their mentoring experiences lack the needed action-oriented support from experienced school leaders (Muñoz et al., 2014; Sherman et al., 2008). A review of the literature has also shown that opportunity and power play a role in career mobility (Kanter, 1977; Kim & Brunner,

2009; Muñoz et al., 2014). Connecting women with active mentors is essential in the development of their leadership abilities and necessary to increase opportunities in career mobility for them (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Daresh, 2004).

Personal preparedness and one's attitude toward the pursuit of the superintendency represent potential leaks in securing the top job. Studies have shown that men are more tenacious when applying for a superintendent position, applying for positions numerous times after a rejection; whereas women tend to give up after an initial rejection (DiCinio et al., 2016; Muñoz et al., 2014). As for the potential to secure the position, more men hold a superintendent's license than women. During the 2018–2019 school year in Ohio, the percentages of women and men employed in K–12 positions who held an active superintendent license was 38% and 62%, respectively (Ohio Department of Education, 2019).

Other hurdles women must overcome include a gap in the perception of female candidates' qualifications and the perceived requirements of the job. Because men have traditionally held the position of superintendent, "the think leader–think male phenomenon can foster bias against women" (Schein, 2001, p. 676) as a result of a "lack of fit between the perceived requirements of the job and the abilities typically attributed to women as a group . . . can be responsible for gender-biased judgments or behaviors" (Sczensy, 2003, p. 354). These gender-biased judgments can have a negative effect in the selection process for aspiring female school superintendents. Figure 1 represents leaks in the pipeline caused by factors women encounter in their personal and professional lives that affect career advancement decisions and opportunities.
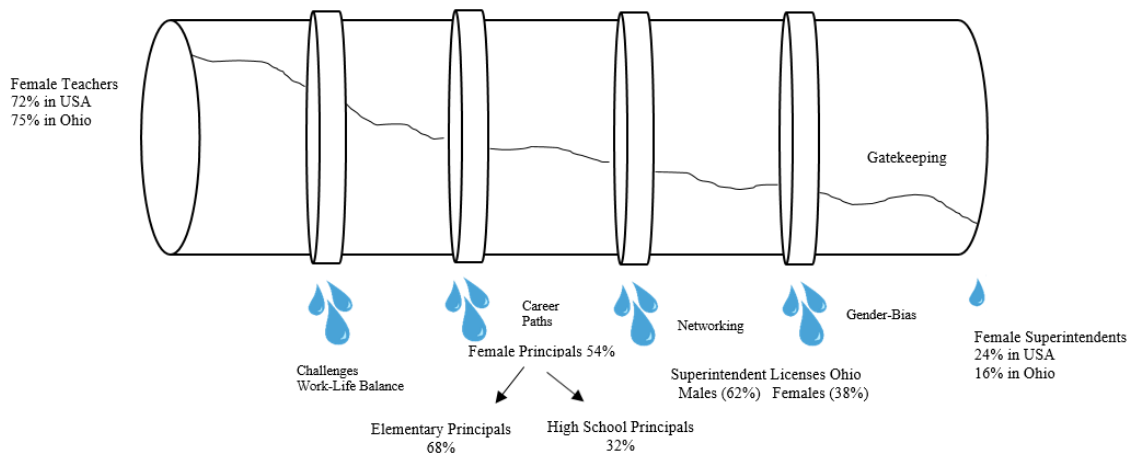
Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Leaks in the leadership pipeline. The figures at upper left and lower right contrast percentages of women in education with women in school superintendencies nationwide and in Ohio (*2019 Ohio by the Numbers*, n.d.; Domenech, 2012; Ohio Department of Education, 2019; Taie & Goldring, 2017). Influential factors that can advance or hinder the process of moving through the pipeline are shown as key constructs, including challenges, career paths, networking, and gender bias.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of five female superintendents and explore the means by which they overcame challenges and successfully secured male-dominated positions. Understanding how these women were able to overcome challenges and navigate the process successfully may support other women who wish to pursue superintendencies. This study was designed to support female administrators by providing much-needed information on career paths that can increase the probability of their securing a superintendency, identify mentors and networks that can assist with career path decisions, respond to internal and external challenges women face as school leaders, and identify strategies to overcome adversity in achieving personal and professional goals.

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The central research question for the study was as follows: What can be learned from the lived experiences of women who advanced to the superintendency in Ohio's public school systems? The following subquestions were used to support the central question:

1. How did gender and race affect the search and selection process for five female superintendents?

2. What role did networking play in advancing the five women to the position of superintendent?

3. What barriers did the five female superintendents encounter as they pursued the superintendency?

4. What attributes of the five female superintendents allowed them to overcome barriers?

5. What internal drivers motivated the five women to pursue leadership positions?

Table 2 shows the alignment of the interview questions to the research questions and proposed constructs.

Table 2

Alignment of Constructs With Research and Interview Questions

Construct	Definition	Research Question	Interview Question
Career Pathway	Defined by decisions made, roles held along the way, and the level of employment that influences the probability of entering the superintendency	What can be learned from the lived experiences of women who advanced to the superintendency in Ohio's public school system?	I am interested in your journey to the superintendency. Please describe your career progression. Please tell me about your decision to

Construct	Definition	Research Question	Interview Question
	(Davis & Bowers, 2019)		become a superintendent. What made you decide to use your superintendent's license?
Gender Bias	Preference for one gender over another; career and promotion pipe-lines shaped by narrow gender norms (Maranto, et al., 2018)	How did gender affect the search and selection process for five female superintendents?	Please tell me about your experience with the search process for superintendent positions. As you reflect on the interview process, do any specific instances or questions related to beliefs or attitudes about being a woman come to mind?
Intersectionality Bias	Ways in which race and gender overlap to compound the problem of discrimination for Black women (Crenshaw, 1991)	How did gender and race affect the search and selection process for five female superintend-dents?	Did other factors impede the recruitment and selection process?
Networking	Key players such as mentors and sponsors that are crucial in establishing the influential networks necessary to create access to a leadership position (Munoz et al., 2014)	What role did networking play in advancing the five women to the position of superintendent?	What people or experiences contributed to your desire to be a superintendent? Have you had any mentors, sponsors, or networks that you believe assisted you in your career path? If so, please describe.

Construct	Definition	Research Question	Interview Question
Challenge	Any factor or obstacle that hinders career advancement to the next level in administration or management (Shakeshaft, 1998)	What barriers did the five females superintendents encounter as they pursued the superintendency?	What barriers affected your career decisions? What, if anything, did you find most challenging about securing a superintendency?
Motivation	The inner strength that powers an individual's growth and persistence toward achieving personal and professional goals (Barsh & Yee, 2012)	What internal drivers motivated the five women to pursue leadership positions? What attributes of the five female superintendents allowed them to overcome barriers?	What strategies did you use to overcome any barriers in your journey to the superintendency? What characteristics do you think aspiring female superintend-dents need to over-come adversity?

Research Design

I selected a qualitative research design and narrative approach for this study to capture the lived experiences of women who had been successful in securing a superintendency. Although I could have used a preexisting survey instrument to gather data related to the experiences of female superintendents, I intended to gain a deeper understanding by allowing participants the freedom to express feelings and emotions about their experiences as female leaders. "Qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6); and a narrative approach allows the researcher to explore the life of an individual or individuals by using

storytelling as a source of data (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research accommodates "a

literary, flexible style that conveys stories [and facilitates an understanding of] the

contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue"

(Creswell, 2013, p. 48). The following characterize qualitative research: (a) The data is

collected from participants in a natural setting; (b) the researcher is the key instrument in

the collection of data; (c) multiple methods are used to collect data from multiple sources;

(d) the process is inductive; (e) the researcher seeks to understand the meaning of

participants' experiences; and (f) an interest in power relations produces questions on the

way an educational system is organized, who has the authority to make changes, and

what outcomes are produced by the structure of the institution (Creswell, 2013).

I developed interview questions by selecting constructs that emerged from the

literature review in order to assure the inclusion of influential factors that can advance or

hinder the process of securing a school superintendency. Key elements included

challenges, career pathways, networking, and gender bias (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Davis &

Bowers, 2019; Glenn et al., 2009; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Maranto et al., 2018;

Muñoz et al., 2014; Tallerico, 2000). Interview questions were reviewed by the

Youngstown State University Institutional Review Board prior to data gathering to ensure

that the well-being of each participant was protected. The interview questions

demonstrated strong reliability and internal validity as a result of their repeatability across

participants. The internal validity of the interview questions was enhanced by

implementing a preparatory research process in which a nonparticipating female

superintendent reviewed the intended interview questions for clarity and

comprehensibility. Any unclear interview questions were reworded prior to final research implementation.

The outcomes of the research emerged as I gained further insights during the collection and analysis of the data emanating from the participants' stories (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An interpretive framework is also useful in qualitative research to frame both social science and social justice theories (Creswell, 2013). The field notes, interviews, and other interpretive practices that are part of qualitative research help the observer organize and make meaning of the self-reflective stories of the participants (Creswell, 2013). This research was designed to illustrate the various truths of female superintendents' experiences as opposed to looking for one impartial view of the phenomenon (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013).

Rationale for Narrative Approach

A narrative approach for this study was most suitable because it allowed me to explore in depth what career decisions helped or hindered career progression in securing a superintendency, challenges faced by the participants, and the networks the five women used during their journeys. Narrative research, which originated from a broad range of academic tradition in sociology, anthropology, literature, health sciences, and cultural studies, has since been a selected method of research for a wide range of other purposes (Guest et al., 2013). Narratives can derive from various sources of stories that represent a sequence of events or accounts captured while collecting data from interviews or observations or from written forms of expression (Guest et al., 2013). When generating narratives, questions are designed to stimulate stories from individuals and to investigate how their stories relate to the greater culture (Creswell, 2007).

Narrative studies typically involve two approaches. In the first approach, the researcher generates descriptions of themes consistent across different types of stories; the researcher then collects descriptions of events and arranges them in a storyline (Creswell, 2007). The second approach highlights the diversity of forms used in narrative research practices, such as a biographical study, autobiographical study, and the life history study. I selected a biographical form for this study because it allowed me to write and record the experiences of women's journeys in securing superintendencies.

Narrative researchers take an informal approach to the collection of information, using the following suggested steps:

1. determine [whether narrative research best fits] the research problem,

2. select one or more individuals who have a story to tell,

3. collect information with the intent of understanding the context of the individual's life (background, setting, and personal experiences),

4. analyze the participants' stories and reorganize the stories into a framework that makes sense, and finally

5. collaborate with the participants. (Creswell, 2007, pp. 55–57)

Feminist research centers on capturing the problematic, diverse issues women face with the institutions—social and political—that frame those situations (Creswell, 2013). The goal of feminist research is "to establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification, and to conduct research that is transformative" (Creswell, 2013, p. 29). For feminist researchers, gender is an organizing principle, the purpose of which is to correct misrepresentation or biased

views, a step important in ending the uneven social positions of women; furthermore, the

questions they pose are central to raising an awareness of the issues women face.

Table 3 shows the alignment of Creswell's (2012, p. 514) steps with those taken in this

research study.

Table 3

Steps in Conducting Narrative Research

Steps in Conducting Narrative Research (Creswell, 2012)	Alignment of Creswell's Steps to This Research Study
Step 1: Identify a phenomenon to explore that addresses an educational problem.	The phenomenon of interest for this study was how female superintendents secured the position in a male-dominated field. The position of superintendent is one of the most influential roles in a school district. If women are absent from the superintendency, their voices are limited in policy, educational decisions, and practices that impact the lives of the nation's schoolchildren.
Step 2: Purposefully select an individual(s) from whom you can learn about the phenomenon.	Because the aim of this study was to understand the journey of breakthrough women who attained a superintendency, I selected a nonprobability purposive sampling that included five female superintendents in Ohio currently holding the position.
Step 3: Collect stories from that individual/s that reflect personal and social experiences. • Have them tell their story. • Collect other field text	The experiences of five female superintendents were collected to capture their stories about successfully securing superintendencies. I developed research and interview questions from constructs emerging from the literature review, including challenges, career pathways, networking, and gender bias. I kept researcher notes and a reflexive journal.

Steps in Conducting Narrative Research (Creswell, 2012)	Alignment of Creswell's Steps to This Research Study
Step 4: Restory or retell the individual's story • Build in past, present, and future • Build in place or setting • Describe their story • Analyze their story for themes	I developed a brief profile for each participant. The semistructured interviews I conducted lasted no longer than 120 minutes with each participant. Data were analyzed through both predefined (deductive) and emergent themes (inductive). The deductive part of the analysis began with a review of the raw data for the existence or absence of the predetermined themes (challenges, career pathways, networking, and gender bias). I employed a constant comparative method, in which the analysis of each interview was completed before proceeding to the next one, allowing for the comparison of one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences among the participants' responses. The data were then grouped by similarities, assigned a temporary name, and then designated as a category. The overall objective of this method was to identify patterns in the participants' responses. Inductively, I used an iterative process to reread transcripts, relisten to the audio, and reexamine my notes and journal entries to determine potential themes.
Step 5: Collaborate with the participant storyteller in all phases of research.	Each participant completed a demographic questionnaire. Then I sent each a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview, conducted an interview of up to 120 minutes with each one, and initiated the member checking process at the completion of each interview.

Steps in Conducting Narrative Research (Creswell, 2012)	Alignment of Creswell's Steps to This Research Study
Step 6: Write a story about the participant's personal and social experiences.	I wrote the story of participants' individual experiences, incorporating literature and research studies and the analysis of specific themes that emerged from their stories. I used a pseudonym for each participant.
Step 7: Validate the accuracy of the report.	To establish credibility for this study, I used the following strategies: a purposive sampling of participants, triangulation, reflective commentary, member check, and advisor and peer scrutiny. Other steps included analysis of the interview, given to each participant to check for accuracy of content. In addition, I used a data-oriented audit trail approach.

Target Population

A target population is the group of individuals or a group of organizations with shared attributes that researchers can identify and from whom or which they select a sample to study for making generalizations about a particular population (Creswell, 2012). For this study, the target population was female superintendents in the state of Ohio, drawn from directory information from the Ohio Department of Education and crossed checked with directory information from the Buckeye Association of School Administrators.

Sample Design

Decisions about locations or individuals to include in a research study are known as sampling (Maxwell, 2013). The sample design selected depends on the type of research being conducted. In quantitative research, probability—or random—sampling is used when each member has an equal opportunity for selection; it allows for results to be

generalized to a greater population. In contrast, qualitative research involves purposive

sampling, a smaller sample size, in which the generalization of results is not likely based

on the small number of participants in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The sampling size for this study was small; thus, the results are not meant to be

generalized. A purposive sampling of five female superintendents from districts of

various sizes and regions in the state of Ohio were used for this study to help connect the

findings to those who review the results. In sampling "the inquirer selects individuals and

sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research

problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 156); furthermore,

purposive sampling focuses on the who, not the what, and allows the researcher to collect

in-depth information from several individuals (Creswell, 2013). The aim of this study

was to understand the journey of breakthrough women who attained the superintendency,

so I selected a nonprobability purposive sampling, which allowed me to collect in-depth

information, gain insight, and learn about the phenomenon first-hand. The main criteria

for the sample design were as follows: female participants currently serving as

superintendents in public school systems in Ohio.

<div align="center">**Procedures**</div>

Recruitment and Access

Upon approval from the Internal Review Board (IRB) at Youngstown State

University to study female school superintendents, I created a pool of potential

candidates to be interviewed, using the following criteria:

- The potential candidate must be a woman.

- The potential candidate must be a superintendent currently working in a public school district in the state of Ohio.

- The potential candidate will be selected from districts of various sizes and regions in the state of Ohio as defined by the typology codes of the Ohio Department of Education.

I accessed a list of potential participants from directory information from the Ohio Department of Education cross-checked with that of the Buckeye Association of School Administrators. I sent an email invitation (Appendix B) to each candidate accompanied by a consent form (Appendix C) outlining the following information: a statement that the study involves research, an explanation of the purpose of the study, expected duration of participation, a description of the procedures to be followed, potential benefits and risks from participation in the study, a statement of data confidentiality, the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, contact information for any pertinent questions to be answered, and a statement that participation in the study was voluntary.

After the potential candidates had responded to the email and agreed to participate, I sent a demographic questionnaire to each participant to complete (Appendix D). They selected a date and time for the interview from a list of potential dates shared between the participant and the researcher.

Data Collection

In qualitative research, interviews, observations, and analysis of documents are sources the researcher uses to collect data. The interview is a widely used method in which a one-on-one meeting allows the researcher to obtain specific information from participants involved in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Individual interview. "The key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions; asking good questions takes practice" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 117). The type of questions asked of participants and the manner in which the questions are presented affect the type of information the researcher receives from the participants. The following types of questions have been suggested:

1. experience and behavior questions that elicit what a person does as well as actions describing behaviors,

2. opinion and value questions that draw out beliefs and opinions,

3. feelings questions that are answered with adjectives,

4. knowledge questions on factual experience with a situation or issue,

5. sensory questions that are more specific than behavior questions, and

6. background and demographic questions about factors like age and job.

    (Patton, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 118)

In qualitative research, most questions are semistructured and driven by the focus of the study. An interview guide (list of questions) is recommended and should contain specific questions asked of all participants and include open-ended questions that may require follow up.

Over several weeks, I conducted semistructured interviews using the online system known as Blackboard Collaborate. I sent the questions to each participant three to seven days before the interview to assist in their reflection on their journey to the superintendency (Appendix E). Interviews lasted no longer than 120 minutes, as indicated on the consent form, allowing each participant ample time to elaborate on her responses. I recorded all interviews on Blackboard Collaborate and then uploaded them

to Microsoft Stream, which generated a written transcript. I saved these transcripts under the pseudonyms assigned to the participants and used a privacy setting to protect anonymity. In addition, if a participant used her name, any identifiers, or any other names in the interview, all were changed in all transcriptions and narratives shared in final reports. Responses were also reported anonymously so as not to identify any one particular participant when the data were ultimately reported. Notably, these precautions took place because participants required assurance that their anonymity was protected at all times.

To ensure repeatability across groups, I asked the same series of interview questions of each superintendent, questions I created by using themes emerging from the literature review, including challenges, career paths, networking, and gender bias. I used an identical process and detailed procedure for each interview, gathering, reporting, and analyzing data to ensure reliability in the study. In some situations, clarifying questions were required to understand the responses of the superintendents under study.

Guided by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), I asked the following questions of each participant involved in the study (Appendix E):

1. I am interested in your journey to the superintendency. Please describe your professional career progression.

2. Please tell me about your decision to become a superintendent. What made you decide to use your superintendent's license?

3. Please tell me about your experience with the search process for superintendent positions?

4. As you reflect on the interview process, do any specific instances or questions related to beliefs or attitudes about being a woman come to mind?

5. Did other factors impede the recruitment or selection process?

6. What people or experiences contributed to your desire to be a superintendent?

7. Have you had any mentors, sponsors, or networks that you believe assisted you in your career path? If so, please describe.

8. What barriers affected your career decisions?

9. What, if anything, did you find most challenging about securing a superintendency?

10. What strategies did you use to overcome any barriers in your journey to the superintendency?

11. What characteristics do you think aspiring female superintendents need to overcome adversity?

After all questions were answered, I informed each participant that the recording of the interview and field notes would cease. I then thanked each one and informed her that an analysis of her interview would be sent for her review to verify the accuracy of the information collected. Upon completion of the interview process, I secured all materials, including field notes, recordings, and any other documents in a safe location until I transcribed and analyzed them. Within 24 hours of the interview, I sent a thank you email to each participant (Appendix F). Within seven days of each interview, I

emailed an analysis of the participant's interview to give her an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the information (Appendix G).

Researcher's notes and reflexive journal. During the interviews, I wrote notes on my observations of the stories told. To maintain integrity in qualitative research, the concept of reflexivity is a strategy used by the researcher in "which the writer is conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that he or she brings to the qualitative research study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 216). I kept a reflexive journal to prevent the influence of any bias or assumptions I potentially brought to the research process. Reflexivity involves two parts: The first deals with the researcher's personal experiences with the phenomenon, and the second, with the way those experiences shape the interpretation of that phenomenon (Creswell, 2013), for example, events from the researcher's work, education, and family history.

Data storage. Digital and written interview data were placed in a storage room in a locked file cabinet at the Beeghly College of Education at Youngstown State University, where they were to remain for at least three years. Written documents were kept on file in a personal location under lock and key for three years and then properly shredded and discarded per university policy, in accordance with 45 CRF 46.155[b]. Digital files were stored in a password-protected Dropbox account accessible only to the principal and subinvestigator at Youngstown State University. Any personal recorded digital files were destroyed promptly after data were analyzed. This included all interview data stored on digital recorders, phones, or other electronic devices. These procedures aligned with the guidelines set forth by both the American Psychological Association and Youngstown State University.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data collection and analysis are simultaneous activities; a qualitative study is emergent because "the researcher usually does not know ahead of time every person who might be interviewed, all the questions that might be asked, or where to look next unless data are analyzed as they are being collected" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 195). The data analysis process, which can be described as a spiral, in which the researcher "moves in analytic circles rather than in a fixed linear approach" (Creswell, 2013, p. 182), consists of a series of loops in which data management is the first loop in the process, followed by reading and memoing, describing, classifying, interpreting data into codes and themes, and finally, representing and visualizing the data. In narrative research, analysis and representation are of the stories told, the development of themes, the use of a chronology, and at times, these result in turning points or moments of epiphany.

The data analyzed in this study primarily derived from the transcription of the interviews with additional data from my notes and reflexive journal. In examining the data, I looked for themes directly gathered in the interviews and themes that lay just below the surface of each participant's story. When conducting narrative analysis, the researcher can analyze data through both predefined (deductive) and emergent themes (inductive) (Creswell, 2013). For this study, I used both deductive and inductive approaches as shown in Figure 2 the predefined themes emerged from the literature review.

Discovery	Totally Inductive	Beginning
↓		↓
Discovery and Verifying	Both Inductive and Deductive	Midway
↓		↓
Testing and Confirming	Primarily Deductive	End
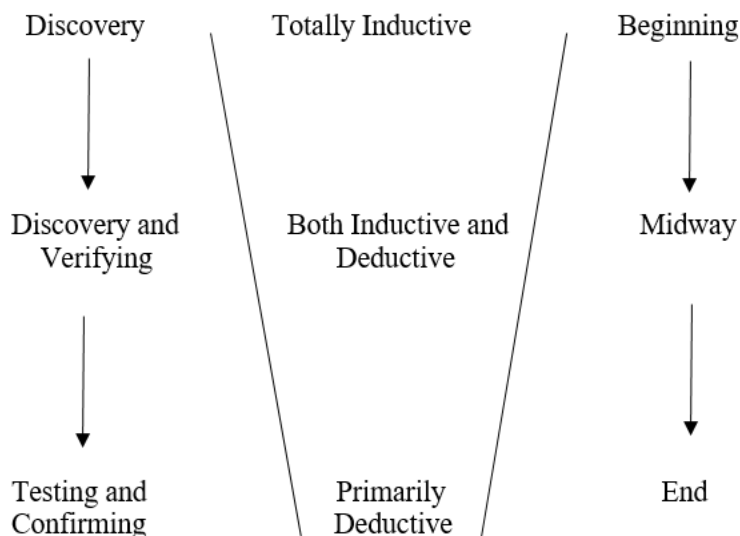
Figure 2. The logic of data analysis in qualitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

I began the data analysis process by creating a profile for each participant in the study (Seidman, 2006). The data to be analyzed derived from stories told by the participants. The deductive part of the analysis began with a review of the raw data for the presence or absence of the predetermined themes described in the literature review. Deductively, the analysis of participants' journeys to the superintendency focused on key themes of career paths, gender bias, networking, challenges, and motivation.

The current study also accommodated themes emerging inductively. After I examined transcripts for the presence or absence of the predetermined themes, I used an iterative process that included rereading transcripts, and relistening to the audio to determine potential themes. Following each interview, I performed a complete analysis of the interview data before proceeding on to the next interview. Thus, I used a constant comparative method of data analysis in which I compared one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences among the participants' responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data were then grouped by similarities, assigned a

temporary name, and then designated as a category. The overall objective of this method was to identify patterns in the participants' responses. The following themes emerged based on their responses: a strong sense of self and the glass maze.

Positionality Statement

One strategy to establish credibility in a qualitative inquiry is the inclusion of a positionality statement (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The findings of qualitative research are dependent upon the way the researcher makes sense of the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the participants, and as the primary instrument, the researcher must also be conscious of her or his role and position as it relates to the topic under study. As the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, I recognized that my own experiences, assumptions, and biases could affect the findings. My position relative to the study on women in school superintendencies appears below.

I am a current school superintendent who has held the position for 10 years. My interest in this study began as a reflection on my journey to the superintendency as a female educator. Before pursuing a position in administration, I spent many successful years as a teacher in the classroom, where I thought I would spend my career in the classroom, until I was encouraged by two influential people in my life: my husband and my father. They encouraged me to pursue credentials to become a school administrator. This encouragement came as a surprise because I was already a working mother of three school-aged children. To seek an administrative position would mean more responsibilities, longer days, and other challenges associated with balancing a career and family responsibilities.

After the completion of a master's degree in administration, I was ready to take the leap from the classroom into administration. I had been working as a teacher in a nonpublic school setting and decided the next logical step was to apply for assistant principal positions in a public school setting. I chose this route because I thought doing so would present more opportunities for career advancement; however, landing my first public school administrative job was not an easy task. I always did well enough to make it to the final round but never landed the job. I eventually gave up this route to school administration and decided to take a teaching position in a public school district. I reasoned that I would have to prove myself as an internal candidate to secure my first administrative job. The move paid off: After two short years, I landed an assistant principal position in that district. After appointment to my first administrative job, I quickly ascended the ranks to building principal, central office director, and assistant superintendent within 10 years.

Like many women, I did not enter the field of education, thinking that I would be a principal, let alone a school superintendent. The aspiration for this leadership role developed as I gained experience in each of my administrative positions. I loved being a building principal because it allowed me to continue working with children and their families regularly. I thought this administrative position would be the last in my journey; however, I found that the same commitment I had for providing the best opportunities for my students was what drove me to expand my scope of influence in pursuing central office positions and eventually the superintendency.

While on this journey, I experienced some of the same internal and external barriers noted in the literature. As a wife and mother of three very involved children, I

tried to find the "right" work–family life balance; but simultaneously dedicating myself to be the best wife, mother, and leader proved challenging at times. As noted above, my aspirations toward leadership roles did not develop until later in my career. As a former elementary teacher and elementary building principal, I found myself outside the typical career path to the superintendency; furthermore, being a woman brought additional challenges. Throughout my administrative career, I have experienced both overt and implied gender stereotyping. As a result of these experiences, I recognized that bias may exist in board members, search firms, or other administrators who have limited experience with female leaders. As one who has gained access to the superintendency, I believe women need strong support systems to help them develop their careers and create opportunities to pursue leadership roles. Women may never be able to overcome all the internal and external barriers they face in pursuit of their leadership aspirations; however, as a female leader, I believe a step in the right directions is to assist women to acknowledge their own leadership potential, develop successful models, and recognize the complexity of their lived experiences.

Trustworthiness

Research studies are typically designed to generate valid and reliable information in an ethical manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In quantitative research studies, internal validity entails the outcomes of the study measuring the study's original intent (Frisbie, 2005). The measurement of internal validity in qualitative research differs from that in quantitative studies because the trustworthiness of the study depends on the credibility of the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The main reason for conducting qualitative research is to gain an understanding of a phenomenon. Concepts like internal validity,

external validity, reliability, and objectivity used in quantitative research are replaced with credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative studies. Validity

> is never something that can be proved or taken for granted. Validity is also
>
> relative: It has to be assessed in relation to the purposes and circumstances of the
>
> research, rather than being a context-independent property of methods or
>
> conclusions. (Maxwell, 2013, p. 121)

Because the researcher is both the primary collector of information and interpreter of data in qualitative studies, most would agree this method is closer to capturing the reality of the data than if an instrument had been interjected between participant and researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The six basic strategies a researcher can use to address internal validity in qualitative research include triangulation, member checks, adequate engagement in data collection, peer examination, reflexivity (researcher's position), and participatory modes of research.

Preparatory Research

To gain an understanding of women's experiences in obtaining a superintendency, I developed interview questions by selecting constructs emerging in the literature review coinciding with factors influential in advancing or hindering the process of securing the position: Career pathways, gender bias, networking, challenges, and motivation were all reflected in the interview questions used for this study because they appeared regularly in the literature (Barsh & Yee, 2012; Davis & Bowers, 2019; Glenn et al., 2009; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017; Maranto et al., 2018; Muñoz et al., 2014; Tallerico, 2000). Using these

constructs, I attempted to improve my understanding of the factors that can influence a women's ability to access the male-dominated position of a superintendent.

Prior to the data collection process, a female superintendent not participating in the research study reviewed all interview questions for clarity and understanding. This step helped (a) to ensure that the final interview questions were administered reliably to all participants and (b) to control for internal validity with participants given the clearest and most coherent version of the interview questions to be asked. During this process, any interview question that may have been unclear was reworded to improve the clarity and understanding of the intended question.

Credibility

Throughout a research study, researchers must ensure both the accuracy and the credibility of their findings and interpretation: these are critical to the validity of a study (Creswell, 2012). A key area addressed by a researcher is internal validity, designed to determine whether or not the study measured what it was intended to measure (Shenton, 2004). Terms like *authenticity* and *trustworthiness* are used to describe the credibility of a qualitative study, and qualitative researchers use several strategies to validate the information recorded in a study (Creswell, 2012). Not every strategy is appropriate to use in a study, so the researcher must "decide what specific validity threats are most serious and plausible and what strategies are best able to deal with these" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 125). To establish credibility for this study, I used the following strategies: a selection of participants, triangulation, reflective commentary, member check, and advisor and peer scrutiny.

Selection of Participants

The sample design selected depends on the type of research conducted. In quantitative research, a probability and random sampling approach is commonly used to prevent bias and allows for results to be generalized to a greater population (Maxwell, 2013). Using random sampling for this study could, however, produce a negative effect. Because "the researcher has no control over the choice of informants, it is possible that quiet, uncooperative, or inarticulate individuals may be selected" (Shenton, 2001, p. 65). The aim of this study was to understand the journey of breakthrough women who secured the superintendency; therefore, a nonprobability purposive sampling was selected to help support the credibility of the study by locating participants who best aligned with the nature of it. In addition, the participants had to be willing to share and articulate their life experiences; this allowed me to collect in-depth information, gain insight, and learn about the phenomenon through the experiences of the women interviewed. The participants were chosen based on specific criteria (currently employed female superintendents in the state of Ohio) to prevent any bias in their selection.

Triangulation

Triangulation, which is a strategy for collecting data from various sources using multiple methods (Maxwell, 2013), involves an examination of each information source to determine whether evidence exists to support a given theme (Creswell, 2012). The use of triangulation in a qualitative study helps reduce bias and ensures that the study is more accurate because it draws from multiple sources. Triangulation as a strategy can also increase the internal validity of a study because the researcher uses multiple data collection methods, sources of data, and theories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this

study, the individual interview was the primary method used to elicit stories and to uncover the thinking process of the participants, objectives that could not have been accomplished by administering a survey instrument. In terms of data, I collected from multiple sources, including interview recordings, transcripts, my notes, and journal entries. I achieved site triangulation by collecting data from participants from several school districts, enabling me to obtain a variety of perceptions of their experiences, thus enhancing the accuracy of their depiction of reality (Dervin, 1983).

Reflective Commentary

In addition to using outside scrutiny, a researcher can reflect on her or his writing to monitor developing constructs (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In my case the production of a reflective journal was ongoing, kept to ensure that findings were from the participants' experiences and not the preferences of my own experiences. Any preliminary assumptions that did not emerge from the study were acknowledged and eliminated.

Member Check

A second strategy used to raise credibility in a qualitative study is member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), a strategy involving the researcher sharing findings with participants to check for the accuracy of reported information (Creswell, 2012). A researcher can check for the accuracy of data with the participants through writing, interviews, and focus groups. The researcher should (a) share the preliminary analysis of descriptions or themes with participants rather than the transcripts from the interviews and (b) check for both accuracies and to see what may be missing from the report (Creswell, 2013). Finally, although the words are those of the researcher, the participants should be able to recognize the account as that of their own experience (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). Participants were made aware of the member checking process after each interview was completed. This process took place either by phone conversation or by email, depending on the availability of each participant.

Advisor and Peer Scrutiny

The researchers should use a third strategy to validate the accuracy of the findings by seeking a person external to the study to ask questions and provide feedback on its strengths and weaknesses (Creswell, 2013). This strategy allows for discussions with an advisor or peers regarding the progression of the study, the compatibility of the emerging findings with the data, and tentative interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Throughout the study, I scheduled periodic meetings with my advisor and committee members, who provided feedback, assisted in identifying potential flaws in the study, and suggested revisions to strengthen the focus of the research (Shenton, 2004). I also sought feedback from colleagues and peers, who brought a variety of views to the study, and allowed me to refine the study where needed.

<div align="center">

Transferability

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External validity, which refers to whether the findings of a study can be generalized to other situations, is a challenging concept for the qualitative researcher because the purpose of the research is to understand in depth the experiences of an individual or a setting, not to discover what is generally known (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). "The general lies in the particular, that is, what we learn in a particular situation we can transfer or generalize to similar situations subsequently encountered" (Merriam &Tisdell, 2016, p. 255). Generalization can happen when the reader of the study can apply what can be learned from the findings. In addition, the researcher can employ

several strategies to enable transferability, including rich, thick description and maximum variation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first one occurs when the researcher provides detailed descriptions that enable readers to make decisions about the transferability of the findings (Creswell, 2013). The second strategy, maximum variation, provides careful consideration of the sample of the study and allows for the selection of a diverse group of individuals; this variation can produce a broad range of applications of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To create maximum variation, I selected a sample of female superintendents, representative of various regions in the state of Ohio and various types of school districts, including urban, suburban, small town, and rural districts as defined by the Ohio Department of Education.

Dependability

Qualitative research deals in human nature, where the researcher tries to describe and explain the world from the perspective of those experiencing it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reliability can be challenging in the social sciences because human behavior is unique, problematizing the way a researcher measures one person's experience as more reliable than another. To address dependability, or reliability, in quantitative research, the researcher must demonstrate that "if the work were repeated, in the same context, with the same methods and with the same participants, similar results would be obtained" (Shenton, 2004, p. 71). For qualitative research, to show that employing the same method will gain similar results can be challenging because the nature of this type of research is context specific. The qualitative researcher can address dependability issues by reporting the process in detail, "thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results" (Shenton, 2004, p. 71). This study provided detailed

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information about the research design, the procedures I followed, participant recruitment and access, the data collecting process, a reflexive journal, and analysis of the data. Regularly scheduled meetings with my dissertation advisor and doctoral committee members also facilitated examination of the methodologies to ensure their dependability in this study.

Confirmability

Confirmability involves the deliberate attempt by the researcher to implement strategies that keep her or him focused on the findings emanating from the participants' and not the researcher's preferences (Shenton, 2004). Triangulation is a strategy that is key to promoting confirmability and helps to reduce bias. A second strategy is the recognition of the researcher's own beliefs and assumptions about the topic that will support confirmability. A third and critical strategy to achieve confirmability is the use of diagrams to establish an audit trail, which allows a reader to follow the steps and decisions made in the study. An audit trail is typically represented diagrammatically and constructed in two ways: data-oriented and theoretically. The former approach shows data that lead to the formation of the recommendations, and the latter approach involves concepts embedded in the research questions that give rise to the body of work. For this study, I employed a data-oriented approach and kept a journal that detailed how data were collected, dates and times of the semistructured interviews, my reflections on the process, questions asked in the study, and how decisions were made with regard to problems, issues, or ideas I encountered in collecting the data.

Limitations

In this study I used an interview method to collect data about five female superintendents' navigation to the position. Using an interview method has some inherent challenges and limitations because the researcher relies on the participants' ability to be open and honest with the researcher and the ability of the participants to articulate and recall their stories accurately. Another limitation is the accuracy of the retelling of the stories by the researcher. The background and personal life of the researcher can cloud the lens through which she or he views the stories of participants, then retells and interprets them (Creswell, 2007); my journey in the pursuit of the superintendency could reinforce my own bias to the study.

Summary

This study provided a detailed description of the methodology used to conduct the study. The purpose of this research was to understand the lived experiences of women's access to the superintendency. Specifically, I used social network theory and feminist theory as a framework to understand their navigation to the top and their lived experiences in gaining access to a male-dominated position.

The main research question was as follows: What can be learned from the lived experiences of women who advanced to the superintendency in Ohio's public school system? The research site encompassed public school districts in the state of Ohio. The criteria for selecting participants were (a) a woman and (b) a current superintendent in a public school district in Ohio.

I conducted qualitative narrative research, designed with both deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis. The process began with an email invitation to

potential candidates explaining the purpose of the study and outlining the level of participation. The online system Blackboard Collaborate was used to conduct the semistructured, individual interviews, lasting no longer than 120 minutes and scheduled at a date and time of the participants' choice. The interviews were transcribed by Microsoft Stream, and an analysis of the interview was sent to each participant for her review and to verify the accuracy of the information.

For data analysis, I used the deductive approach, following the guidelines of data analysis in qualitative studies by Merriman and Tisdell (2016). Deductively, the analysis focused on the leadership experiences of all participants based on predetermined themes emerging from the literature review: challenges, career pathways, networking, and gender bias. My method allowed new themes to emerge through inductive analysis based on the reexamination of all research data in the form of cross-case analysis. Addressing trustworthiness in this study, I used several methods, including an appropriate methodology, a detailed explanation of the methodology used, triangulation of data, reflexive commentary, outside scrutiny and member check as well as rich, thick description, and clarification of researcher bias.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

For this study, five female school superintendents in Ohio shared their lived experiences in securing a superintendent position in a traditionally male-dominated field. The perspectives in this chapter are those of female school superintendents from small to midsized school districts from various regions in Ohio. As the narrative of each female school superintendent's experience unfolded, the subjective meaning of each participant's experiences emerged as related to career decisions, the importance of mentors and networks, and the role of response to challenges in securing a superintendency. Each story also revealed important experiences that helped to shape the leadership style of the participant.

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings related to the main research question: What can be learned from the lived experiences of women who advanced to the superintendency in Ohio's public school system? Findings have been organized by key constructs that emerged from the literature review and from new themes that emerged through inductive analysis using a constant comparative method. This organizing method served as a systematic way to disclose personal insights of each superintendent's experiences.

Recruitment Process

A list of potential participants was identified from directory information provided by the Ohio Department of Education and crossed checked with directory information from the Buckeye Association of School Administrators. If a discrepancy occurred, I visited the school district's website to identify the current school superintendent and to

confirm place of employment. In order to select superintendents from diverse districts, I

added a column to the directory spreadsheet and then listed each female superintendent

next to her district of employment. I then sorted the list by typology code and by female

superintendent to cluster female superintendents by district type. Table 4 provides a

description of typology codes along with the total number of school districts in each area.

The last column shows the number of female superintendents in each category.

Table 4

Ohio School District Typology and School Superintendents

Typology Code	Major Grouping	Full Descriptor	Districts Within Typology	#Female Superintendents
1	Rural	Rural: High Student Poverty & Small Student Population	124	18
2	Rural	Rural: Average Student Poverty & Very Small Student Population	107	13
3	Small Town	Small Town: Low Student Poverty & Small Student Population	111	15
4	Small Town	Small Town: High Student Poverty & Average Student Population Size	89	14
5	Suburban	Suburban: Low Student Poverty & Average Student Population Size	77	14
6	Suburban	Suburban: Very Low Student Poverty & Large Student Population	46	8
7	Urban	Urban: High Student Poverty & Average Student Population	47	11
8	Urban	Urban: Very High Student Poverty & Very Large Student Population	8	3

Once all female superintendents were clustered by typology, I used a random

numbers table to select one potential participant from each of the eight school district

typology areas. I then sent an invitation letter approved by the Youngstown State

University Institutional Review Board to one superintendent in each of the eight typology

code areas. If a potential candidate refused the invitation or did not respond to the

invitation, I used a random numbers table again, starting with the next potential

participant in that category. Once I received a commitment from five school superintendents, at that point, the recruitment process ceased. In the process of securing five participants, 18 invitation letters were sent to potential candidates over a period of one month. Participants were then contacted by email to arrange an interview date and time of their choosing.

Participant Confidentiality

I made every attempt to protect the confidentiality of each participant during the course of the research study, adhering to all guidelines and protocols set forth by the Youngstown University Institutional Review Board throughout the study. My use of the online system Blackboard Collaborate allowed me to conduct the semistructured individual interviews with each superintendent. This format helped to safeguard the confidentiality of answers and the anonymity of those participating. Each participant read and signed the approved Youngstown State University Institutional Review Board informed consent form before the commencement of their interview.

The reporting of all data was generalized so as not to identify individual participants. Pseudonyms appear in final documents to protect the confidentiality of each participant, and no district was identified by name. In addition, if a participant used her name, any identifiers, or any other names during the interview process, the identifying information was changed or generalized in all transcriptions or narratives shared in the final reports. Although participants shared no information during the course of the interviews that could be potentially harmful to their future employment or social well-being in their school district, I took every precaution to protect both confidentiality and anonymity of each participant.

Participant Profiles

Each of the five female school superintendents from public school districts in the state of Ohio who participated in this study completed a demographic questionnaire and engaged in an interview session lasting no longer than 120 minutes. The demographic questionnaire provided personal and professional information (Appendix D). All five participants held a master's degree in educational administration. Three of the five superintendents had secondary backgrounds, teaching English courses at the high school level. The remaining two participants had taught first and sixth grades. The marital status of the participants varied: One participant was divorced, two divorced and remarried, and two were married. With the exception of one participant, all others had children. All participants would be considered middle-aged. Participants averaged 30.3 years' experience in K-12 education and had an average of 16 years of administrative experience. Each of the superintendents was in her first superintendency and collectively they averaged 3.5 years in the position. Table 5 provides a summary of participants' demographics and backgrounds.

Table 5

Demographics and Backgrounds Summary

Name	Age Range	Race	Years as a Super- inten- dent	Years in Adminis- trative Position	Years in K–12 Education	Teaching Certifica- tion	Chil- dren
Catherine	50– 59	White	4	12	38	Secon- dary	2
Sadie	50– 59	White	5.5	21	37	Secon- dary	3
Sophie	50– 59	White	1.5	19	28	K–8	None
Susan	40– 49	White	2	11	27	1–8	2

| Charlotte | 40–49 | White | 4.5 | 17 | 21.5 | Secondary | 3 |
| Average | | | 3.5 | 16 | 30.3 | | |

Superintendent Profiles

The following section contains individual profiles of each participant. The information provided in the profiles was drawn from the demographic questionnaire completed by each participant and from the information shared in their interviews. An analysis of their interview was sent to each participant to verify the accuracy of information reported.

Profile 1: Catherine

Catherine, who was near 60 years of age, had been in the field of education for 38 years and held a permanent teaching license in English Literature 7–12. She began her career as a classroom teacher and spent 24 years teaching high school English. Around her 22nd year of teaching, Catherine decided to earn her administrative license. Motivated by the lack of support and vision from the building administration, she began her administrative career as an assistant principal in the same building where she taught for 14 years.

After one year, Catherine was promoted from assistant principal to high school principal. Her first central office position was as a secondary curriculum director, a role she held for five years before becoming the assistant superintendent of human resources. Catherine was an internal candidate for the open superintendent position in her district. Her decision to apply for the position was motivated by her desire to continue the substantial progress the district had made with educational initiatives; she was appointed

superintendent in the same school district where she had been a classroom teacher. This was Catherine's first superintendency and had been in her current superintendent position for four years. The district had approximately 6,800 students and was considered a suburban school district. Catherine, who secured her first superintendency within five years of obtaining her superintendent's license, was the first women to hold that position in the district.

Profile 2: Sadie

Near 60 years of age, Sadie had been in the field of education for 37 years. She held a teaching degree in English and psychology and had begun her career teaching English at a joint vocational school. Sadie had spent 16 years in the classroom before moving into administration.

Twenty-one of her 37 years had been in various administrative roles, her first as a supervisor at a career tech center, a role she described as similar to that of an assistant principal in a traditional high school setting. Her responsibilities as a supervisor were to oversee business programs and tech prep programs as well as to lead all transitions moving from a vocational model to a career tech model. Sadie advanced from supervisor at the career center to a director position, which resembled the role of a high school principal. Her responsibilities included overseeing academic areas, contract negotiations, levy campaigns, facility renovation, and service on the superintendent's leadership team.

Once Sadie had moved from her director's position to become the assistant superintendent at the career center, she applied for and secured her first superintendency in a neighboring school district, where she had served for 5.5 years, the number of years she has been a school superintendent. Her district was home to over 1,500 students and

was considered a rural school district. Having received her superintendent's license in 2014 and securing her first superintendency one year later, Sadie was the first women to hold the position of superintendent in her district.

Profile 3: Sophie

Sophie, who was in the 50–59 age range, had been in the field of education for 28 years. In addition to her Master's degree in Educational Administration, Sophie held a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction and a teaching certificate for elementary grades K–8. A sixth-grade teacher for nine years, she taught language arts and science.

After nine years in the classroom, Sophie moved into her first administrative position as an assistant principal, assigned to a building among those in greatest need in the district. She remained there for two years before taking on her own building as an elementary principal. Of her 28 years in education, Sophie had spent 19 of those years in administrative roles.

She held several central office positions as a director of teaching and learning, director of academic services, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. All of her administrative positions as well as her teaching experience had been in the same district. Sophie was the superintendent of a fairly large district of over 6,000 students; the district was considered an urban school district. This was her first school superintendency, and she had been in the position for 1.5 years.

Profile 4: Susan

Susan, who was in the 40–49 age range, had been in the field of education for 27 years. Equipped with a teaching certification in elementary grades 1–8, she began her

career as a teacher and spent 15 years teaching first-grade students. For two of those years, she remained with her students and taught second grade.

Susan spent 11 years in administrative positions, her first as an assistant principal in an elementary building, a position she held for four years. She then became a principal of a large elementary building with approximately 900 students. She served in an elementary principalship for three years, a position she considered her favorite.

Susan had no desire to move from her position as an elementary principal; however, her superintendent wanted to bring her into the central office as the district's chief academic officer. The superintendent's background was at the high school level, and he wanted to bring someone into central office who had an elementary background. With the exception of her superintendency, all previous positions held (teaching and administrative) had been in her hometown district, where she attended school as a student and graduated from high school. This was Susan's first school superintendency, which she had held for two years. She was the first women to hold the position of superintendent in her district, which schooled under 1,500 students and was considered rural.

Profile 5: Charlotte

In the 40–49 age range, Charlotte had been in the field of education for nearly 22 years. She held a 7–12 English (Comprehensive Communication) teaching license and started her career teaching high school English, speech, and journalism, teaching students in Grades 9 and 11. While teaching high school English, the athletic director left in the middle of the school year; Charlotte took over that position and served as the assistant principal and the athletic director at the high school. She fully expected to return to the

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classroom at the end of that school year, but that position remained open; and she committed to returning to it for another year.

Charlotte had been a building principal at two different middle schools, one in a neighboring school district and one in the district in which she was the superintendent. After several years of building-level administrative experience, she moved on to district-level administrative positions as the director of academics, assistant superintendent, and finally superintendent. Her district, a midsized school district home to nearly 4,000 students, was categorized as a small town; however, the growing community would be considered a city after the next census. Charlotte secured this position, her first superintendency, within two years of obtaining her superintendent's license.

<div align="center">Summary of Results</div>

The following section provides an overview of the locations where female school superintendents are employed in the state of Ohio. In addition, a review of data collection and data analysis appears.

Female Superintendents in Ohio

To determine the regions in Ohio where female superintendents were employed, I plotted their location by county from the directory database (Figure 3) and retrieved some interesting findings. I found that female school superintendents clustered in the southwestern and northeastern parts of the state. Counties located in central, northwest, and southeastern regions of Ohio showed very few females employed as superintendents.

 Figure 3 illustrates the locations of female school superintendents employed in Ohio during the 2019–2020 school year, specifically the number and percentage of female superintendents in each county. The number noted in each county represents the

total number of female superintendents employed in that county, and the number in parentheses represents the percentage of female school superintendents in each county relative to the total number of school superintendents employed.

Figure 3. Female superintendents by county.

Results indicate that although some counties, such as Cuyahoga and Hamilton, employed seven and six female superintendents, respectively, overall, women still represent only 23% and 27% of all superintendents in those counties. Other counties like Jefferson and Clermont show a lower number of female superintendents; however, women represent 60% and 44% percent of all superintendents in those counties.

Making Sense of the Data

The primary source of data from the study derived from the transcription of participant interviews with additional data from the researcher's notes and reflexive journal. Field notes and electronic recordings taken during each interview ensured the accuracy of the responses given by each participant. I used the online platform Blackboard Collaborate to conduct each interview, using the private setting mode and then uploading to Microsoft Stream for transcription and saved under the participant's pseudonym. After the transcription process was completed, I conducted an analysis of the interview of each participant, who was then sent an analysis of her interview for verification of the accuracy of the information.

Because of the immense volume of data collected during this study, I analyzed the transcripts as they were collected, comparing newly collected data to existing interview data. In addition to the literature review that showed pertinent key constructs, such as career paths, gender bias, networking, and challenges, the current study also allowed for themes to emerge inductively through an iterative process that included rereading transcripts and relistening to the audio to determine potential themes. A constant comparative method of data analysis was used: Upon completion of each interview, data analysis was conducted before moving to the next interview, allowing me to compare one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences among participants' responses. The data were then grouped by similarities, assigned a temporary name, and designated as a category (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The overall objective of this method was to identify patterns in the responses given by participants.

Interviews. The interview questions were sent to participants three to seven days prior to the interview to help prepare them for reflective questions about their experiences. They were free to respond to interview questions based on their comfort level. All chose to elaborate upon their answers, providing several examples that directly facilitated the understanding of their experiences as female school leaders. Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to an hour, and participants appeared to enjoy the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences. Many participants thanked me after the interviews, indicating the process made them reflect on topics they haven't thought about. Several of the participants wrote preparatory notes after receiving the interview questions.

Coding and category creation. I made every attempt to transcribe and analyze each interview immediately after it was completed in order to capture the preciseness or sentiments shared during the interviews. I carefully analyzed each transcript by using both open and axial coding to develop and later refine categories, themes, and important findings based on topics emerging across all interviews and in key findings from the reviewed research. During the open coding process, I created many codes, highlighting the key ideas the superintendents shared during the interviews. Many codes were shared by all of the women studied, but others were unique to specific female leaders. Open codes were then placed into broad categories, such as extensive educational experience, stereotyping, desire to make a greater impact, and advice for women. During this preliminary process referring back to the conceptual framework and literature reviewed in Chapter 2 was helpful, a strategy that would later be repeated as themes and key findings were derived from the data collected.

Broad categories were initially created, but as each interview was conducted, I began to form the categories based on data from multiple participants. For example, after each interview was transcribed, I returned to early interview transcriptions, revising the categorization process to reflect new categories emerging from later interviews. In addition, I compared those findings with those in the reviewed literature to determine whether noticeable qualities of the interview aligned with the current body of literature or whether new findings emerged. By doing so, I was able to ensure that categories were true to what I heard, compared against the body of research. Once this process was completed, key themes and important findings were generated to reflect how the five female superintendents perceived their experiences.

Audit trail. I used an audit trail during this process to document the steps taken and the decisions made in the study. This strategy allowed me to stay focused on the findings to assure the themes and categories selected were those emerging from the participants and not of the researcher's preferences. Keeping an audit trail as a living document helped me to reflect on the process and accommodate the refinement of the categories and themes as they emerged.

Member checking. In addition to an audit trail, I used a member checking process by sharing an analysis of the interview with each participant to check for the accuracy of the information collected was consistent with the intent of the participants' responses. The process also assisted me in checking both for accuracy of the report and what may have been omitted from each interview analysis. In several cases I sent follow-up emails to the participants for additional clarification. During this process the

confidentiality of each participant was protected with the pseudonyms I used throughout the process, and all data tied to each participant was generalized in all reports.

Key Themes

The following themes were developed from the interview transcriptions based on the research question: What can be learned from the lived experiences of women who advanced to the superintendency in Ohio's public school system? Predefined themes provided the foundation for the analysis of participants' narratives: (a) career paths, a theme that revealed each participant's decision-making process and roles held prior to securing a superintendency; (b) experiences related to being a woman; (c) the influence of networking and mentors on career movement; (d) the presence of a strong internal drive that helped these women overcome the challenges they encountered. Besides the predetermined themes, two additional themes emerged from this study through inductive analysis: (a) a strong sense of self and (b) the glass maze. Table 6 shows example codes, categories, and themes.

Table 6

Codes, Categories, and Themes

Example Codes	Category	Theme
Teacher, assistant principal, principal, director, assistant superintendent, superintendent, organizational knowledge, building and district level administrative experience, horizontal movement	Extensive level of educational experience	Career paths (deductive)

Example Codes	Category	Theme
He had been groomed, former superintendent had not seen me as a candidate, you're a women—do you think you can lead, don't need to pay her that much, she's a mom, she's got kids—she's not going anywhere, some men won't be okay being led by a women, she's emotional not passionate	Stereotyping	Gender bias (deductive)
A woman had never held that role before, been purposefully kept out of opportunities to learn, individual mindsets (male), challenges from males in other political subdivisions	Challenges	
Wanting to make a difference, clear focus on students' well-being, desire to make a greater impact, visionary	Desire for change	Internal motivation (deductive)
Goal driven, take on a challenge, refusing to give up or fail, I realize I had to work twice as hard, put my head down and push, prepared and did my homework, did my research so I wouldn't fail	Competitive drive	
Stretched me, pushed me, help me understand how strong I was in a different way, gain confidence, recognizing my abilities, giving me opportunities, pointing me in the right direction, guiding some of my decisions, a sounding board, help keep things in perspective, grounded me	Mentors influential in career movement	Networking (deductive)
Overcome adversity, knowing who I am as a	Breaking barriers through confidence	A strong sense of self (inductive)

Example Codes	Category	Theme
person, found alternative ways, knowing yourself, I know my strengths and weaknesses and how they translate to others, staying true to yourself, be who you are, thinking you have to be someone else, how you can be perceived by others		
Gain confidence through experience, seek support through networks, staying true to yourself, don't take things personally	Advice for women	Glass maze (inductive)
Willingness to give back to help other women, encourage and support other women's success, prevent isolation, lack of women peers in the superintendency	Strong support for leadership development	

The following section explains both the predefined themes that provided the foundation for the analysis of participants' narratives and themes that emerged from the study through inductive analysis. Theme one emphasized how holding several key positions prior to the superintendency built the participants capacity to secure the position. Theme two showed how women can be effected by gender stereotyping. Theme three highlighted the participants strong internal drive to stay focus on their purpose and achieve career goals. Theme four, participants shared how mentors supported their personal and professional growth and influenced their career decisions. Theme five showed how the participants built confidence in their abilities to meet challenges and overcome barriers. Theme six, the participants offered advice to aspiring female leaders

on how they can be successful in their navigation to leadership positions. Table 7 shows a summary of the six themes.

Table 7

Summary of Themes

Theme 1: Career paths

Theme 2: Gender bias

Theme 3: Internal motivation

Theme 4: Networking

Theme 5: A strong sense of self

Theme 6: The glass maze

Theme 1: Career Paths

These women clearly had extensive and diverse educational experiences; they would be considered highly qualified and had held many roles in their career. Most of the participants worked for an extended period of time as classroom teachers. On average, participants spent 14 years in the classroom before moving into administrative positions. Their career paths would include holding at least four to six administrative positions before securing their first superintendency. Common positions held were as an assistant principal, principal, and a directorship in charge of academics. Four out of the five were hired out of the role of an assistant superintendent.

Each participant had begun her administrative career as an assistant principal, a role they would all hold for a very short time before leading their own buildings as principals. All participants held at least one district-level administrative position before

securing a school superintendency. Four of the five women held several district-level administrative positions, including assistant superintendent before securing the top seat. All five female superintendents had strong backgrounds in academics and at some point in their career were in charge of overseeing instructional programming for their districts.

Each participant shared her love of the building principalship; in fact, they all expressed that the position of building principal was where they thought their career would either end or at least remain for a period of time. Their advancement from building-level leadership roles to district-level positions was the result of someone's recognition of their leadership abilities, encouragement to take on more responsibilities, or a move for the betterment of the district. Sophie noted her desire to remain a building principal: "The only job I wanted other than teaching was to be a building principal. All the other jobs [central office] were the result of people approaching me to take a position."

After three years in the principalship of a large elementary school, a position she regarded as her favorite, Susan was informed by her superintendent that at the end of her third year there, he planned to move her to the central office as the district's chief academic officer.

Charlotte was a high school English teacher, whose first administrative role was the result of an unexpected midyear opening at her high school. The position had a dual function as an assistant principal and athletic director. She accepted the position, thinking it would be temporary; however, Charlotte did not return to the classroom, and her administrative career was thus launched. She was in the dual administrative role for a short time before securing a middle school principalship in a neighboring school district.

After four years in that position, she was hired again as a middle school principal in the district where she is currently employed as the superintendent. Charlotte enjoyed her work as the middle school principal, but she was asked by her superintendent to move into the central office to serve as the district's director of academics. Charlotte's passion was overseeing academic programs; however, after a short period of time, she was once again asked to fill another vacant central office position and became the district's assistant superintendent. With Charlotte in this position, the Board learned of her abilities as a school leader. She clarified that in her district the position of assistant superintendent is very involved with the Board and that the Board was somewhat familiar with her as the district's director of academics. As the assistant superintendent overseeing human resources, however, she and the Board would have more direct interaction.

Theme 2: Gender Bias

The search and selection process differed for each of the participants interviewed. This resulted in participants having different experiences in the process. Catherine and Sadie participated in what would be considered a full-blown search process, involving a search firm and several rounds of interviews with community stakeholders. Susan participated in a search process; however, the search and selection process had an abbreviated time line conducted by the Board of Education without the involvement of a search firm or stakeholder input. In Sophie and Charlotte's cases they were current assistant superintendent in their districts, selected by their Boards of Education without a formal interview process; and no other candidates interviewed for the position.

Catherine and Sadie who experienced the search process through an outside professional organization stated that the interview questions were appropriate and the

consulted helped to keep the integrity of the process intact. However, for Susan, whose search was conducted by the local Board of Education experienced something different. Susan spoke at length about what she experienced during the interview process and after she was hired.

> In my interview a Board member asked, "You're a woman. Do you really think you can lead a district?"

> I responded, "I am a woman, and I worked with a lot of men in my life; and I can tell you that I can outwork every single one of them. I have no doubt that I can lead a district." I would be challenged by more comments: "Well, you need to know that there are some men here that are not going to be OK with being led by a woman. What are you going to do?"

After several rounds of interviews, to Susan's surprise she was offered the position and became the first women in that role for the district. Once in the position she continued to be questioned by the Board about her gender. She said, "If I could tell you the number of conversations I have had about the fact that I am a woman!" During her first month on the job, she met individually with each Board member. In her meetings, three of the four male Board members made similar statements: "Now you need to know as a woman, you know, if you can't figure out what decision to make, you can come to us and we will help you." Susan was also dismayed at the length of initial contract, a two-year contract, unlike the initial five-year contracts given to the two previous male superintendents. She was not happy about her contract but decided she would have to jump one hurdle at a time. However, at the time of the interview, Susan noted that she has since been given an extension to her initial contract.

Catherine did not experience the same type of gender-biased questions that Susan experienced in her interviews. The search process was conducted by an outside professional organization, which, Catherine believed, actually helped to maintain the integrity of the interview process; however, the Board's decision to conduct a full-scale search was frustrating to Catherine. She had had a long history with the district and was the current assistant superintendent; she believed that the outgoing superintendent had influenced the Board to conduct the search because he had not seen her as a viable candidate for the position and had another candidate (a man) in mind to fill his position.

Although initially frustrated by the Board's decision to conduct a full search, Catherine stated that the interviews helped her in the process. Prior to the search process, Catherine had not had the opportunity to interact with Board members.

> The interviews were really long interviews. In the second round, several Board members started to voice their opinion: "Why are we continuing this process? Catherine is who we should be hiring." But they had never seen or had the opportunity to hear from me like that. They didn't know I knew as much as I did. It sounds like I had been kept out of things, put off in a corner, and not allowed to shine.

Through the rounds of interviews, Catherine was able to share the knowledge she had developed in all of her professional experiences with the Board members. Despite the outgoing superintendent's effort to promote a male candidate, Catherine was ultimately one of two female finalists for the position. Catherine further stated that the use of a search firm helped to ensure all candidates were treated fairly and thought had the search been kept internal she may not have gotten the chance to secure the position.

Charlotte did not go through a search process for her superintendent position; however, she, too, experienced gender-biased comments made by a male Board member. The Board that hired Charlotte comprised three females and two males; furthermore, the Board president was female. Charlotte described two of the three female members as very assertive women who stood up for women's rights. However, after the position was offered to Charlotte and was in a conversation about her contract, one of the male Board members made a comment about her being a woman. She provided an example that illustrated his gender-biased statement.

> We don't need to pay her that much. She's a mom. She's got kids. She's not going anywhere. The female Board members would keep him in check and asked him, "If she was a guy, would you be saying that?"

For the most part Charlotte thought that the Board had treated her well and that they had more reservation about her age than gender as she was 38 years old when she accepted the position. When it came to her gender, Charlotte's biggest challenge would not be with her Board but with political subdivisions (e.g., fire department, village council). Charlotte noticed her interactions with members of these political subdivisions were different than their interactions with a male Board member. She said:

> When discussing topics that involved the district and city affairs, they pretty much wanted me to shut my mouth, sit there, and be quiet. When the [male] Board president would speak and say the same thing as I did, the suggestion was received in a positive manner. Basically, they didn't want to deal with me on these issues. This is a relatively conservative community where the presence of a

"good ol' boys' club" is still present. They thought I would be better suited to be
at home as a housewife.

Sadie and Sophie stated that they had not experienced gender-biased behavior
during the search and selection process; however, they commented that they had
experienced it in their careers. Sadie recalled a time when she went to her male
supervisor for support on how to resolve an issue and found his response insulting and
unhelpful: "Well, you two are too much alike. You're just two females that can't get
along." Rather than offer advice, he chose to stereotype their behavior as "female."
Sophie stated that she appreciated her current Board because they have never made her
feel that as a woman she couldn't be a superintendent, yet she noted that if previous
Board members had still been on the Board, the situation would have been different.

Theme 3: Internal Motivation

Although all of the female superintendents demonstrated that they were driven
women, none of the women expressed the school superintendency as their personal life
goal. When asked what made them want to pursue the position, their responses were
similar: they all expressed a sincere desire to make a substantial impact for the students in
the district and the school district as a whole. For them, opportunity knocked, and they
wanted to answer the door.

Charlotte had been in leadership roles since childhood. In high school she was
class president, captain of her sport teams, and even a manager at her place of
employment in college. Always gravitating toward leadership positions, Charlotte
described her motivation to secure her first superintendency as follows:

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I was being presented with a great opportunity, one that I couldn't pass up. My

strength and passion is in academics. At the time, the district was heading in a

really good direction. I had invested a lot of time developing programming for the

district as a director and as the assistant superintendent. Although this opportunity

was presented to me much sooner than I wanted, I figured either I step up and

take the challenge or risk someone else coming in and tak[ing] the district in a

different direction.

For Sophie, the thought of being a school superintendent was not on her radar

either. She had been a student in the district and spent her entire professional career in

that same district. Well-known and trusted by parents, teachers, and administrators,

Sophie thought the district was a great match for her both personally and professionally.

She was fully invested in the district and had the desire to change the system for the

better.

Susan wanted to be in a position that could have a positive impact on the lives of

children. She thought she had found the perfect job as a building principal. For Susan,

success was not merely about securing a superintendent's job: It was about finding the

right match between her educational philosophy and what district leaders sought in their

next superintendent. Susan applied for the open superintendent position in a neighboring

school district so she could practice for any opening when her own district had an

opening. She never envisioned she would land the job on her first attempt.

As excited as Susan was about the offer of the position, she had some reservations

about accepting it. The members of the Board who hired her had a reputation of being set

in their ways, resistant to change; in addition, the district had a history of superintendent

turnover. After some soul searching she thought the best way to change people's opinions about female leaders was to meet the challenge head on and show her capabilities. She thought that if she could be successful in the position, she could open the door for other women.

With over 20 years of experience as a teacher, Catherine loved the classroom; in fact, she never intended to leave it, but her desire to have substantial impact on students drove her to return to school to earn her administrative license. Like the other participants, Catherine had a strong background in academics. She described her motivation to apply for the job as follows:

> I was fully invested and was excited with the level of innovation happening in the district with curriculum and instruction. I thought our district was really moving forward. We were doing well academically, which gave us the freedom to be innovative. I was motivated to apply for the position because I didn't want to see that progress stopped by an outsider with a different educational philosophy. Taking on the role of superintendent would allow me to help the district to continue the work that had been laid out.

Determination characterized Catherine's thoughts about securing the superintendency. When asked what strategies she used to overcome barriers, she responded, "Well, refusing to never give up or fail." She said that because she had not been given much work-related experience in preparation for the superintendency, she realized she had to work twice as hard, scrambling to learn the job and execute it at the same time. Sadie shared feedback she had received from a stakeholder that was involved in the rounds of interviews. The stakeholder shared that Sadie's responses to situational type questions

brought out her strengths as a school leader. Sadie was characterized as someone they would want to go to in a "sticky" situation; someone who could be both "polished" and display "grit" when making tough decisions. Sadie believed that it was her ability to balance these two characteristics that helped the Board see her as a viable candidate for the job.

Theme 4: Networking

Researchers have encouraged aspiring female leaders to seek out mentors and build networks of individuals who can attest to their leadership capacity (Sperandio, 2015). This theme includes individuals (mentors) and support systems (networks) identified by participants as influential in their professional growth and as an essential support with day-to-day decisions. All five superintendents identified individuals who had supported them professionally and helped to advance their career. These individuals were described as both male and female mentors, people who helped them form their core beliefs and educational philosophies. These individuals were also people who helped them realize their leadership potential. Several of the participants credited the support of their mentors for their career success. They described their mentors as influential people who had helped to move their careers along and enhanced their self-confidence in their abilities to lead an organization.

Catherine stated that support came from two men in her life. She identified her husband as one of her strongest supporters. His encouragement helped her gain the confidence to pursue leadership roles. Without his support, Catherine said that making career decisions would have been difficult. The second individual Catherine identified as a mentor was a male school Board member, the Board president at the time of the search

process. Catherine described his support as that of a "significant champion, someone who saw something in me that others did not." Their support had a transformative effect on her ability to see her strength as a school leader. She said:

> I am small in stature, soft spoken, introverted—traits that are not considered traditional leadership traits. They helped me to understand how strong I was in a very different way. I didn't have to be like everyone else. They helped me to see that the characteristics I possess are actually strengths and not weaknesses.

Sadie and Susan both described their bosses as great mentors. Sadie's mentor was the principal (a man) who had hired her as a teacher and had promoted her to her first administrative position. Sadie described his support:

> His support came in many forms: He challenged me, held my feet to the fire, and pushed me so I could stretch myself professionally. He was also a good mentor because he was solid in instruction, good with handling people, and firm in dealing with student discipline. Our styles are different, but we were alike with the important things, such as our beliefs on how to treat people and what garners good instruction and professionalism as school leaders.

Sadie's mentoring experiences helped her gain confidence, facilitated her professional growth, and allowed her to make mistakes without being "sent up a flagpole or tarred and feathered." Her mentors were like teachers, who helped to guide her decisions and taught her how to establish her own system of doing things.

Susan described her former building principal (a man) as one of her mentors. He saw the potential in her as a leader and encouraged Susan to get her administrative

license. She never thought she would leave the classroom but decided to take the necessary classes, encouraged by her principal.

> After I started taking classes, I had a male superintendent that showed an interest in my professional growth. He was very good at questioning me. He stretched me and forced me to think outside the box. I would . . . credit [him] with helping me grow professionally.

Charlotte identified her former superintendent (a man) as a good mentor. She described their relationship through the interpretation of a color test.

> I'm the color orange, which is being creative, visionary, and having a big personality. On the other hand, my former superintendent was a lot calmer. I know myself: I have the type of personality that needs to vent, get things off my chest. Once I can vent, I can become focused, calm, and ready to deliver my message. So having a mentor who was a calm sounding board was a huge support for me.

Charlotte described other qualities of her mentor: "He kept things confidential. He was very trustworthy, and he helped me to keep things in perspective." Finally, she commented that her mentor helped to keep her grounded so she could find the right work–life balance as a working mother.

> For Sophie, support had come from several individuals and a network of people. When she was a teacher, the district's curriculum director provided guidance. One of the best pieces of advice she had given Sophie was to be honest and respect everyone, no matter what job they held in the district; and second, to always take the time talk and listen to people. This advice was something by which Sophie continued to live.

For these female superintendents, their mentors positively influenced their professional growth; their encouragement helped them to see their leadership potential and gain the confidence necessary to pursue leadership roles. All participants emphasized the importance of networking once they secured the superintendency. Each one described either a formal or informal network to which she belonged. These networks included peers they could bounce ideas off and were varied: some with both male and female superintendents and some single gender. Susan described how she sought support on day-to-day issues:

> When there is an issue, I interact with two text messaging groups. One group is male; the other group is female. I text separately to see what they would say on a given issue. Interestingly enough, their feedback is never the same. I won't say that I always go with how the females would do it. I don't look for support because they are male or female. I just find value from listening to the different perspectives on a given issue. It helps me make a more informed decision on how to resolve the matter.

Sophie stated that she had not engaged in the formal mentor structure. She tapped into resources, both men and women, for advice. These individuals were current colleagues and former colleagues that she maintained a professional relationship after taking the position. Her informal network included superintendent colleagues as well as other individuals that hold various central office administrative positions. She liked to listen to various perspectives to see what she could learn. She did not hesitate to pick up the phone and just call someone. Sophie described her professional collaborative as substantial in supporting her day-to-day decisions. She belonged to an informal group of

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about 12 people, who called one another about all matters. Sophie said the nature of the issue directed her choice of colleague from whom she sought support. For these women, securing the position was one thing: Their focus then shifted to how they could sustain and succeed in the position.

Theme 5: A Strong Sense of Self

Each of the five female superintendents had a strong sense of who they were as individuals. They articulated very clearly their values, personality, emotions, their strengths, and their weaknesses. Having a strong sense of self helped these women channel their emotions and manage stress. The ability to identify their behaviors also helped them to understand how others may have perceived them. Several of the participants stated that as they moved through the administrative ranks, they wanted never to lose sight of their purpose or change as a person. In their interviews each of the five female superintendents demonstrated confidence and the belief that staying true to herself was what had helped each one weather challenges that came her way.

When asked whether they had encountered any barriers affecting their career decisions, no participant thought she had been hindered. Yes, they collectively stated encountering barriers; however, they did not allow themselves to become distracted by a barrier. If they encountered a barrier, they saw it as a challenge, one that could be turned into an opportunity. Sophie confidently expressed that she recalled encountering no barriers at all; she would not allow a barrier to stop her from accomplishing her goals. She said:

If I did encounter a barrier, I just made a different decision. I just looked to find

an alternative way to do it. I would stay focused on the vision and continue to

pursue what I wanted.

Sadie stated that some obstacles were created by women themselves; especially

when they were not aware of how others perceived their actions. Sadie described the

importance of knowing your audience. She stated:

Knowing yourself [and] being conscious of how you can come across to various

stakeholders [are important]. Being assertive can be seen as a strong leadership

trait, but when a woman displays this trait, it may not be embraced as a positive

one. Assertiveness for females can be perceived as . . . very negative. You have to

recognize that sometimes as a female you can say the same thing as a male but

have it . . . received differently. As a female, you have to be conscious of your

voice, your tone, and your mannerisms.

Charlotte believed that knowing who she was as a person had helped her avoid

difficult situations. She described herself as a very passionate person. She stated that a

person must know when to use a strength and when doing so is not in your best interest.

Charlotte provided an example of how people can perceive one trait differently.

My administrative team appreciates my passion. They like it when I get them all

fired up. However, when it comes to dealing with males from political

subdivisions (fire department, village council), I have to be conscious of how I

present myself as they may view my passion as more emotional. I am conscious

of my pitch (lower), and I know when to slow things down. I try to keep my

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emotions in check because I realize that [when I exhibit] my positive passion, [I] can be viewed as an emotional woman.

Susan believed she had been successful in her career because she knew who she is and did not try to be someone else. Her decisions were driven by what was best for her students, something she made clear to others. She wanted her legacy to be about making a positive impact on students and serving as a good role model for her two daughters.

Theme 6: Navigating the Glass Maze

Because women typically face a complex and varied series of challenges in their quest for career success, the term *glass maze* was used in the literature (Stern, 2015). For the female superintendents in this study, securing a superintendency was only one level of navigating the maze. Even after they had secured the position, they continue to reflect on ways to perpetuate their success.

All participants interviewed demonstrated a high level of organizational knowledge acquired from their experience in numerous administrative positions. They appeared to have mastered each position held, advancing to other roles with a broader set of responsibilities. Holding numerous positions in their navigation to the role helped participants to leverage their experience with decision-makers, and their demonstration of competence in key district–level administrative positions also helped to make them competitive candidates for a superintendency.

Advice for aspiring female superintendents. Susan stated that the confidence and willingness necessary to network with other people would help aspiring female leaders navigate successfully to the position. She said that aspiring females must be willing to push themselves and have the drive to stretch and learn:

It's about building confidence. Nothing good comes easy, and aspiring leaders need to have the determination to work through challenges. They need to put their heads down, work hard, and people will notice. Persevere and don't stop until you achieved what you have dreamed.

Sadie used the word *persistent* as a trait necessary for aspiring female leaders. She admitted that they would be challenged:

Expect it, stick to it, and never give up. To be successful in securing the position, aspiring female leaders need to set high expectations for themselves, do their homework, and have the experience to prove it. Make sure you have the work-related experiences to be successful in the position. And make sure it is at the right time in your life.

Sadie also believed that female leaders must strike the right balance of leadership traits. She believed her ability both to act "polished" and display "grit" when making tough decisions helped the Board see her as a viable candidate for the job. Finally, Sadie recommended that aspiring female leaders advocate for themselves. They cannot assume that people know their abilities as school leaders.

Of dealing with men who Charlotte knew would challenge her, she said, "Some men tend to focus on their egos. Sometimes you have to send a little praise their way to get movement on an initiative." Doing so was not something she liked to do but admits at times it was necessary. Charlotte further stated, "The challenge is to make sure you don't compromise on what you want to accomplish in the process."

After securing the position, female superintendents must still navigate their way through challenges. For example, Susan told of preparing for her first Board meeting and encountering the following frustration.

> I asked this particular employee to mow the yard before my first Board meeting. I wanted the Board Office to look neat for the public and for the Board members. I reminded this individual several times. The day of the Board meeting came, and the yard was still not mowed. I decided to mow the yard myself. As I mowed the lawn, the staff member who was responsible for this task was surprised and uncomfortable with me mowing. He tried to step in. I told him clearly this is not a priority for you, but it is for me. Needless to say, after that first time I never had to mow the lawn again or remind that staff member to do so. When a male Board member heard about the situation, he commented that I was a woman. Of course, I am pickier about stuff like that.

Susan realized that mowing the lawn could have been risky for her; however, she wanted to prove a point to the Board members and the employee. Her point was that she has high expectations and has no problem modeling those expectations; moving forward she would hold others to those expectations as well.

Giving back. Susan stated that female superintendents must be willing to give back. They must make the time to help aspiring female leaders see their own leadership potential. Susan provided several examples of her support of aspiring female leaders. She started a book club with local teachers and administrators. They attend leadership conferences geared toward women's professional growth. Occasionally, they socialized

to have fun and see one another's human side. Her goal was to help them find their voices and achieve their professional goals.

Charlotte also felt the responsibility to support the leadership development of other women. To begin with, the lack of female peers in the superintendency made the role even more difficult. She illustrated the isolation for female superintendents:

There are 32 superintendents in the area consortium. There are very few female school superintendents. The lack of women peers in the superintendency can foster isolation for both aspiring female leaders and female superintendents. This isolation can lead to unsuccessful attempts to secure a superintendent position as well as the support needed for those female superintendents to sustain the position.

To avoid isolation, Charlotte regularly met with area female superintendents. She mentored two newly hired female superintendents, one in her first year and the other in her second. They met on selected dates and times to share ideas, visit one another's districts, and brainstorm on day-to-day issues. Charlotte concluded that female leaders must encourage other women to aspire to the position and support their success.

For Catherine, having little work-related experience for the position left her with the feeling that she could have known so much more prior to taking on the role. To help others secure the position, Catherine recommended that aspiring female superintendents should be given an opportunity to learn more about the position before pursuing the job. Because most women have prior experiences as classroom teachers or experience in curriculum and instruction, Catherine suggested they be provided more opportunities in areas of building operations, maintenance, and capital improvement projects. She also

suggested the need for more exposure to the political side of the job and inclusion in conversations with key stakeholders, such as Board members. In addition, Catherine suggested that aspiring leaders (male or female) need opportunities for exposure to their Boards so members can become familiar with their leadership skills.

Catherine further elaborated on how her personal experiences had impacted her philosophy of support for her leadership team. In her words, "Everyone is invited to the table." She did not isolate or pick and choose who had opportunities for what experiences. If she had an administrator (male or female) who wanted to grow professionally, she made it happen. Catherine believed she had the responsibility to mentor all who desired to learn, to give them the experiences they needed to prepare them for the position, and not merely to focus on grooming the next superintendent.

Summary

This chapter includes findings from the narratives of the five participants who answered questions related to the research question: What can be learned from the lived experiences of women who advanced to the superintendency in Ohio's public school system? Content was deductively analyzed to determine the presence of predefined elements: career paths, gender bias, networking and challenges. In addition, I also conducted inductive analysis and uncovered two themes from the narratives: strong sense of self and the glass maze.

Findings showed that although the career paths differed among participants, all participants had a vast amount of experience in education. Three of the five superintendents had secondary licenses and had experiences in teaching and working in administrative positions at the secondary level. In fact, secondary-level experiences

tended to be the more traditional track to the superintendency. The remaining two participants' backgrounds were as elementary teachers and building principals. All participants had held several district-level positions at the central office, and at one point in their careers, all were responsible for the district's academic programming. Their horizontal movement in district-level positions helped them to master the organizational landscape in building their capacity for the superintendency. Some of the participants mentioned that they took on additional tasks or roles to gain experience, demonstrate their leadership, and establish credibility with decision makers.

Although participants acknowledged that the superintendency was a male-dominated position, not all thought gender was a barrier in the search process. For one participant, Board members clearly struggled with her as a female candidate. Several questions and comments related to gender, such as a question about whether she thought a woman could lead a school district and how she would deal with men who would surely challenge her. Another participant mentioned that she believed that the Board had more an issue with her age than gender. The remaining female superintendents did not think gender discrimination played a role in the selection process; however, all five female participants had encountered gender-biased behaviors in their careers while holding other administrative positions and stated they continued to experience those behaviors in their positions as school superintendents.

Three of the participants secured the superintendency later in their careers; as a result, they believed the timing of taking on the position helped to minimize the stress of balancing work and family responsibilities. Their children were at ages where they were independent and able to take care of their own needs; however, for one participant who

had school-aged children, balancing work and family proved challenging. This participant stated that even with a supportive spouse, women carry the burden of balancing work and family responsibilities in a relationship.

Findings showed that participants' opportunities came from individuals in their networks. All participants noted people like their bosses or supervisors had given them opportunities to gain experiences needed for career advancement. Their mentors stretched them, encouraged them, and challenged them to grow personally and professionally. They described their mentors as influential people, who helped to move their careers along and enhanced their self-confidence to take on leadership positions.

Internal motivation was a common theme among these women. All participants desired to make an impact on their districts and had a clear focus on student needs. Their competitive nature was also an influential factor in pursuing leadership positions. These motivations included (a) the challenge of demonstrating that women can lead (Susan), (b) the desire to change the system for the better (Sophie) and have a positive impact on students (Sadie), (c) the intent to perpetuate the success of the district (Catherine), and (d) the courage to put students first (Charlotte).

Other factors revealed in the study showed that these women had a strong sense of self. Aware of their qualities and how those traits could be perceived by others, they were conscious of their strengths and their weakness. Depending on the situation, they had built the capacity to be aware of, control, and express their emotions appropriately. They had gained confidence through their diverse work experiences and from the mentors who supported them.

All participants provided the following advice to women who may want to step up to leadership roles. Aspiring female superintendents should expect challenges and be willing to turn those challenges into opportunities. They advised to avoid rushing to secure the top seat: Applicants should take the time to learn about the position and gain the necessary work-related experiences to be successful in the role of a school superintendent.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of five female superintendents from the state of Ohio by describing how they successfully secured a superintendency in a male-dominated field. Although the number of women securing the superintendency has increased over the last two decades from 13% in 2000 to 24% in 2010 (Kowalski et al., 2011) to 27% in 2015 (Ellerson et al., 2015), progress has been sporadic; furthermore, not all statistics show encouraging numbers for aspiring female leaders (Wyland, 2016). Current statistics show that women hold approximately 16% of school superintendencies in the state of Ohio (*Ohio Department of Education*, 2019). The number of women in superintendent positions stands in direct contrast to the number of women working in the female-dominated teaching profession.

To help advance more women to the superintendency, I examined the lived experiences of female superintendents to identify patterns of success in securing the position. Throughout the course of the interviews, I was able to improve my understanding of participants' professional experiences, challenges they faced as women, personal motivators, influential people in their lives, and the strategies they employed in achieving personal and professional goals. Key constructs that emerged from the review of the literature showed that career paths, gender bias, networking, and challenges can be influential factors that can advance or hinder the process of securing a school superintendency. As such, this in-depth analysis of five female school superintendents provides a candid look into the lives and experiences of those studied. This study was

designed to identify patterns in the experiences of five female school superintendents who had successfully secured school superintendencies.

Summary of Findings

Feminist theorists introduced the idea of gender and contributed to the discussion of the inequalities women faced in both their personal and professional lives. I used feminist theory as a lens to examine the stories of each participant as they experienced it. Looking through different lenses provided various perspectives that helped to gain an in-depth understanding of their collective experiences as female leaders. Lewin's gatekeeper theory was used as the primary means to explain how biases impact the upward mobility of individuals and social network theory to draw attention to power relations and the influential networks necessary to increase access to the position (Muñoz et al., 2014).

The potential for women to attain leadership positions is promising because they constitute a majority of the teaching ranks, yet despite their aspiration to leadership roles, they encounter hurdles from both internal (personal) and external sources. Notably, women face inherent challenges as they struggle with internal conflicts and their desire to pursue leadership roles (Diamond, 2009). Proponents of the pipeline argument, introduced in the 1990s, suggested that a substantial number of women entering the pipeline over time would lead to a significant number of women rising to higher-level positions in their organizations (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). The review of the literature has shown, however, that as women move through the pipeline, they encounter factors that can either advance or hinder their progress in securing a superintendency.

Key elements of career-path decisions, mentoring experiences, gender-biased behaviors, and internal motivation were highlighted in the participant interviews. Four

themes were consistent with constructs from the conceptual framework (career paths, gender bias, internal motivation, and networking). Inductively, two additional themes emerged from the data: a strong sense of self and the glass maze. The central question for the study was as follows: What can be learned from the lived experiences of women who advanced to the superintendency in Ohio's public school system? Five subquestions were used to support the central question. The sections below outline findings as they relate to supporting questions.

Career Progression

Although no supporting question dealt directly with career progression, each interview opened with participants sharing their pathway to securing a superintendency. The professional background they shared provided insight into their types and levels of professional experiences. Participants averaged 30 years of experience in K–12 education and an average of 16 years in administrative roles. Researchers have studied the career paths of individuals, specifically the way they move both vertically and horizontally throughout their careers. Studies showed that men's career trajectories took a more direct route to the superintendency than women's. The most common pathway for men was directly through a principalship (41.32%), but for women it was through a district-level position as an assistant superintendent (23.83%) (Davis & Bowers, 2019).

Instructional leadership. Findings show that although the career paths differed among participants (three secondary and two elementary), all had a considerable amount of educational experience. Most participants worked for extended periods of time as classroom teachers before moving into administrative positions, and all of them demonstrated high levels of organizational knowledge as a result of holding several key

administrative district-level positions. Each participant had been a building principal and at some point in her career; all five female superintendents had held a directorship and had overseen academics.

   Twenty-first century leaders. Contemporary superintendents are expected to be experts in collaboration, community engagement, and instructional outcomes; focused on current and future success and the well-being of each student and adult (NELP, 2018; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Each of the superintendents interviewed had experiences leading their school districts in academic programming. The emphasis on school reform movements driven by political and social influences like No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act have intensified the importance of the superintendent's instructional role. Superintendents are expected to lead reform movements in their districts through annual testing and to measure the academic progress of students based on state report card metrics. A superintendent's influence on the academic success of students derives from articulating an instructional vision and building the organizational supports needed to achieve that vision. Research on women in educational leadership has been conducted to offer new ways to view school leadership in challenging the status quo and to show that women's style of leading aligns with current demands of school reform and inclusive practices needed by contemporary school leaders (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2013).

Gender and Race

   The first supporting research question was designed to examine the effect, if any, of gender or race on the search and selection process for the five female superintendents.

Gender. Although participants acknowledged that the superintendency is a male-dominated position, not all thought gender was a barrier in the selection process. One participant saw board members struggle with her as a female candidate as shown in several questions and comments related to gender during the interview process. A finalist along with an internal male candidate, Susan knew she faced an uphill battle to resolve the doubts board members had about her leadership abilities. Susan stated that she was determined to make her voice heard. She described her responses to Board members' questions as respectfully assertive, and she displayed confidence when challenged by questions related to her gender. Ultimately selected over the internal male candidate, Susan was later informed that after the first round of interviews, the Board knew she was the leading candidate; but they needed to be convinced that her answers were legitimate. Catherine and Sadie detected no gender discrimination in the interview process; however, two participants stated that board members displayed gender-biased attitudes with regard to salary and contract length.

Gender and salary. Studying the base salaries of superintendents, I found nonsignificant discrepancies between those of men and women; but the discrepancies were not universal across district sizes. The results of the AASA Superintendent 2018–2019 Salary and Benefit Study showed findings consistent with previous years: Salaries increased as enrollment increased, and little discernable difference existed between men and women in reported salaries (Domenech, 2019); however, notably, the largest discrepancies in the reported data involved the number of male respondents, which more than doubled the female respondents in each of the five enrollment categories.

The findings from the salary study indicated that on the surface, women earn almost the same has their male peers. However, the disparity in the number of women to men reporting their salaries showed that a gender division of labor still exists. This is apparent by the small percentage of females serving as public school superintendents. Feminist standpoint theory maintains that men and women are presented different rights and opportunities (Wallace, 2014). Again, notably, the fact that in the United States women are twice as likely to have earned a doctorate in education, yet men are five times more likely to hold the job of superintendent of schools (Wallace, 2014).

Discrimination. Catherine, Sadie, and Sophie reported no encounters involving gender-biased behavior in the search process; all reported they had experienced overt or implied gender stereotyping while holding previous administrative positions and their current school superintendencies. Several of the participants described males as stereotyping their behavior as "female" instead of dealing with an issue or acknowledging a problem. Charlotte believed she was treated differently when interacting with male members of political subdivisions. As she discussed issues with the group, her suggestions were ignored but were well received when the male board made the same suggestion. In addition, one of the male Board members suggested the Board did not need to pay Charlotte much because she was a mother with children and "wasn't going anywhere." When it came to making difficult decisions, male Board members offered Susan help: "Now you need to know as a woman, you know, if you can't figure out what decision to make, you can come to us and we will help you." One Board member described Susan as "pickier about stuff like that because you're a woman," referring to a

directive she had given to a maintenance employee to cut the grass before her first board meeting.

Race. Race was not addressed in this section because all five female superintendents reported their race as White. Few women and fewer Black women held superintendencies at the time of this study: Research showed that the presence of African American women in the superintendency has increased; however, their numbers still lagged in comparison to men (White or Black) and White female superintendents (Brown, 2014). Although a random numbers table was used in the selection process, it was unsurprising that no African American superintendent was selected as a potential participant for the study because African American female superintendents in Ohio currently represent less than 1% of all superintendents (*Ohio Department of Education*, 2019). The gross underrepresentation of African American females in the superintendency is an example of intersectionality in leadership positions. African American women face a phenomenon of double jeopardy (race and gender) that affects their presence holding the top job (Brown, 2014). Explaining the interests and experiences of women of color is often marginalized because society reacts to one or the other, failing to recognize intersectional identity as both a woman and person of color (Gordon, 2016).

Networking

The second supporting research question was designed to examine the role networking played in advancing the five women to the position of superintendent. Findings showed evidence that participants' opportunities came from individuals within their networks. All participants noted that people like their bosses or supervisors had

given them opportunities to gain the experience needed for career advancement. They described their mentors as influential people who helped to move their careers along by providing opportunities to gain the work-related experiences that raised their confidence to take on leadership positions.

Kim and Brunner (2009) related career movement to visibility, exposure, and connections to influential people in an organization. This concept played out better for some participants than others. Catherine believed she was purposely excluded from opportunities to shine. Although she held a key position (assistant superintendent) in the district, she was not given the opportunity to interact with board members in positions to make decisions about her future. Sadie, a known leader in the area, also an assistant superintendent, had numerous experiences that made her a viable candidate for the position; yet she was not recruited to apply for a local superintendent opening and decided to apply for the position on her own. Charlotte's and Sophie's exposure to key players was in direct contrast to Catherine's and Sadie's experiences. Charlotte and Sophie were employed as assistant superintendents who had been given prior opportunities to interact with board members before the position became open. These opportunities allowed Charlotte and Sophie to demonstrate their leadership abilities and build relationships with key decision makers. When the time came to select the next superintendent in their districts, no search process was conducted; nor were other candidates interviewed. The position of board president would also prove to be an influential role. In Charlotte's case, the Board president was an advocate familiar with her skills and leadership abilities, who engaged other board members in ongoing dialogue to support Charlotte's selection as their next superintendent.

Work-Life Balance

The third research question dealt with potential barriers affecting the career decisions of the five female superintendents. Findings suggest that no barriers stood in the way of these women in their career decisions. Three of the participants secured the superintendency later in their careers. Another had no children and cited no other barrier affecting her career decisions. The three superintendents who secured the position later in their careers felt the timing was right for them and their families. All had been well established in their careers, and the timing of assuming a demanding role minimized the stress of balancing work and family responsibilities. These women further explained that their children were old enough to be independent and take care of most of their own needs. The women interviewed were well established in their careers and considered middle aged. One of the challenges attributed to the absence of female leaders is the internal conflict between work expectations and the realities of work–life balance for women (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kellerman & Rhode, 2017).

Catherine, Sadie, and Susan secured the superintendency later in their careers; as a result, they believed the timing of taking on the position helped to minimize the stress of balancing work and family responsibilities. For Charlotte, the work–life balance proved challenging because she had school-aged children at home when she secured the position. Younger children created an added level of stress when trying to meet the needs of the job and her family. Charlotte said that she had a supportive spouse; however, even with support, stress still posed problems for working women. The superintendency is a demanding job with long hours and added stress. As women form families, jobs with less

pressure are more appealing, leaving them out of the applicant pool of future leadership positions (Barsh & Yee, 2012).

Motivation

The fourth question dealt with the internal drivers that motivated the five women to pursue leadership positions. All five were clearly powered by their desire to have a positive impact on students, and the superintendency allowed them to exert such an influence on improvements and to support the continued success of their districts.

Although their personalities differed, all demonstrated a competitive drive, not in the sense of winning and losing but in being goal driven and unafraid to take on challenges. Each of these women was in her first superintendency. Several of the participants talked about extensive preparation before applying for the job, including researching the district, meeting with key players to gain insight, and engaging in mock interviews. One participant applied for a position for practice so that when an opening occurred in her hometown district, she was ready. The opportunity proved to be more than practice because she was offered the job on her first attempt.

Glass Maze

The subject of the fifth question was the attributes that allowed these women to overcome barriers. Because men had been predominantly selected to school superintendencies, their career paths had been equated with the path to success (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Women may travel paths different from the paths men typically take in their careers; however, these women have proven career success can be achieved on their own terms. The five participants traveled different paths to the superintendency. They avoided dwelling on barriers they encountered; instead they presented their methods to

overcoming barriers by gaining confidence through work-related experiences, support

from mentors and networks, self-reflection, and development of the skills needed to

understand social situations and respond appropriately.

Although all participants stated that they met challenges in their lives, all

demonstrated a positive attitude toward being a female superintendent. They felt

empowered and were open and honest about their qualities; however, a concern was the

lack of female peers in the position and the isolation it caused. To help advance more

women to leadership positions, they felt the responsibility to mentor and provide

opportunities to support other women's navigation as they seek to achieve professional

goals and career success.

Key Findings and Existing Research and Literature

The five female superintendents in this study demonstrated many of the findings

that emerged from the literature review, particularly with regard to career paths, mentors,

networking, challenges, and gender bias. In the following discussion I have related the

key findings of this research with the salient points noted in the literature review and in
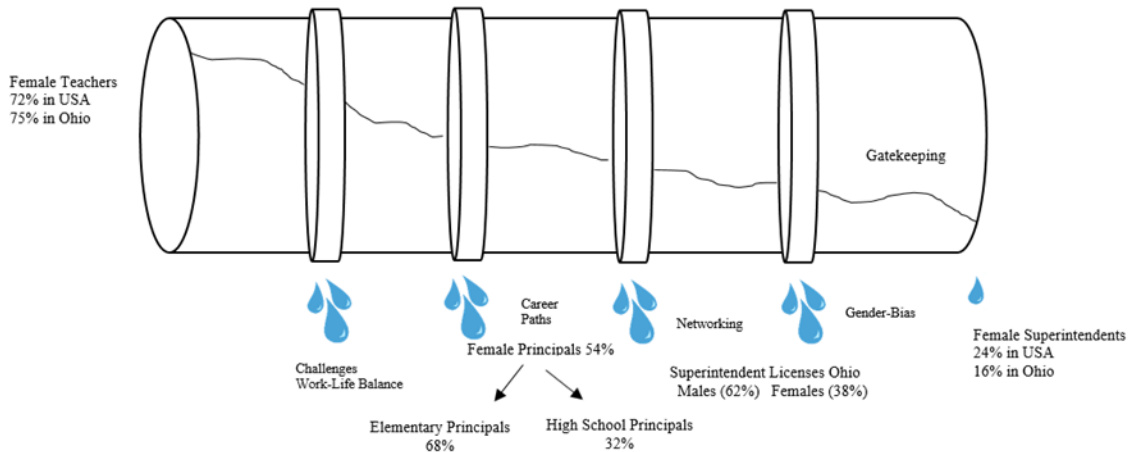
the conceptual framework.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Leaks in the leadership pipeline. The figures at upper left and lower right contrast percentages of women in education with women in school superintendencies nationwide and in Ohio (*2019 Ohio by the Numbers*, n.d.; Domenech, 2012; Ohio Department of Education, 2019; Taie & Goldring, 2017). Influential factors that can advance or hinder the process of moving through the pipeline are shown as key constructs, including challenges, career paths, networking, and gender bias.

Figure 1 illustrates that the potential for women to attain leadership positions is promising because they constitute a majority of the teaching ranks, yet the number of women in superintendent positions stands in direct contrast to the number of women working in the female-dominated teaching profession. To understand the phenomenon, I explored how these women were able to overcome challenges and successfully secure a superintendency in a male-dominated field. The following sections will review how the concepts, beliefs, assumptions, of the conceptual framework held true or changed in the study.

Challenges: Work-life balance. Women face inherent challenges as they struggle with internal conflicts and their desire to pursue leadership roles (Diamond, 2009). For many women, leadership positions are unattractive because the demands of the position can conflict with family responsibilities. Catherine, Sadie, and Susan secured the superintendency later in their careers; as a result, they believed the timing of taking on the position helped to minimize the stress of balancing work and family responsibilities. Sophie had no children that posed as a barrier in balancing work and family life. For Charlotte, the work–life balance proved challenging because she had school-aged children at home when she secured the position. Younger children created an added level of stress when trying to meet the needs of the job and her family. Charlotte stated that even with a supportive spouse; the mental stress of balancing work and family

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responsibilities fell on her. All the women interviewed were well established in their careers and considered middle aged. This minimized the internal conflict between work expectations and the realities of work–life balance for women presented in the literature.

Career Paths. The superintendency is a demanding job with long hours and added stress. As women form families, jobs with less pressure are more appealing, leaving them out of the applicant pool of future leadership positions (Barsh & Yee, 2012). Studies showed that men's career trajectories took a more direct route to the superintendency than women's. The most common pathway for men was directly through a principalship (41.32%), but for women it was through a district-level position as an assistant superintendent (23.83%) (Davis & Bowers, 2019). Catherine, Sadie, and Charlotte were secondary principals; however, unlike most men, they did not secure the superintendency directly from the principalship. The participants horizontal career movement was consistent with the current research; four out of the five secured the superintendency from the assistant superintendent position and held four to six administrative positions prior to gaining access to the position.

Networking. More leaks in the pipeline can occur when women are unable to access influential networks because of the administrative position held. Successful school leaders use networking as a path to influential decision-makers. Review of the literature differentiates between the role of mentors and sponsors. Sponsors differ from mentors in that the former hold positions of power or influence that can help interested individuals navigate their organization and advocate for their advancement (Rochon et al., 2016) Findings from the study showed that participants' opportunities came from individuals in their networks. All participants noted people like their bosses or supervisors had given

them opportunities to gain experiences needed for career advancement. Their mentors stretched them, encouraged them, and challenged them to grow personally and professionally. They described their mentors as influential people, who helped to move their careers along and enhanced their self-confidence to take on leadership positions. For Sophie and Charlotte, their networks gave them access to power players, such as board members, in helping them reach leadership positions. Catherine, Sophie, and Sadie, noted board members as "champions" of their work. Charlotte described her female board members as advocates; very assertive women who stood up for women's rights. Results from the study showed that attainment of an influential leadership positions, such as the superintendency, was strengthened when the participants established a strong relationship with influential decision-makers.

Lack of credentials for female educators. Perhaps the biggest leak in the pipeline is the lack of credentials for the superintendency by female educators. Without the credentials, access to power players and networks needed for advancement can hinder career movement. It would appear that women are interested in obtaining advanced degrees as they outnumber men in most graduate and doctoral programs (Jaschik, 2010); however, they are not opting to earn a superintendent's license. Current statistics show that women lack the credentials for the superintendency. A substantial gap exists in the percentage of men (62%) and women (38%) who hold a superintendent's license in Ohio. Qualified women may not choose to pursue a superintendent's license due to work and family conflicts that come with the demands of the position and family responsibilities. Other reasons may include: lack of confidence, low aspirations for advancement, or lack of experience working with Boards of Educations.

Gender Bias. A growing body of research has suggested stereotyping, a central reason for gender gaps, has become an influential and unseen threat to women in the workplace (Kellerman & Rhode, 2017). In this study participants acknowledged that the superintendency is a male-dominated position, not all thought gender was a barrier in the selection process. However, all reported they had experienced overt or implied gender stereotyping while holding previous administrative positions and their current school superintendencies. These women were successful in their navigation through the pipeline by avoid dwelling on barriers they encountered; instead they presented their methods to overcoming barriers by gaining confidence through work-related experiences, support from mentors and networks, self-reflection, and development of the skills needed to understand social situations and respond appropriately.

Although these women were able to navigate their way through the pipeline; changes in the system still needs to occur. The disparity between the percentage of women in education with women in school superintendencies nationwide and in Ohio supports what researchers have referred to as the "think leader–think male" mindset (Schein, 1978, 2001; Sczesny, 2003). The lack of female superintendents can lead to a perception that success is likely to be experienced by more men than women; thus producing a psychological barrier discouraging women from pursuing a school superintendency (Schein, 2001).

Key Finding 1: Administrative Experiences

Broad exposure to administrative experiences can build capacity and skills for the superintendency. As the female leaders shared their career progression, they revealed that they all had a considerable amount of educational experience. When examining the career

trajectories of aspiring female leaders, researchers showed that a woman's path to the top is not likely to occur in as straight a line as a man's (Rochon et al., 2016). Their finding was consistent with the career progression of the female five superintendents in this study.

Incremental path to the superintendency. As noted above, all participants had held several building-level and district-level leadership positions prior to their superintendencies. Although they may have taken more positions to reach the superintendency than their male counterparts, this path was not necessarily detrimental. "Extensive experiences of horizontal promotion, which presumably provide a broad exposure to administrative experiences, may actually build greater capacity and skills for the superintendency" (Kim & Brunner, 2009, p. 104). Investing time in relevant work-related experiences and in district-level positions makes for a more competitive candidate because of her or his local knowledge (building level), visibility, and demonstration of competence in district-level positions (Sperandio, 2015).

Credibility. The participants built their creditability by demonstrating their experiences, qualifications, and skills. Their path to the superintendency was an incremental one: They held four to six administrative positions before assuming the superintendency; however, these positions exposed them to a broad range of experiences, ones they could leverage during the selection process. As previously stated, all five participants at one point in their careers was responsible for academic programming. In addition, four of the participants held a position in charge of human resources; a key position responsible for district employee relations, negotiations, and hiring decisions.

Alignment of associated themes with existing literature. Broad exposure to administrative experiences can build capacity and skills for the superintendency. This key finding aligns with Theme 1 (career paths) and Theme 6 (glass maze). The participants' horizontal movement in district-level positions helped them to master the organizational landscape in building their capacity for the superintendency, supporting research by Kim and Brunner (2009), Rochon et al. (2016), and Sperdino (2015), who found that holding several key positions prior to the superintendency builds capacity for the position.

Key Finding 2: Mentors

Mentors are influential individuals who support the personal growth of aspiring female leaders in their ability to lead organizations. All participants were able to quickly identify mentors who supported them in their personal and professional lives. The support from their professional mentors was twofold: Their mentors, who provided (a) opportunities for career movement and (b) opportunities to enhance their confidence as school leaders, were individuals who stretched them, challenged them, and saw their leadership potential.

Mentorship is often cited in the literature as an effective support available to women in securing the superintendency (Muñoz et al., 2014; Sherman et al., 2008). As noted, mentoring for school leaders should be viewed as essential in the development of effective leadership and as part of the socialization necessary for leadership positions (Daresh, 2004). Studies on women's leadership development have shown that talented women in current administrative positions achieve such positions because of the "life transforming impact of an individual who saw potential in them that they had not seen in

themselves" (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010, p. 255). Connecting women with mentors and role models can foster a self-perception of their ability to lead organizations.

Male mentors. Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones (2010) have suggested that male mentors can be beneficial for aspiring female leaders as a way to validate their capabilities. Catherine identified a male school Board member as a mentor; he was the Board president at the time of the search process. She described his support as that of a "significant champion, someone who saw something in me that others did not." His support had a transformative effect on her ability to see her strength as a school leader. Sadie and Susan both described their bosses as great mentors. Sadie's mentor was the principal (a man) who had hired her as a teacher and had promoted her to her first administrative position. His support came in many forms: "He challenged me, held my feet to the fire, and pushed me so I could stretch myself professionally." Susan described her former building principal (a man) as one of her mentors who saw the potential in her as a leader and encouraged her to earn her administrative license. Charlotte identified her former superintendent (a man) as a good mentor: "He kept things confidential, he helped me to keep things in perspective, and kept me grounded so I could find the right work–life balance as a working mother."

Sponsors. Sponsors differ from mentors in that the former hold positions of power or influence and can help interested individuals navigate their organization and advocate for their advancement (Rochon et al., 2016). Sponsorship programs have shown promise as a way to support women who want to pursue higher-level executive positions in academic medicine (Rochon et al., 2016). The very practice of sponsorship, not necessarily the sponsor, can influence and guide a potential candidate through the maze

of the organization to advancement (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Sadie described how her former boss, a female superintendent was a great support. She guided Sadie with career decisions and "pointed her in the right direction." Susan shared how a male superintendent showed an interest in her professional growth. He supported her while she was taking classes for her administrative license and would credit him with moving her career along.

     Alignment of associated themes with existing literature. Mentors are influential individuals who support the personal growth of aspiring female leaders in their abilities to lead organizations. Key Finding 2 aligns with Theme 4 (networking) and Theme 6 (glass maze). Participants described mentors as influential individuals who (a) supported participants' personal growth and their confidence in their ability to lead organizations and (b) provided opportunities for career movement. Findings support research indicating that mentorship is an effective support available to women seeking to secure a superintendency and that networks provide more social capital when they are substantial and diverse (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010; Muñoz et al., 2014; & Sherman et al., 2008).

Key Finding 3: Self-Perception and Strong Internal Drive

     Self-perception and a strong internal drive are essential skills necessary to overcome challenges and achieve career success. When participants reflected on their individual traits, each of the five female superintendents demonstrated a strong sense of who she was as a person. They articulated their values, personality, emotions, strengths, and weaknesses. Charlotte described herself as a very passionate person. When dealing with stressful situations she uses breathing techniques to ensure that she presents herself

in a very calm and measured way. Sadie stressed the importance of knowing yourself,

being conscious of how you can come across to various stakeholders can help facilitate a

more positive interaction. Sadie provided an example: "being assertive can be seen as a

strong leadership trait, but when a woman displays this trait, it may not be embraced as a

positive one." These women were also committed to maintaining a sense of self. They did

not want the job to change them or lose sight of their purpose as school leaders. The

participants wanted others to see them as "real people" and as leaders who modeled what

they expected of others. Susan shared a conversation that she had with a female

superintendent. This female superintendent was one of her mentors that gave her hope

that she could maintain a sense of herself when Susan became a superintendent. Susan

was concerned that as a female she would have to take on male tendencies because of

comments made by male colleagues and friends. Their advice to Susan was not to show

her emotions, even if something tragic happened to a student. Susan also found

reassurance while interviewing women for a projects for her superintendent's license.

These female superintendents shared that they were able to maintain who they were as a

female and make those characteristics work for them in their career and in their

superintendency.

Sense of purpose. All of the female superintendents demonstrated a drive for

high achievement and were goal driven. When asked what made them want to pursue the

position, their responses were similar: They all expressed a sincere desire to make a

substantial impact for the sake of the students in the district and the school district as a

whole. They were not afraid to take on a challenge. When they encountered a barrier they

sought support from their mentors. In addition, their overall vision and sense of purpose

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seemed to create "blinders" that prevented them from becoming distracted by obstacles or hindered by barriers.

Self-determination. Responses like the following described participants' drive for success (Christman & McClennan, 2008): "Refuse to give up. If you say you're going to do something, do it. The best way to change the opinion of others is to take on the challenge." A strong determination and an iron will have characterized women who have succeeded in breaking into the ranks of male-dominated professions because they had to overcome barriers and survive more scrutiny in their pursuit of a school superintendency (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). These female superintendents, who reached the top of their organizations, revealed what other researchers had reported in terms of desirable characteristics: a strong work ethic, goal orientation, focus on improving the organization, dedication despite challenges, and the ability to motivate others to improve their organization (Barsh & Yee, 2012).

Alignment of associated themes with existing literature. Self-perception and a strong internal drive are essential skills necessary to overcome challenges and achieve career success. Key Finding 3 aligns with Theme 2 (gender-bias), Theme 3 (internal motivation), and Theme 5 (a strong sense of self). All five superintendents were clearly powered by their desire to have a positive impact on students, and the superintendency allowed them to exert that influence, resulting in improvements. Findings support research by Barsh and Yee (2012), Christman and McClennan (2008), and Derrington and Sharratt (2009), who found that a strong internal drive can facilitate career goals.

Key Finding 4: Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping practices can influence access to the superintendency. Two elements that affect career mobility for individuals are opportunity and power (Kanter, 1977). The opportunity to move vertically in an organization is defined by the way people involve themselves in their work; power is defined as the accumulation of experiences and alliances gained by an individual (Kanter, 1977). Decision-makers, such as those on Boards of Education and superintendents, can limit administrative opportunities for women when they perceive them as weak managers or inept with finances or believe that they allow their emotions to influence their decisions (Superville, 2017). A primary reason given by Boards of Education for hiring men over women is their perception that men know more about finance and budgeting. This perception could be credited to women's preferred career paths of curriculum and instruction (Muñoz et al., 2014).

Influence of power players. For this study, I used Lewin's gatekeeper theory as the primary means to explain how biases impact the upward mobility of individuals. Accessing the superintendency is influenced by power-holders' decisions based on personal criteria, routine practices, or attitudes and decisions about an individual (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Tallerico, 2000). Data collection and analysis for this study show that certain decision makers had varying levels of influence during the selection process. Several participants expressed the influence of the outgoing superintendent on board members during the search process. Catherine, who was an internal candidate, stated that she was not the candidate of choice of the outgoing superintendent, who had promoted among board members another candidate, a man he had groomed for the position.

Opportunity. Qualified women who want to pursue the superintendency require opportunities and experiences to work with decision makers, such as members of Boards

of Education. In Ohio, Boards of Education comprise five members, who elect their board president and vice president every January. A Board president has more responsibilities and tends to hold more clout than other members. Prior opportunities that Charlotte and Sophie had to interact with the Board, specifically with their Board president, allowed board members to become familiar with their leadership abilities. Their Boards decided against a search or interviews with other candidates. Their established relationships facilitated their securing of the superintendency from inside their districts.

Alignment of associated themes with existing literature. Gatekeeping practices can influence access to the superintendency. This key finding aligns with Theme 2 (gender-bias), Theme 4 (networking), and Theme 6 (glass maze). Data collection and analysis for this study show that certain decision-makers had varying levels of influence during the selection process. Qualified women who want to pursue the superintendency require opportunities and experiences to work with the decision-makers, such as Boards of Education. Findings support research by Davis and Bowers (2019), Kanter (1977), Muñoz et al. (2014), Superville (2017), and Tallerico (2000) stating that gatekeepers can influence advancement decisions.

Key Finding 5: Networks

Networks are a resource for leadership development and support for women. As noted in Key Finding 2, participants discussed mentors as influential people who had powered their professional growth. I used social network theory to draw attention to power relations and the influential networks necessary to increase access to the position (Muñoz et al., 2014). Women who want to pursue career advancement opportunities need

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to develop their networks. Munoz et al. (2014) found that networks—formal or informal—provided more social capital when they were substantial and diverse. "Women who aspire to increasingly stronger and more influential leadership positions can find pathways to reaching that goal considerably strengthened when they establish strong and influential networks" (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006, p. 196).

Support systems. Once in the position, participants described professional networks as essential in supporting their work in the superintendency. Each participant identified either a formal or informal network to which they belonged for support. A formal network like the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development has provided programs and workshops to assist aspiring women gain the confidence and skills needed to access leadership roles. The association identified networking and mentoring as gateways to gain senior-level positions and encouraged women to align themselves with individuals experienced as senior-level leaders (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010). Formal networks were helpful; however, participants emphasized the value of the informal networks comprising area colleagues. These networks included both male and female superintendents with some including females only. They accessed these networks on a regular basis to discuss a variety of topics and day-to-day operational decisions.

Giving back. Relationships between established and aspiring female leaders can also help to dispel gender stereotypes. Those seeking higher-level jobs must have strong female role models and mentors in top positions because watching other females deal with difficult situations can help build confidence in their own ability to do the job. As female leaders who have secured the superintendencies, the five participants in this study

felt a responsibility to support other women's leadership potential. They provided examples of attending selected conferences together, engaging in book clubs, and mentoring entry-year female superintendents. Networks have proven an indispensable avenue for leadership development and access to leadership roles (Muñoz et al., 2014). The mentoring experience for women can be improved by (a) creating networks that give women access to the power players who will help them reach leadership positions, (b) developing formal programs for future leadership, (c) promoting action-oriented support from experienced school leaders, and (d) encouraging aspiring female leaders to be proactive about choices that can lead them to their career goals (Sherman et al., 2008).

Alignment of associated themes with existing literature. That networks are a resource for leadership development and support for women aligns with Theme 1 (career paths), Theme 2 (gender-bias), Theme 4 (networking) and Theme 6 (glass maze). Relationships between established and aspiring female leaders can help to dispel gender stereotypes; furthermore, watching other females deal with difficult situations can help build confidence in their ability to do the job. As female leaders who have secured the position of a superintendent, the five superintendents in this study felt a responsibility to support other women's leadership potential. Findings support research by Dana and Bourisaw (2006); Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones (2010); Muñoz et al. (2014); Sherman et al. (2008), who showed that networks provide leadership opportunities and support women in leadership positions.

Limitations

The aim of this study was to understand the experiences of women who had secured a superintendency in a male-dominated field. With a sample population of five

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female superintendents, the results are limited to those whom I interviewed. The small sample size precludes the generalizability of the results from the study to a larger population. In addition, the site location of the research was in Ohio. This research was limited to one geographic area of the country that may not represent female superintendents from other states or represent all superintendents, including men.

Implications of Findings

After analyzing data from the five female superintendents studied, I found that participants did not view gender as a direct obstacle or formal barrier to securing their current positions; however, their perceptions indicated that gender mattered in regard to individual and institutional mindsets concerning their gender and leadership. The results also indicated that regardless of gender, mentors are influential in career movement and can support the self-confidence of aspiring leaders. Encouragement and linking aspiring leaders with mentors can enhance their awareness of their leadership potential. Mentoring for school leaders should be viewed as essential to include in leadership development programs. Other implications from the findings are discussed in the sections below.

Implications for Leadership

If leadership models are established predominantly by males and endorsed by males what does that mean for women and people from different cultures who try to access the role (Ayman & Korabik, 2010)? Representation at the top matters, the school superintendent plays one of the most influential roles in a school community. Since 2000 researchers have examined career paths to the superintendency and because men have been predominantly selected to the school superintendency, "their career paths have become the template for success" (Brunner & Kim, 2010, p. 285). However, these

women have proven that career success can be achieved on their own terms. These women built a reputation of getting the job done; giving them credibility and a path to be an influential leader. Their passion and "can do" attitude was inspirational and empowered others to do the same. They valued relationships; the type of leadership that generates political power, and builds alliances that make sustainable change possible (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2013). Studying the female perspective on school leadership is important as the teaching profession is mainly female. Taking into account the lived experiences of women can give legitimacy to leadership practices, and giving credibility to the female style of leading would open the door for men who are inclined to lead in a similar manner (Sergiovanni, 2013).

Implications for Women

Each woman in this study made a strong commitment to maintaining her sense of self. As they moved through the administrative ranks, they wanted to keep their sights on their purpose as educators. Of the many facets of preparation for a superintendent position, much information in this study covered professional experiences and personal attitudes; however, the first step in closing the gap between male and female superintendents must be to increase the number of women who hold a superintendent's license. It would appear that women are interested in obtaining advanced degrees as they outnumber men in most graduate and doctoral programs (Jaschik, 2010); however, they are not opting to earn a superintendent's license. Current statistics show that women lack the credentials for the superintendency. A substantial gap exists in the percentage of men (62%) and women (38%) who hold a superintendent's license in Ohio. More attention

should be directed to helping female educators understand the role of a superintendent and encourage them to determine whether a superintendency is desirable for them.

A knowledge gap may also be present in board members with regard to aspiring female superintendents and areas of importance for the position. One would think that a primary area of focus for school boards would be instructional in nature; however, studies have shown that board members are more concerned with relationships with stakeholders, finances, and school safety (Muñoz et al., 2014). Notably, most female educators' experiences come from career paths involving curriculum and instruction. Both groups would benefit by expanding their perceptions of what the position entails—all those areas and more.

Implications for Education

In an era of uncertainty and ambiguous messages from a diverse community of stakeholders, the need for effective and inspirational leaders is more critical now than ever before in public education. School districts are public arenas where change is constant. Today, superintendents must negotiate their way through an increasingly unforeseeable landscape. The demands and pressures placed on public school leaders are growing as they are expected to be expert educators, trauma-informed leaders, safety authorities, and politically astute entrepreneurs. To meet the growing demands of our school communities, it will take a diverse collective leadership style to lead complex organizations as public school systems. Women often engage others in leadership practices and are experienced with improvement projects (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2013). As more women move into leadership roles as principals, superintendents, college deans, and university presidencies, we need to take notice of how these women lead and have

defined their roles. Finally, research conducted by women on women in leadership positions can be beneficial. In particular, qualitative studies of the experiences of women will encourage future inquiries, support improvements in the field, and contribute to the evolution of a future ready school superintendent.

Recommendations for Future Research

The literature review highlighted the accomplishments of women who have successfully navigated the glass maze to achieve high-ranking positions in their respective fields. Although the number of women securing a superintendency has increased since 2000, progress continues to be sporadic; and current statistics in the state of Ohio lag behind the average in the United States. To advance more women to the superintendency, I examined the lived experiences of female superintendents to identify (a) factors most influential in securing the position and (b) patterns of success.

Leadership Development Programs

Findings from this study indicate that mentors play an influential role in leadership development. Leadership programs at the state and regional level need to be developed on effective mentor practices. Substantial literature was available on the importance of mentors but little information on what makes a good mentor. Studies have shown that not all mentors are created equal (Muñoz et al., 2014). To help facilitate the recruitment of women into leadership roles, those in medical academia have implemented sponsorship programs modeled after what occurs in the corporate world (Rochon et al., 2016). Sponsorship programs have shown promise as a way to support women who want to pursue higher-level executive positions. Educational leadership programs have been

recommended to develop sponsorship programs that can help interested individuals navigate their organizations and advocate for their advancement.

School districts are public arenas where change is constant. Transitioning into the role of superintendent expands an educator's arena to include dealing with political powers like boards of education, civic leaders, labor unions, and state organizations. A superintendent's ability to effectively communicate with these stakeholders is crucial to her or his success and sustainability in the position. As a result, a need exists for additional professional development programs and emphasis in college and university programs on interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and abilities. Often the importance of these skills is overlooked, and aspiring superintendents may be unaware of their significance in securing and succeeding in the position.

Strategies to increase more women into the superintendent's licensure program needs to be developed. The literature has shown that women are interested in obtaining advanced degrees but are not opting to earn a superintendent's license. Consideration should be given to offering licensure coursework concurrent with doctoral studies. In addition, state agencies and higher institutions should provide incentives or scholarships for aspiring female leaders and minority educators who want to pursue the school superintendency.

Board Training

Researchers have indicated that the type of relationship established between a superintendent and board of education is critical to the success or failure of the superintendent with many factors influenced by personal and political motives (Petersen & Short, 2001). Successful relationships do not happen by accident; in fact, future studies

are necessary to identify best practices in school board governance. School board members are both appointed and elected community members who receive little or no training. A recommendation for policy makers is to require training for board members to include cultural competence, conflict resolution, and collaboration strategies.

Understanding the Clusters of Female Superintendents in Ohio

To find regions in Ohio where female superintendents were employed, I plotted their location by county from the directory database (Figure 3). The location of female superintendents yielded some interesting findings. Female school superintendents were found to be clustered in the southwestern and northeastern parts of the state. Counties located in central, northwestern, and southeastern Ohio showed very few women employed as superintendents. I recommend a future study to examine first, the employment history of female superintendents in Ohio districts since 2000. For that study, let it be noted, three of the five superintendents in this study were the first females to hold the position in their districts, one was the second female, and the remaining participant was the fourth female to hold the position. Second, commonalities in areas where female superintendents are found to be clustered deserve study. The clusters appear to be near large cities like Cleveland and Cincinnati. Third, counties where female superintendents appear to be isolated require examination to explore the impact of isolation on recruitment and sustainability in the position.

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Conclusion

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Public school leadership has been described as a paradox, dominated by men while a majority of the teaching profession comprises women. Although women have made their way into educational leadership roles, the reality of the superintendency is that

most studies have shown that few women hold the position. I turned to third-wave feminists, who emphasized the personal experiences of women and placed a value on personal narratives (Yu, 2011), and fourth-wave feminists, who continued to emphasize personal stories and experiences as a means to help other women reflect (Diamond, 2009), to shed light on this phenomenon. Thus, the compilation of the stories of the five female superintendents in this study was designed to assist other aspiring women to prepare for the position. I hope that those who read this study will connect in some way to the stories told by these breakthrough women and gain understanding of their experiences. Although challenges may exist, at times involving risks, the stories told by these female superintendents must be heard to inform and to encourage a future generation of aspiring female leaders.

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Appendices

Appendix A

IRB Approval

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

One University Plaza, Youngstown, Ohio 44555
Office of Research
330.941.2377

January 26, 2020

Dr. Jane Beese, Principal Investigator
Ms. Linda Reid, Co-investigator
Department of Counseling, School Psychology, Education & Leadership
UNIVERSITY

RE: HSRC PROTOCOL NUMBER: 085-2020
     TITLE: Breakthrough Women: The Lived Experiences of Women's Navigation to the Superintendency

Dear Dr. Beese and Ms. Reid:

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed the abovementioned protocol and determined that it meets the criteria of DHHS 45 CFR 46.104(b)(2) and therefore is exempt from full committee review and oversight. Your project is approved

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Dr. Severine Van Slambrouck
Director Research Services, Compliance and Initiatives
Authorized Institutional Official

SVS:cc

c: Dr. Jake Protivnak, Chair
      Department of Counseling, School Psychology, Education & Leadership

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www.ysu.edu

Appendix B

Invitation to Participate

Dear Superintendent,

My name is Linda Reid and I am a doctoral candidate at Youngstown State University. I am also a current superintendent in a school district in the state of Ohio. I am currently working on my dissertation entitled *"Breakthrough Women: The Lived Experiences of Women's Navigation to the Superintendency."* Your experience as a female superintendent is important to my research. I am seeking participants for my qualitative study of the leadership journeys of women school superintendents. I hope through my qualitative study to learn about your journey in securing the position of superintendent, your thoughts about the search process as a woman, and the experiences you have had that may help future women who aspire to the position. I would like to identify and interview five current superintendents who fulfill the following criteria: 1) female, and 2) a current superintendent in the State of Ohio.

Participation in this study will include completion of a demographic questionnaire, an interview that will take no longer than 120 minutes, and a follow up inquiry by phone. The interview process will use the online system Blackboard Collaborate, with the date and time of the interview determined by you. Participation is voluntary, confidential, and there will be no personal identifying information about you in the study. Even if you agree to participate, you may withdraw at any time. If you decide to participate, please send an email to the address below. If you have any

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questions about my study or would like further information, please do not hesitate to

contact me. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,

Linda N. Reid
Contact info removed.

Appendix C

Informed Consent to Participate

My name is Linda Reid and I am presently a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Youngstown State University. I am also a current superintendent in a school district in Ohio. To help complete my dissertation process, I will be conducting interviews as part of my research study to understand the leadership journeys of women superintendents.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

    A. This research study is intended to add to the knowledge that exists about who has access to superintendent positions.

    B. To contribute to new and existing knowledge about the experiences of female superintendents, their access to the position, and to provide valuable information for aspiring female superintendents.

RESEARCH STUDY DESIGN AND DURATION

This research study will utilize a biographical narrative design encompassing the following parts:

    A. Demographic Questionnaire – (5 minutes).

    B. Semi-structured interviews – No more than a 120 minute interview following a set of scripted interview questions that align with literature-based themes pertaining to influential factors that can advance or hinder the process of securing a school superintendency. The online system Blackboard Collaborate will be used to conduct the interviews. Responses will be recorded digitally and also with handwritten notes.

    C. Analysis of Interview – Analysis of your interview will be emailed to you for your review, verification, and comments (20 minutes).

    D. Follow-up Inquiry – To reflect on experience and other inquiries (10 minutes).

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS FROM PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY

As a participate in this study, several benefits exist. A benefit of reflection of your experiences may give you a greater understanding about leadership, lessons learned, and

an increased knowledge base on influential factors for sustaining the position. In addition, this study may provide valuable information on mentoring practices for aspiring female superintendents. The results of the study may also expand and strengthen existing research regarding the inequitable representation of females in superintendent positions. The possible risk, harm, discomfort, or inconvenience to you from participating in this study is minimal. **Although the researcher will take every precaution to protect your confidentiality, it is possible your responses may identify you which may lead to various risks including adverse social and employment consequences. As such, please only share information you feel comfortable sharing.**

STATEMENT OF DATA CONFIDENTIALITY

As a participant in this study, I will not be identified by name on any reports or publications. My confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured during this study and all data gathered will be subject to standard data use policies which protect your privacy and personal information. Only the researcher will have access to the personal data gathered during this study.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY AT ANYTIME WITHOUT PENALTY

If you feel uncomfortable at any point in the research study, you have the right to refuse to answer any question and may also end the interview immediately upon request.

QUESTIONS

The researcher will offer to answer any questions prior to and during the research study. No deception will be used in the research study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Linda N. Reid – Researcher

Dr. Jane Beese – Dissertation Chair

SIGNATURES

I have read all of the above information about the research study in addition to my rights as a research participant. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study and have been given a copy of this form.

My Printed Name:_____

My Signature:_____ Date:_____

I have read all of the above information about the research study, including the study design and the method of data collection. I voluntarily agree to be recorded during the interview process.

My Printed Name: _____

My Signature: _____Date: _____

AGE DECLARATION

I agree that I am at least 18 years of age and therefore do not require parent or legal guardian permission to take part in this study.

My Printed Name: _____

My Signature: _____Date: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____

Linda N. Reid – Youngstown State University Contact info removed.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research at YSU (330-941-2377) or at YSUIRB@ysu.edu

Appendix D

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Chosen pseudonym_____

2. Number of years in field of K-12 education_____

3. Highest degree obtained_____

4. Teaching area/s_____

5. Number of years in an administrative position_____

    Please list administrative positions_____

    _____

6. Number of years as a school superintendent_____number of years in

    current superintendent position _____

7. Current size of school district by enrollment _____under 1500_____1500-

    3000_____3001-4500_____4501-6000_____over 6000

8. What category best describes your school district _____urban _____suburban

    _____small town _____rural

9. Age range_____30-39_____40-49_____50-59_____60-over

10. Marital status _____single _____married _____divorced

11. Children_____

12. Race/ethnicity_____

13. (OPTIONAL) How do you identify? _____

14. Add anything else you would like to share_____

    _____

Appendix E

Interview Protocol Preview

A STUDY OF WOMEN'S ACCESS TO THE SUPERINTENDENCY

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me and to share your experiences related to your journey to the superintendency. My name is Linda Reid and I am a doctoral candidate at Youngstown State University. I am also a current superintendent in a school district in the state of Ohio. Your experience as a female superintendent is important to my research as I hope through my study to learn about your journey in securing a superintendency, your thoughts about the search process as a woman, and other experiences that may help future women who aspire to hold the position. I will be asking a variety of questions during the interview. Please know that if you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions feel free to pass on any question, or stop the interview at any point. The interview will take no longer than 120 minutes of your time. Below is a preview of the questions to be asked during the interview process.

1) For the benefit of the transcription process, please state your pseudonym.

2) I am interested in hearing about your journey to the superintendency. Please describe your career progression?

3) Please tell me about your decision to become a superintendent? What made you decide to use your superintendent's license?

4) Please tell me about your experience with the search process for superintendent positions?

5) As you reflect on the interview process, do any specific instances or questions related to beliefs or attitudes about being a woman come to mind?

6) Did other factors impede the recruitment and selection process?

7) What people or experiences contributed to your desire to be a superintendent?

8) Have you had any mentors, sponsors, or networks that you believe assisted you in your career path? If so, please describe.

9) What barriers affected your career decisions?

10) What, if anything, did you find most challenging about securing a superintendency?

11) What strategies did you use to overcome any barriers in your journey to the superintendency?

12) What characteristics do you think aspiring female superintendents need to overcome adversity?

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Linda N. Reid

Appendix F

Thank you Email to Participants

(to be sent within 24 hours after the interview)

Dear _____,

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me on _____. I appreciate you taking the

time to do so. If you have any additional thoughts, ideas, or reflections since we

conducted the interview, please do not hesitate to contact me. You may respond to this

email or call me, whichever you prefer. My email address is email address removed, and

my phone number is phone number removed.

Sincerely,
Linda N. Reid

Dr. Jane Beese
Dissertation Chair
email removed

Appendix G

Follow up Email to Participants

Dear _____,

Thank you for participating in my study. I appreciate the time you spent with me talking about your leadership journey and your experiences. Attached to the email you will find an analysis of your interview. Please check to see if I have captured your responses accurately. Feel free to contact me with any additional thoughts, ideas, or reflections you may have as a participant in this study.

Sincerely,
Linda N. Reid
email removed

Dr. Jane Beese
Dissertation Chair
email removed

Appendix H

Comparison of Key Findings to Associated Themes

Key Findings	Associated Themes
Broad exposure to administrative experiences can build capacity and skills for the superintendency.	Theme 1, Theme 6
Mentors are influential individuals who support the personal growth of aspiring female leaders in their abilities to lead organizations.	Theme 4, Theme 6
Self-perception and a strong internal drive are essential skills to overcome challenges and achieve career success.	Theme 2, Theme 3, Theme 5
Gatekeeping practices can influence access to the superintendency.	Theme 2, Theme 4, Theme 6
Networks are a resource for leadership development and support for women.	Theme 1, Theme 2, Theme 4, Theme 6

Appendix I

Comparison of Key Findings With Existing Research

Key Findings	Previous Research
Broad exposure to administrative experiences can build capacity and skills for the superintendency.	Supports research by Kim and Brunner (2009), Rochon et al. (2016), and Sperdino (2015), who found that holding several key positions prior to the superintendency builds capacity for the position
Mentors are influential individuals who support the personal growth of aspiring female leaders in their abilities to lead organizations.	Supports research by Dahlvig and Longman (2010), Dana and Bourisaw (2006), Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones (2010), Muñoz et al. (2014), and Sherman et al. (2008), stating that mentors are influential people who support personal and professional growth
Self-perception and a strong internal drive are essential skills to overcome challenges and achieve career success.	Supports research by Barsh and Yee (2012), Christman and McClennan (2008), and Derrington and Sharratt (2009), who found that a strong internal drive can facilitate career goals
Gatekeeping practices can influence access to the superintendency.	Supports research by Davis and Bowers (2019), Kanter (1977), Muñoz et al. (2014), and Superville (2017), stating that gatekeepers can influence advancement decisions
Networks are a resource for leadership development and support for women.	Dana and Bourisaw (2006), Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones (2010), Muñoz et al. (2014), and Sherman et al. (2008), who showed that networks provide leadership opportunities and support women in leadership positions