RULES OF ENGAGEMENT: NAVIGATING GENDER
IN THE SUPERINTENDENCY

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

    The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of LINDA MARIE BOGGS find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

___________________________________
Chair

___________________________________

___________________________________
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RULES OF ENGAGEMENT: NAVIGATING GENDER
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Abstract

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Women in our nation continue to be underrepresented in the role of public school superintendent and there is little extant research about the women who ultimately do become superintendents. Further, there is scant research exploring the role gender plays as both men and women pursue the superintendency.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lives and experiences of four men and four women superintendents to address the issue of gender in the superintendency. Specifically, men’s and women’s experiences were compared to investigate how gender is negotiated in the journey to the superintendency. This study also sought to expand research by Riehl and Byrd (1997), which focused on career mobility as a construct for understanding what factors may inhibit or support the career path in educational leadership.

Analysis of the data yielded two general topic areas: 1) factors related to the professional journey; and, 2) factors related to navigating gender in the superintendency. Further analysis exposed three major themes. First, this study identified communication as a strategy employed by participants to navigate perceived or anticipated gendered experiences. Miscommunication, and the negative experiences which result, were often found to be the catalyst that illuminated
gender as a factor in the day-to-day experiences of these superintendents and contributed to communication problems.

Second, the data suggest that although the men and women acknowledged gendered experiences, sexism, and discrimination in their day-to-day lives, intriguingly, this realization did not influence or shape the advice they offered to men and women who aspired to be superintendents. Women superintendents failed to provide insight or advice, based on their often negative gendered experiences, to aspiring women superintendents.

And, finally, this study indicates that parents’ careers influenced the participants’ own career paths. However, this phenomenon was not directly identified by the participants’ themselves and only emerged through data analysis. The parent’s influence differed between the men and the women in the study – the men’s fathers had positions in educational leadership, including the superintendency, while the women were encouraged or allowed to pursue higher education, but not with the same vigor or role modeling as their male peers.
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Dedication

To my parents,

Darrell and Maureen Michaelson

I am who I am because of you. I love you and I miss you.

I hope I’ve made you proud.

God Bless
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The current landscape of educational leadership, a new epoch (English, 2008) calls upon school superintendents to be instructional leaders of the school community. Utilizing the Interstate School Leaders of Licensure Consortium Standards (ISLIC) English (2008), agrees that among the duties of a superintendent are facilitating the development, articulation and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community, promoting the success of all students by ensuring the management of the organization, operations and resources for a safe, effective and efficient learning environment, supporting the success of all students by advocating and creating a school system culture and instructional program that is conducive to student learning and staff professional development, collaborating with families and community stakeholders in order to address the concerns, interests and needs, and acting with integrity, with fairness and in an ethical manner, and understanding, responding and influencing the political, economic, cultural and social constructs at the local, state and national levels. While he acknowledges the importance understanding the role and responsibilities, English is quick to suggest that the standards may be missing the “artful performance” (p. 192) that is part of leadership and further, this oversight should not be ignored.

A critical player in educational reform, the role of superintendent is foundational to the success of the students in a school system. Nationwide, the role of the superintendent, in K-12 public school administration is dominated by white males and their orientations; however, women continue to be the dominant gender in elementary classrooms. According to the American Association of School Administrators, (AASA, 2000), nearly 75% of all elementary teachers are women. Further, 75% of the superintendents did not teach at the elementary level.
Research on the superintendency, prior to 1980, focused on the superintendency in general and more specifically, the male as a superintendent (Bell, 1988). More current research (Blount, 1998) on women administrators suggests that women’s interests and skills, such as collaborative decision making, focus on human relations and shared leadership, are consistent with the skills necessary to address the current era of school reform.

Bjork (2000) utilizing Shakeshaft’s (1999) study to understand the evolution of women in the superintendency provides a historical perspective of the research on women’s journey to the role of superintendent, as well as providing direction for current and future research. Six stages were developed from the review of the research: a) informative; b) investigative; c) barriers to the superintendency; d) the effects of gender on human behavior; and e) the experiences of men and women working together. Stages five and six, the effects of gender on human behavior and the experiences of men and women working together will be used to frame and interpret the findings of this study. Further, career mobility as a socially constructed concept (Riehl & Byrd, 1997) will serve as a frame for understanding individual, organizational and social context of career development.

Skrla (2000) examined the effects of gender on human behavior, providing voice to women superintendents and exploring the social construction of gender from their perspective. A pattern of reverse discourse emerged renaming as strengths, socialized feminize characteristics that have been typically labeled as weaknesses. This suggests that gender does affect human behavior.

The underrepresentation of women in the superintendency and the persistent barriers to their advancement has been well documented (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Chase, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1987). Highlighting early feminist research that approached the underrepresentation
from the point of view of the women themselves, Bell (1988) found that women experienced perceived gendered experiences during the application and hiring process. Bjork, (2000) states that societal, cultural and professional norms have created a paradigm that suggests that being male is key to accessing the superintendency, thus creating gender bias in the superintendency. Craig and Hardy (1996) found that of the 15,449 superintendents in the nation, only 6.6% of them were women. By 2000 (AASA), the percentage of women superintendents had increased to 18%. This growth becomes less significant when viewed in the context of the teaching force, in which 75% of the members are women. Even with these recent gains, the overall landscape of the percentage of women superintendents in the last century is flat (Blount, 1998). The impact of these concepts acting in concert exposes a potential reason for the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency.

A second possibility can be found in an exploration of the careers paths of men and women to the superintendency. The differences among men and women superintendents are pronounced when preparation for the position is considered. Significantly more women superintendents than men held undergraduate degrees in education. In addition, women spent more years in the classroom before moving into administration than men. Further, in regard to career aspirations, all superintendents were likely to be appointed from outside the district rather than from promoted within, with men being twice as likely as women to be appointed from outside the system (Brunner & Grogan, 2005). Blount (1996) states that while the role of teacher became feminized; the role of administrator became masculinized. The typical career path to the superintendency is high school teacher, athletic director or assistant principal, secondary principal, assistant superintendent and then superintendent (Witmer, 2006). Grogan and Brunner
(2005b) suggest that the differences may exist in the way elementary and secondary teachers are trained and the experiences they have as educators.

Despite the known path to the superintendency, women aspire to the role of superintendent. The American Association of School Administrators (2004) found 40 percent of the women in central-office administration identified themselves as aspiring to the position of superintendent.

Women who do make it to the superintendency stay in the classroom longer than men (Glass, 2000). Further, a recent study by the American Association of School Administrators (2007) revealed that 47% of the women superintendents completed their preparation within the last fifteen years compared to 40% of the men that completed their training within the last ten years. Most superintendents were secondary school leaders and a majority of them had assistant principal experience. This analysis demonstrates that women are poorly positioned for the role of the superintendent, top executive office, and the pinnacle of educational leadership.

The study published by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA, 2007) found that within the next five years, nearly 39% of current superintendents do not intend to be working in that role. This suggests a potential shortfall of qualified candidates. I suggest that this looming shortage is an opportunity to explore the current underrepresentation of women in the superintendency and create a pool of qualified candidates for this critical role in public education administration.

Schmuck (1986) suggests a third possibility for the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency is the women themselves and that they should strive to “fix or remediate the deficits (p. 9). Criticizing this idea, Shakeshaft (1989) calls this way of thinking as “blame the victim” (p. 82).
Research Problem

Women are historically underrepresented in the role of the superintendent. In the early 1980s researchers began to approach this phenomenon through the voices and perspectives of the women themselves. There has been an increase in the number of women across the nation who have assumed the role of superintendent; however, reaching a high of 18% representation in the most gender-stratified position in the nation indicates there remains a significant margin of disproportionate representation. Researchers concur that the underrepresentation of females in the role of superintendent stems from subtle expectations of gender and leadership as well as outright discrimination (Miller, Washington & Fiene, 2006). Riehl and Byrd (1997) suggest the research conducted on women’s career paths “shows different results over time and must be revised periodically.” The looming potential shortage of qualified and interested superintendent candidates (AASA, 2007), coupled with mandated accountability and achievement requirements and the morale imperative to provide the best learning environments for our children, compel the further exploration of the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency.

Purpose

The purpose of this in-depth qualitative narrative research study is to explore the lives, experiences and perceptions of four men and four women currently in the role of superintendent in a western state. There is a paucity of research exploring the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency from the perspective of men and women in the same study. The study will illuminate how men and women superintendents understand their journey and experience in educational administration. The study will serve to expand on Riehl and Byrd’s (1997) study of the factor of gender in career mobility, which suggests that career advancement is structured in the context of the social work environment and the people within the environment. Moreover, the
study conducted by Riehl and Byrd (1997) was quantitative. Studying four men and four women superintendents in a qualitative study allows the researcher to explore the story behind the factors identified in their research while expanding on their work by including the variable of gender. Further, understanding the day-to-day experiences in the gendered-stratified role of the superintendent will potentially expose the effects of gender on human behavior and highlight the working relationships of men and women, specifically:

♦ How do these men and women describe themselves personally and professionally?

♦ What experiences in their career helped lead them to educational administration?

♦ What role did mentors assume in their path to the superintendency?

♦ What advice would they offer to men and women superintendent aspirants?

Methods

This study will use qualitative methods to explore the lives, experiences and perceptions of eight superintendents, four men and four women. The methods will include one on one interviews with current superintendents, with at least three years of experience, in a Western State. A follow up interview will be conducted within four weeks of the initial interview.

Significance

Exploring the lives, experiences and perceptions of current men and women superintendents can add to the existing body of literature, which explores the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency by exposing the effects of gender on human behavior and illuminating the experiences of men and women together.

The findings of this study can potentially impact the way in which men and women prepare for and ascend to the superintendency. Further, the findings may impact the content of
courses in college certification or doctoral programs. Additionally, the way in which men and women work together can potentially be influenced by the results of this study, exposing how men and women acknowledge and manage perceived or realized gendered experiences. Finally, there is potential for the findings to influence policy at the local and state level in relation to equity.
Chapter 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Labor has identified the American public school superintendency as the “most gender stratified executive position in the country” (Skrła, 2000a, p. 612). In 2002, women filled only 14% of the nation’s school superintendent positions, in other words “just over 1 in 10 superintendents is female” (Phelps, 2002, p. 151). The problem is even more pronounced for women of color in the superintendency (Gewertz, 2006; Herber, 2002). The factors underlying this disparity are myriad. Some are structural in nature – for instance, Brown, Irby and Iselt (2002) reported that male applicants to superintendent positions receive over twice as many interviews as do women candidates. The structural barriers often reflect cultural biases, as Brown, et al. added that women receive fewer interviews for the superintendency because they “are not considered viable candidates by school boards,” (p. 163). Lowery, Buck and Petrie (2002) echoed this when they observed that it is much more difficult for women to secure the position of superintendent than it is for them to successfully carry out the job.

Interestingly, although there is “ample evidence of under representation and substantiation of common career barriers” to women becoming superintendents, there is not much research devoted to those women who have made it into high levels of educational administration (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999, p. 1). In the vacuum created by a paucity of empirical investigation, there emerges a general uncertainty about how to proactively address the under representation of women within the superintendency. For women interested in pursuing the superintendency as a career, there is little clear direction as to the best path to leadership and few other women they can look to for role modeling.
This has provoked outrage in some quarters. Skrla (2000a) was unconditional in her denunciation of the failures of educational theorists, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to come to terms with the idea of the gendered superintendency. Blount (1995) writes of this neglect of women public school superintendents in searing terms. “At first, we ignored their presence. Then, we counted them numerically and reported their numbers as neutral assessments of truth.”

Then, we questioned them in our positivist surveys and aggregated their responses with men’s assuming their views and experiences were the same as men’s. After many years, we realized that they might be different, so we designed research that focused specifically on them, but our methods still were androcentric and our questions still were based on male views (Bell, 1988, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1987, 1999). (p. 612).

“A shroud of silence colors how women superintendents consider and speak about their experiences,” Skrla (2000a) argued. And it has further impaired efforts to eradicate gender bias as it is realized in the training, hiring and support of female superintendents. Eventually, “we consciously sought to use feminist methods and appropriately empathetic interview techniques in our research with them – but often we found that they would not or could not talk to us about the discrimination they face” (Beekley, 1994; Bell, 1995; Chase, 1995).

Buell, Schroth and DeFelice (2002) reported that a growing number of educators are making the decision not to pursue careers in educational administration. They noted that a large number of administrative openings (at the principal and superintendent levels) have occurred in recent years due to a high rate of retirement. Further, O’Connell (2000) describes an increasing shortage of qualified superintendents to fill the available number of positions. These factors, coupled with expanding student enrollments, have intensified the need for talented
administrators. And yet, many likely candidates appear to be opting out. Glass, Bjork and Brunner (2000) claimed that “women probably constitute the most important future candidate pool for the superintendency.” (p. vii). It is therefore critical to the health of the profession that the drastic under representation of women in the profession be examined and addressed.

The literature discussed in this chapter provides a context for the further examination of the issues impacting women in the superintendency.

**Literature Review**

The literature review encompasses a look at the literature on gender and leadership (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Billott, 2002; Stelter, 2002; Engen, van der Leeden & Willemsen, 2001; Yoder, 2001; Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000) and how female leaders may express leadership in different terms than male leaders (Barbuto, Fritz, Matkin & Marx, 2007; Chen, Takeuchi & Wabayashi, 2005). Within the gender and leadership literature, there is a small group of studies looking at leadership effectiveness and how it may or may not relate to gender (Choi, 2004; Popper, Amit, Gal, Mishkal-Sinai & Lisak, 2004; Billot, 2002; Herber, 2002; Thompson, 2000; Mayo & Christenfeld, 1999). Studies on women in leadership reveal a tendency to identify gender-specific traits of leadership (Dunn & Brasco, 2006; Eagley & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Schroth, 1995) as well as gender-specific leadership style, such as transformational versus transactional vision and behavior (Stout-Stewart, 2005; Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Powell, Butterfield, Alves & Bartol, 2004; Young, 2004; Yoder, 2001; Thompson, 2000; Carless, 1998; Maher, 1997; Hudson, 1995; Langford, 1995).

The current state of the public school superintendency is explored next, with a discussion of the challenges facing all superintendents, male and female (Pascopella, 2008; Buell, Schroth & DeFelice, 2002; Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000; Shepard, 1999). Skrla’s (2000b) discussion of
the “social construction” of the superintendency highlights how gender has become an inextricable part of how society envisions the job and is supported by the work of others (Al-Omari, 2007; Boonsathorn, 2007; McNeill, 2007; Ramsay & Letherby, 2006; Timms, Graham & Caltabiano, 2006; Aladejena & Aladejena, 2005; Kjeldal, Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2005; Leathwood, 2005; Chan, 2004). The literature examining characteristics associated with successful superintendents is also considered (Hoyle, 2007; McGarity & Maulding, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2007; Eadie & Houston, 2003; Kelleher, 2002; Pankake, Schrot & Funk, 2002; Wolverton & MacDonald, 2001).

How women are achieving in jobs across the spectrum of education is then discussed with a look at the particular challenges that seem to face women in realizing promotional advancement and parity in salary, promotions and tenure (Pedersen & Whisenant, 2005; Monks & McGoldrick, 2004; Sczeny, 2003; Herber, 2002; Lowery, Buck & Petrie, 2002; Langford, 1995). This context is critical for understanding why so few women may be moving into the superintendency from other administrative positions (Howley, Andrianaivo & Perry, 2005; Haar, 2002; Phelps, 2002 Itzahky & York, 2000; O’Connell, 2000; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Langford, 1995; Schrot, 1995).

Issues of power as they relate to gender and leadership are discussed (Katz, 2005; Shields, 2005), including the “normalization” of gendered forms of power (Ramsay & Letherby, 2006; Lesnick, 2005; Skrla, 1999) in order to arrive at a sense of how the superintendency may require women to “act as men” in their leadership efforts. This is followed by a review of the literature on the preparation and training for the superintendency (Brown, Irby & Iselt, 2002; Glass, et al., 2000; Sharp, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2000; Shepard, 1999) and the particular challenges women (and sometimes men) face in pursuing the superintendency as a career goal.
Finally, the literature on mentoring of female superintendents is explored (Bierema, 2005; Hall & Klotz, 2001). The research suggests that the benefits of networking and mentoring for women pursuing executive leadership can be enormous (Goodman, 2002; Gupton, 2002; Salsberry, 2002; Grady, 1995), but that there are some surprising challenges to realizing this ideal (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Young, 2005; Goodman, 2002; Hall & Klotz, 2001; McGlashan, Wright & McCormick, 1995; Watkins, et al., 1995), aside from the simple fact that there are not enough women in the superintendency to provide mentoring for up-and-coming female leaders (Goodman, 2002; Watkins, et al., 1995).

It is the purpose of this study to build on the research reviewed in this chapter and to contribute to the growing awareness that women in the superintendency face challenges particular to their gender in pursuit and subsequent attainment of executive leadership positions in education administration.

Gender and Leadership

The question of gender as it pertains to leadership is fascinating. The debate over what strengths may be specific to gender continues to rage, even as women have realized enormous gains in economic and political power in America over the last half century (van Engen, van der Leeden, & Willemsen, 2001). Much of the research, regardless of philosophical orientation, is in agreement that the mechanisms by which women achieve positions of leadership, and the conditions in which they live out this leadership, are qualitatively different than those...
experienced by male leaders (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Stelter, 2002; Yoder, 2001; Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000).

The attainment of leadership positions demands the development of a leader persona and the pathway for women must differ to that of men for they occupy different socially constructed regimes. Women work with conflicts that often accompany their ascendancy to such positions, including the question of identity, balancing socially constructed and normalized roles and responsibilities, and the issue of marginality both in their professions and the public mind (Curry 2000, p. 4).

The journey to leadership involves negotiation of complex social, psychological, and cultural pathways and these are gender-specific (Billot, 2002, p. 10). This is consistent with van Engen et al.’s. identification of leadership styles that have a “clear-cut ‘gendered’ connotation” (p. 582).

Chen, Takeuchi and Wakabayashi (2005) discuss gender and leadership in terms of “instrumentality” versus “expressiveness.” Instrumentality speaks to “independence, self-confidence, proactivity and self-orientation” and is associated with men, while expressiveness is marked by a facility for interpersonal relationships and caring for others (and, therefore, associated with women). Chen et al. note that some of the research on gender differences in leadership indicates that women are more engaged with work environment concerns, while men are more engaged in pursuing career success. Thus, “the skill learning process for women is social-environment related, while for men it is individual and strategy related,” (p. 789).

Barbuto, Fritz, Matkin and Marx (2007) examine the relationship between gender, education and leadership style and find that the better educated the leader; the less likely there is to be a gender effect on their leadership styles. However, when male and female leaders do
pursue education past high school, the researchers note small but significant differences in their leadership styles. At this level of education, female leaders are perceived by subordinates as using more pressure tactics in their administration than are male leaders.

**Effective Leadership**

Billot (2002) contends that leadership effectiveness is best viewed by considering leader identity and proactive agency. She indicates the leader’s identity is shaped by a variety of social, cultural, environmental, and demographic factors and that this specific combination contributes to the leader’s perception of how and where to take initiative (proactive agency). Billot explains that since identity is so profoundly impacted by societal values, the role of “gendered identity” must be considered as a potent factor in the leadership equation. Thus, gendered identity will influence, and be impacted by, considerations of proactive agency in a leader’s determinations.

However, there also are studies that suggest that leadership characteristics – particularly those associated with effective leadership – are consistent for men and women leaders. Thompson (2000) reports on a study of 31 men and 26 women working in high-level educational administration, in which their subordinates describe their leadership orientation and assess their effectiveness. He found that regardless of the administrative leader’s gender, if they exhibit a combination of “fully balanced” and “moderately balanced” cognitive-behavioral responses to situations (rather than reflecting one didactic approach to leadership, regardless of the circumstances of the moment) they are viewed as successful by their subordinates. The women in Thompson’s study are as likely to exhibit a complex command of appropriate and measured responses as are the men and, consequently, the researcher sees no difference in how they were rated by those that they lead. Popper, Amit, Gal, Mishkal-Sinai and Lisak (2004) argue that leaders are distinguished from nonleaders largely on the basis of their psychological potential to
lead. They delineate this further as a high degree of self-efficacy, optimism, a strong internal
find that self-efficacy may be moderated in part by gender and race, with men regularly evincing
higher levels of self-efficacy than their female peers.

The “dilemma” for women pursuing leadership roles is neatly captured by Herber (2002)
who observes that sociocultural notions of “effective leadership” appear to be at odds with
sociocultural perceptions of women’s strengths and weaknesses. In fact, when reviewing most of
the relevant literature of the 1990s, one notices that women professionals are characterized as
more caring, democratic, and reform-minded than their male counterparts (Chase, 1995; Grogan,
1996). Effective leadership, however, has consistently been found to require traits stereotyped as
masculine, such as autocracy, forcefulness, strength, rationality, self-confidence,
competitiveness, and independence . . . .

In light of society’s perceptions, as well as the leadership research, women may attempt
to gain status by expressing masculine traits. There is, however, a catch. Peers and
associates often criticize women who violate traditional gender role expectations. In fact,
several researchers have found that women leaders acting outside of the feminine gender
role are evaluated less favorably than women who act within their expected role (Eagly,
Klonsky, & Mak hijani, 1992; Nieva & Gutek, 1981). Women, therefore, face a real
paradox in their efforts to become effective leaders. (Herber, 2002, p. 137)

Women as Leaders

Schroth (1995) draws on research in business to identify features of leadership that
appear more typical among female leaders than male ones. She writes that women business
leaders often view their organizations as circles, with them situated at the center of the circle,
gathering information and conveying ideas to others. In this way, they believe they are sharing responsibility for and creating stakes in the business enterprise for staff at all levels, letting them know their opinions are valued contributions. Schroth lists a series of “common traits” seen in female business executives. They:

- are available to listen to and provide feedback to employees;
- prioritize positive working relationships as central to business success;
- are committed to long-term organizational health;
- readily share information with peers and subordinates;
- empower and support others in their decision-making processes;
- identify good communication as central to the organizational environment;
- are responsive to others by exhibiting strong listening skills while being especially astute at reading body language. (p. 128).

These common traits signal the kind of democratic (as opposed to autocratic; Dunn & Brasco, 2006) style that Eagley and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) explore in terms of gendered leadership. Their review of the literature on male and female leaders suggests that women are somewhat likelier to demonstrate a democratic leadership approach than were men. However, the researchers posit that this finding might be explained by other gender forces at work in that a stereotypical bias toward women leaders may inhibit women’s ability to engage in autocratic behaviors – their lack of “legitimacy” thus requires them to engage in more round-about methods of drawing subordinates in through agreement and acceptance.

Schroth’s (1995) observations line up with Billot’s (2002) argument that women leaders are almost by definition “proactive agents” because they have reached a level of power partly by “moving outside of those actions that are permissible and encouraged” (p. 12). In other words, by
not adopting the patriarchal sense of leadership and authority that is so prevalent across cultures, women who emerge as leaders demonstrate initiative in creating their own style of leadership that is shaped by their gendered reality. Billot suggests that such initiative is a form of “creativity” which she identifies as a central driver of effective leadership.

The personal and political influences, events, and changes in circumstances that shape women’s lives, especially through social conditioning and the shaping of social choices and constraints, mold the ways in which women can contest their specific circumstances of concern. By learning the ground rules of what is socially expected and acceptable, women can creatively manage and manipulate available resources, transferring their energies to laterally extend their influence into other areas. As women’s agency becomes more temporally and spatially mature, so women’s ways of viewing their world become modified, influencing further interpretations and actions. (Billot, 2002, p.13).

*Transformational Leadership*

Hudson (1995) reports that transformational leadership, characterized by “collaboration, participatory decision-making and shared vision” (p. 107), is the current watchword in educational administrative practice. She and others (Yoder, 2001; Langford, 1995) note that these features tend to be exhibited naturally by women in leadership positions. Thompson (2000) makes a similar point when he cites research by Rosener (1990, as cited by Thompson, p. 2), that “males characterize themselves as transactional leaders in which they ‘use power that comes from their organizational position and formal authority’,” reinforced through rewards and punishments, while women described themselves as transformational leaders. They attribute “‘their power to personal characteristics like charisma, interpersonal skills, hard work, and
personal contacts’ and encourage subordinates to work for the greater good of the organization” (p. 2).

A number of researchers have observed that the recent embrace of transformational leadership practices bodes well for women (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Yoder, 2001; Hudson, 1995). Whereas, in the past, top-down (“enforcer”) management was the favored and more respected approach and a hierarchical vision more frequently associated with male leaders, recent thinking on how to improve delivery of educational services has recognizes the need for more holistic and democratic approaches such as drawing teachers more directly into the decision-making process, decentralizing school board authority and encouraging more site-based management of schools. Langford (1995) contends that female superintendents and principals interact more with teachers and students than do men. They spend more time in the classroom or with teachers in discussions about the academic content of the school than do males, and they spend more time outside of school hours with teachers (Fauth, 1984; Gilbertson, 1981; Gross, 1964, 1976; Pitner, 1981) as noted by Carol Shakeshaft (1989).

The discourse should revolve around the essential purpose of teaching and learning and how best to create a safe, healthy, caring school community in which all persons are respected, supported and encouraged to learn and grow (Hudson, in press).

Transformational leaders look for ways of decentralizing the decision-making process while simultaneously globalizing the vision. (p. 108).

Carless (1998) surveyed a large group of Australian bank managers (126 women, 239 men) to identify transformational leadership behaviors in this population. Senior staff (14 people), superior to the managers were also surveyed (91% of these were male), as were a large number of employees supervised by the managers – 477 females and 81 men. In this sampling
alone, the effects of gender distinctions in the workplace appear to be evident. The researchers utilize several inventories designed to capture and assess transformational practices. Carless found that while the employees make no distinctions between male and female managers in terms of transformational leadership practices, the managers themselves, as well as their superiors, identify more women managers as more transformational in practice. However, when the specific behaviors are analyzed according to manager self-report, it becomes clear that women managers differentiate themselves from men in the arena of interpersonal behaviors like participatory decision-making, caring and praising. Carless speculates as to the various explanations for these differences, and did not appear to favor one argument over the other. She suggests that the fact that subordinates do not perceive differences in leadership style according to gender may indicate that the effects of gender expectation do not impact workers’ perceptions of those who supervise them.

Maher (1997) and Powell, Butterfield, Alves and Bartol (2004) also note the tendency of researchers to regard transactional leadership style as male and transformational leadership style as more female, although Eagley and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) join Maher in stating that women may be perceived as not having an identifiable leadership style and that this may be a disadvantage in the workplace. Interestingly, Barbuto et al. (2007) finds some evidence that this male-transactional/female-transactional dynamic is flipped when the leaders have a high-school diploma or less education. Given this variable, the female leaders tend to be more autocratic, applying pressure to achieve subordinate agreement, while the high-school-educated male leaders tend toward a much more transformational style of inspiring workers and engaging in “individualized consideration behaviors,” (p. 81). However, this flipped dynamic is not present with male and female leaders at higher levels of education. Stout-Stewart (2005) similarly finds
that female college presidents with higher levels of education are more likely to exhibit transformational leadership qualities than are their female peers who had lower levels of education.

A study of leadership styles among male and female higher education managers was conducted by Young (2004) finds little difference in transactional and transformational practices according to gender. In fact, both the male and female managers tend toward “clear/strong” behaviors associated with both styles. Further, and to Young’s surprise, “all the managers demonstrated the leadership style associated with ‘female’ qualities, although higher education is often regarded as a bastion of male hegemony, where women more often adopt ‘male’ styles,” (p. 98).

The Superintendency

Noting that there is a growing administrator shortage threatening the health of the American educational system, Buell, et al. (2002) contends that there are problems inherent to the administrative field that impact both male and female educators who might be dissuaded from pursuing a career in administration. First among these is job attractiveness, with many educators identifying high stress, long hours, lack of job security, lack of community resources, concerns over housing costs and the likelihood of moving with some frequency, coupled with the comparatively low salaries (Pascopella, 2008). Additionally, administrators are often subject to the whims of changing communities and elected school boards that may contribute to a sense of instability in terms of job security and frustrating inconsistencies in educational practice.

Buell, et al. (2002) suggests that improving salaries is just one mechanism for increasing educators’ interest in pursuing administrative careers. They urge school systems to identify “the best and brightest” among their educators and to encourage these teachers to consider
administration. This effort also could be enhanced by focusing on drawing more women and minorities – currently and seriously underrepresented in the ranks of higher administration – into the process. They note that studies on women educators certified to work in administration but who had chosen not to do so, indicate a number of quality of life issues that factored into their decisions (Shepard, 1999). For instance, one study reveals that 93% of these women “were not willing to relocate due to their husband’s work, family obligations, and the low salary schedule” (p. 172).

Other studies indicate that potential female administrators are happy in their current educational positions and do not see any real advantage to assuming the work and stresses associated with administration. However, Buell et al. (2002) demonstrates that many of these same concerns exist for men qualified to serve as administrators, but who decide not to pursue that career path. The same quality of life issues – concerns over relocation frequency, job stressors, and impact on the family – plague male educators at a rate of significance equivalent to that for female educators. The researchers conclude that the problem may not be so much a matter of gender inequity in recruitment and support of qualified candidates, but a problem with the administrative environment itself and with the expectations associated with leadership in educational systems.

Glass, Bjork and Brunner (2000) report on a 10-year study of the state of the American superintendency undertaken by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). They found that more than half of the superintendent respondents report feeling “very great” or “considerable” job stress. Much of this stress appears related to the ever present concern over financing of school programs. In recent years however, an increasing number of superintendents express stress related to mandated testing (often tied to performance-driven funding), community
pressure groups and concerns related to school violence. Despite these concerns, 56% report being “considerably” satisfied with their work and over two-thirds indicate they would make the same professional choice again, were they to do it all over (Pascopella, 2008).

The Social Construction of the Superintendency

While many of the same issues confront male and female superintendents, a number of researchers contend that women superintendents confront an extra layer of challenge, which might simply be phrased as trying to get by as a woman in a man’s world (Ramsay & Letherby, 2006). Skrla (2000b) speaks in terms of the “social construction” of the superintendency as a masculine one, ensuring that women who take on the role “will necessarily have difficulties caused by their femaleness,” (p. 293). Noting that the executive position was first established in 1837 in Buffalo, New York and Louisville, Kentucky, the job is traditionally viewed as presiding over the day-to-day structural operations (finance, curricula) of the school system. Such tasks are often associated with socially-identified “masculine” abilities such as power negotiation, ambition, competitiveness, and autocratic leadership. Conversely, women are perceived as “nonaggressive,” emotional, risk-averse, and “weaker” in the areas of typical (male) executive strength. This produces conflict for women in the superintendent’s role who must negotiate perceptions of what it means to be a woman – to be feminine – while fulfilling the role of the executive leader. And the problem is not limited to the U.S., as Skrla and others have observed. The literature is rife with examples of this same social construction across nations and cultures (Al-Omari, 2007; Boonsathorn, 2007; McNeill, 2007; Timms, Graham & Caltabiano, 2006; Aladejena & Aladejena, 2005; Kjeldal, Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2005; Chan, 2004).

Skrla (2000b) conducted individual and group interviews with three female superintendents to get a fix on their experience of the social construction of the superintendency
and how it impacted their professional practice. She finds that all of the women similarly identify expectations as to how they are to behave as women, which Skrla sums up as “passive” and “subservient.” She also notes that these superintendents inevitably provide an expanded construct or counterargument upon identifying these socially constructed expectations. Even as they recognize the constraints of the social construction, they formulate ways around it or identify other forms of strength. In her words, the “study participants used forms of reverse discourse by renaming as strengths socialized feminine characteristics that have typically been labeled as weaknesses,” (p. 306). This finding is echoed in Coleman’s (2005) research with female principals in the U.K. Further, while the women in Skrla’s study also identify the social construction of the superintendency in masculine terms, they appropriate these characteristics and adjust them to embrace their “feminine” traits.

This phenomenon is also seen in Leathwood’s (2005) research on social constructs of professionalism and identity in a population of female educational administrators working in the United Kingdom. She observes that while some women are able to embrace a “feminized” management style and apply it without too much difficulty, the majority of her respondents feel conflict in their approach. There is little evidence that it was any easier to combine feminine and manager identities, or to bring feminist values into managing without cost. Many examples from these women managers suggest the continual struggle and negotiation required in the construction of their professional identities.

Leathwood concludes that professions are “clearly gendered” and that efforts in the educational field to restructure the profession result in women attempting to apply their feminine strengths to the normalized goal of “improving economy and efficiency” (p. 405). This, she contends, takes a personal toll on the women leaders and hurts the profession by failing to
capitalize on the potentially positive paradigmatic shifts in theory and practice that could occur if women’s styles of leadership are more valued.

*Superintendent Characteristics*

The features that characterize a successful superintendent may be differently identified in the literature, but there do appear to be certain core values that appear again and again. McGarity and Maulding (2007) describe the chief characteristic of the effective superintendent in deceptively simple terms: he or she “must be able to relate to all interest groups within the school district” (p. 42). This is hardly a definitive picture of what is required to successfully run a school district, although it does suggest the difficulty of devising a straightforward recipe for superintendent success.

Many researchers clearly prize the idea of superintendents who are trained educators (Pankake, Schroth & Funk, 2002; Wolverton & MacDonald, 2001) and who work their way up to administrative leadership through experience in the ranks. Leadership style is increasingly a matter of interest for researchers studying effective school administration. Kelleher (2002), for instance, cites the superintendent’s ability to work effectively with the Board of Education as the chief function of her or his role, arguing that most other duties (for curriculum development, budgeting, and etcetera) can be delegated. How this relationship is most effectively conducted is a matter of some difference depending on the individuals involves but the common denominator of clear and open communication is apparent even when different approaches are advocated.

Hoyle (2007) outlines eight standards for superintendent assessments which provide a template for considering how an effective superintendency is determined:

1. Executive vision and shaping district culture
2. Executive leadership in societal and school board governance issues
3. Executive leadership and internal and external communication

4. Executive leadership and managing resources

5. Executive leadership and curriculum

6. Executive leadership and instructional management

7. Executive leadership and personnel management

8. Executive leadership and personal values and ethics

(Hoyle, 2007, p. 157)

How individual superintendents realize these standards – their characteristics or style of leadership – may be quite different (Waters & Marzano, 2007; Eadie & Houston, 2003). Individuals will necessarily bring different abilities and strengths to their professional practice.

A study of 12 superintendents who had been singled out the by Texas Association of School Boards for finalists in its Outstanding Superintendent of the Year award was conducted by Pankake, et al. (2002). Six female and six male superintendents are identified and interviewed to determine what they had learned over the course of their careers, how their thoughts on the superintendency had changed (or not) over time, and what experiences they attributed with shaping their leadership style and organizational outlook. The superintendents are also asked to identify the characteristics they associated with effective leadership. All superintendents selected “vision, integrity and honesty, knowledge and working hard (energy and stamina),” but the men also identified “being a good listener” and “having credibility” as essential qualities. The women did not select the latter two and instead substituted “passion and commitment” and “promoting leadership in others” (p. 71).

Interestingly, for both the female and male superintendents in Pankake et al.’s (2002) study, the most influential experiences related to their leadership development are traced to
family support (both childhood family and adult-created family). While formal education and work experiences both within and outside the educational field contribute to some degree to the shaping of the leadership sensibility, none were as significant as the family variable. Even professional mentors did not carry as much weight although it was telling, perhaps, that women superintendents identify mentors as contributing to their development as leaders and the male superintendents do not.

Women in Education

While greater parity in the workplace has been realized in the last several decades, the evidence indicates that the proverbial glass ceiling – while perhaps less evident – nevertheless still exists across most professions (Sczesny, 2003). It is, sadly, no different in the educational field. As Herber (2002) notes, based on her own review of the research, women have not advanced in educational administration or in academia at a rate consistent with their male peers. Herber, as well as Monks and McGoldrick (2004), report on substantial gender gaps in promotion, salary, and length of tenure. Another factor is the gender ghetto that appears to have formed in lower levels of administration and academia with women disproportionately holding less prestigious and lower salaried positions (Pedersen & Whisenant, 2005). As Lowery et al. (2002) report, women are well-represented in the principalships of elementary and middle schools across the country. They are much less likely than males to serve as the principals of high schools, which as the researchers note, is a “traditional career route” to the superintendency (p. 244). Studies indicate that the lack of women in positions of educational leadership may be traced to a dominant male culture that “asks the female leader to change or adapt to a logical, factual, objective system to succeed” (Langford, 1995, p. 99).
Female Administrators

Women in educational administration exhibit a management style similar to that identified for women business leaders, as noted earlier in the discussion of the relationship between gender and leadership. Management and leadership practices in education are changing and Langford (1995) contends that the new direction places a “feminine agenda” of “nonbureaucratic, nonhierarchical structures” at the “forefront of school restructuring” (p. 99). Schroth (1995) references a study indicating that female educational administrators are more likely than male educational administrators to:

- have a higher percent of contacts initiated by others
- more often take paperwork home in order to be accessible during the day
- more frequently use cooperative planning in meetings
- have less interest in personal power and are more inclusive
- favor people-oriented projects
- place students first
- value beauty, freedom, happiness, self respect and loving
- shy away from pronouncements and rather use words like “apparently” and “Do you suppose. . . .?”
- more often use language that shows consideration and concern
- listen more and remember more
- observe teachers more frequently and are more knowledgeable about the curriculum
- have more positive interactions with community members

(Schroth, 1995, pp. 128-129)
These female administrators strive to achieve buy-in of subordinates by drawing them into the conversation about organizational goals rather than dictating direction to them (an approach seen more frequently among male administrators). Ultimately, Schroth claims, women educational leaders wield power differently than their male counterparts, seeking to empower staff through inclusion rather than through reward incentives or sanctions.

Haar (2002) reports on research with several female principals to highlight female characteristics of effective leadership (p. 23). She surveyed teachers working with these principals and conducted interviews with the principals themselves. The most oft-cited characteristic for the female principals is their inclination to “empower” others, such as teachers and students. This characteristic appears to be typical of women engaged in work or community improvement activities (Itzahky & York, 2000). Haar’s principals also evinced “openness” to new ideas and expressed a willingness to hear others out. Trust, compassion and understanding are characteristics identified by teachers and the principals themselves, as well as an interest in ongoing professional development and personal education. As Haar observes, these characteristics are entirely in line with “effective leadership” traits as identified by Sergiovanni (2000, p. 167 as cited by Haar, p. 26) and Aburden and Naisbitt (1992, as cited by Haar, p. 24).

Phelps (2002) speculates that women educators may be more resistant to pursuing superintendencies than male educators, having weighed the cost and benefit associated with the position. Similar findings are reported among teachers considering becoming principals – more men than women were willing to view the costs as worth undertaking for the benefit of increased authority and greater prestige (Howley, Andrianaivo & Perry, 2005). Phelps notes that the superintendent answers directly to a school board and is retained at the board’s will. This leaves the superintendent with little recourse to challenge the board’s decisions. Superintendents tend to
move with some frequency between school systems and the attendant mobility can place strains
on family and resources that women may be less willing to suffer, particularly for salaries that, as
Phelps observes, are not much higher than the salaries generally paid to school principals or to
assistant superintendents. These are interesting arguments to consider in terms of gendered
identity and leadership as it pertains to the position of superintendent in particular.

O’Connell’s (2000) research with a population of superintendent search consultants
reveals similar results: that starting salary and school district socio-economic status (and
presumably, the availability of resources to the school) are significant factors in attracting
superintendent applicants and that women and minorities still constitute a very small segment of
the applicant pool. However, O’Connell finds that in the New York State population of
superintendent candidates his research considered, once in the applicant pool, women have a
slightly higher job offer rate than did the male candidates. He does not provide further
delineation, so it is difficult to know whether these female applicants are more qualified than the
males being considered for the same position, as data discussed elsewhere in this chapter
suggests (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999).

Power, Gender and Leadership

Power, as it pertains to women in leadership, is an interesting sidebar to this discussion of
gender and the superintendency. Shields (2005) presents a thoughtful analysis of feminist
research on female leadership and, in the course of it, she notes that “feminist approaches to
leadership have tended to neglect, reject, or, at a minimum downplay the presence of power in
female approaches to leadership,” (p. 77). Katz (2005) also finds that women superintendents she
surveyed demonstrated some discomfort discussing their role in terms of its “power” and how
they perceive their use of it in influencing others. To explain this seeming contradiction – a
leader who eschews overtly recognizing and valuing her power – Katz and Shields refer to the research of Carol Gilligan, establishing that women regard being perceived as powerful as troubling since it “is often a contradiction in both personal and social terms” (Katz, p. 29). Thus, many of Katz’s superintendents speak more in terms of how they influence others, rather than identify this influence as a form of power. They also favor a style of “sharing or giving power” to others – empowering them – as a mechanism for furthering their own power. They believe that when they are perceived as “giving” in this fashion, others sense of their power grew as well.

Further reflection on her interviews with female superintendents lead Katz (2006) to consider that women superintendents “challenge the process,” a leadership practice she attributes to Kouzes and Posner, (1995, as cited by Katz, 2006, pp. 6-7). These women report on ways in which they seek to “change, grow and improve” in their superintendent practice by acknowledging the barriers women face and then challenging the barriers through creative initiative. Among the barriers these superintendents identify are the lack of female role models, difficulty in finding appropriate mentors, insufficient peer networking opportunities, and the simple challenge of being a woman in what has typically been regarded as a man’s job. While the female superintendents identify some differences in leadership style between men and women – men being more authoritative, women being more collaborative in working relationships – it is really in this area of networking and mentoring that they feel women are at a disadvantage because men just do a better job.

Five high level female administrators working in education are surveyed by Shields (2005) to form a picture of how they view their power in the professional sphere. Each of them tells the researcher that others perceive them as having greater power than they actually believe they possess. They also are unanimous in considering their power as “social” in nature – an
ability to get others to buy in to goals and carry out responsibilities through a sense of shared purpose and an embrace of the leader’s vision. The women are also quick to differentiate between this social power and a structural power conferred by the leadership position itself; none of the women are inclined to value that form of authoritative power as much as they do the more coercive but collaborative social power. In an indication of how entrenched the social notions of gendered leadership can be, even given a self-reflective group of leaders such as Shield’s assembled, these women “rejected attributing certain characteristics to women leaders” and yet they revert to describing men as “authoritative” and “non-communicative” and women as “collaborative,” despite their statements that they know male leaders who were likely to empower those around them.

The Normalization of Power

Skrla (1999) suggests that the normalization of the superintendency – the values and principles that continue to guide how it is envisioned and practiced in the U.S. with a remarkable level of consistency despite regional, demographic and cultural differences – is largely responsible for the white male dominance of the profession. She identifies how the “productive effects of power” work through normalization in that the “rules, expectations, understandings, and discourses. . . act to produce the normal situation” (p. 9). Since masculine imperatives have shaped how the superintendency is manifested, it stands to reason that forms of male power constitute the normative expression of power within the position. In practice, this results in an emphasis on structural skills such as managerial ability and finance and accounting experience (Morley, 2005). Skrla observes that more psychoemotional skills might just as easily have become the norm – prioritizing relationships and empowering subordinates – but for the fact that women’s power was not the normalizing effect. Consequently, typically female expressions of
power are considered to be exceptional forms of leadership – standing outside the norm – rather than an alternative form of normative leadership (Ramsay & Letherby, 2006; Lesnick, 2005).

In support of this perspective, Skrla (1999) notes that women superintendents will often admit to an “accidental superintendent” narrative. She refers to the oft-reported accounts of women superintendents who indicate they do not so much pursue superintendency, but are approached to assume it. This vantage point both denies a level of ambition and reinforces the notion that women are “modest” about their capabilities, a culturally-reinforced desired trait of femininity. The emphasis on empowering others, and describing power as collaborative in nature, allows women to “maintain appropriately feminine roles in their organizations while in leadership roles” (p. 17). It is Skrla’s contention that with these masculine and feminine normalizations so firmly entrenched in the realization of the superintendency, it has been virtually impossible to consider the nature of female superintendency from a neutral position.

Preparation for the Superintendency

One of the difficulties in assessing the effects of training and preparation for the superintendency and how they might impact the experience of the female superintendent is simply that there is not been enough research attention devoted to the question of professional preparation. Glass, et al. (2000) say as much in noting that training for school superintendents “has never been a high-visibility program in either university educational administration programs, state departments of education, or the profession itself,” (p. viii). Nevertheless, even with the constraints presented by the paucity of empirical research, Brown, et al. (2002) identifies a host of drawbacks in current school superintendent training programs, with some of them specifically related to gender. It is worth noting them all because they provide context for considering the state of the superintendency today and suggest the ways in which achieving
parity continues to prove difficult for women. Among the failures of superintendent preparation programs are the failures to address:

♦ superintendent/school board interactions
♦ the vulnerability of the superintendent
♦ the important role of a career plan for women
♦ external and political influences on the superintendency
♦ the influence of the media
♦ school board turnover issues
♦ the intense visibility of the superintendent
♦ emotional demands of the position
♦ information about gender in the curriculum
♦ less than rigorous admission standards
♦ overly theoretical curriculum
♦ job related issues and challenges encountered by superintendents

(Brown, et al., 2002, p. 164)

What is encouraging is the report that women “constitute more than half of the doctoral students in educational administration,” (Sharp, Malone, Walter & Supley, 2000, p. 3; Shepard, 1999). Less encouraging is that they currently occupy only 25% or so of educational administrative positions. Further, Sharp et al. note, of the women enrolled in doctoral programs, only about 10% are pursuing a superintendent certificate as part of their degree.

Shepard (1999) finds differences in aspiration level between male and female students and graduates of an educational administration program. While all the students and graduates identify the goal of entering educational administration as their most important objective, more
than half the men indicate that the superintendency is their ultimate career objective, while only 25% of the women identify the superintendency as their goal. Whereas 15% of the women identify “assistant superintendent” as their final goal, none of the men do; and slightly more women (40%) than men (36%) cite the principalship as their ambition revealing some gender differences.

**Challenges and Considerations**

Despite the need to recruit and support more women as educational administrators, it is apparent that the playing field is still not level for women aspiring to the superintendency. Watkins, Gillaspie, Stokes, Bullard and Light (1995) observe that a number of institutional barriers, both structural and cultural in nature, impede women in their efforts to achieve promotion within the administrative division. They reference one study indicating that women working in education realize promotion at a rate of two to ten years slower than their male counterparts. Watkins et al. suggest the subtle, virtually invisible ways in which female educators may suffer from gender bias. School administrations that prioritize student evaluations of teaching performance in order to arrange promotions (a generally laudable practice) may hinder female teachers’ advancement, as studies suggest that women’s classroom teaching performance tends to be more critically evaluated than men’s. This bias also appears to exist in the inverse relationship with many studies indicating that “even well-intentioned teachers repeatedly and subtly discriminate against female students,” (Goodman, 2002, p. 127). Further, the roles female educators often assume – working directly with students in an advisement capacity or actively participating in departmental improvement efforts – place demands on time and energy that may draw their attention away from more high-profile and better rewarded efforts (such as publication of academic work).
Goodman (2002) pursues the question of whether female students experience discrimination (whether overt or subconscious) in educational administration training programs. After reviewing the literature she determines that not only is there a lack of research into this question, but that the “discriminatory treatment of female students” is “barely mentioned in introductory Educational Psychology textbooks,” (p. 129). She concludes that most administrator education programs lack a “female perspective” and that they further discriminate against females by adhering closely to a patriarchal system that values an “authoritative leadership style” (p. 129). Goodman proposes that in order to counteract the potential for gender bias in educational administration programs, universities would do well to embark on system-wide efforts to establish where bias exists (through blind studies) and to shape efforts to correct bias – such as mandatory training in gender bias issues for faculty and staff. She also recommends a series of steps directed toward improving educator training programs through networking and mentoring and by introducing gender issues into the curriculum on a regular basis.

A study of 124 superintendents evenly split between males and females, demonstrates remarkable consistency for what leadership skills the participants identified as needing, but felt they had not been adequately prepared for, in their educational preparation programs (Iselt, Brown & Irby, 2001, as cited by Brown, et al., 2002, pp. 164-165). The women superintendents identify eight topics: “legal issues, organizational culture, climate, ethics, working within the cultural/political system, collaboration, networking, use of mentors, and interviewing practice” (p. 165). These are not topics identified by the men and they do suggest some difference in leadership approach or awareness, perhaps, with an emphasis on organizational culture and negotiating the political issues within that environment.
Lowery, et al.’s (2002) study of 78 female superintendents in Texas identifies motivation (to serve students/to pursue a personal goal) as critical in their decision to pursue work as a superintendent. The support of educational peers and family members is also cited as a contributing factor, but the motivation of “really wanting the job” is central to their administrative pursuit. These superintendents are unanimous in their advice to female superintendent aspirants to network with current administrators and to seek out mentors to provide direction and expertise as they work through their administrative training and embark on interviewing and job application process.

A study of 13 women superintendents leading school districts in Indiana reveals that they had higher educational and professional qualifications than their male peers in the state (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). The researchers observe that this finding is consistent with other studies showing that women tend to be more qualified than the male applicants they compete against for jobs. They also find that the women seemed to follow one of two standard career patterns: one reflecting the importance of hard work and the influence of mentors (often males), and the other reflecting hard work, tenacity, and independence.

In all probability, this basic difference is attributable to an intricate mix of professional and personal variables. Individuals who had a close and trusting relationship with person of influence, for example, may be more inclined to work within the existing system. (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999, p. 38)

Sharp, et al. (2000) distributed questionnaires to 118 female superintendents across three states – Texas, Illinois, and Indiana – to ascertain their perceptions of gender bias or discrimination they experienced in their rise to the superintendency, their perceptions of male power versus female power, the impact of family concerns in their career decision-making
process, and their thoughts about barriers to the superintendency specific to females. Many of the women came to their superintendent’s position after first serving as an assistant superintendent. Some came directly from principalships, most of these being at the elementary or middle-school level, suggesting that it is not necessary to have a high school principalship under one’s belt in order to be viewed as a viable candidate for the superintendent’s position (p. 7). These women did not report experiencing bias from the members of their board of education (the majority of which were male, across the districts and states), nor did the great majority agree with the notion that the superintendency is an innately “male position” in which women are judged according to masculine standards. A majority did acknowledge, however, that “society” held views that the superintendency as predominantly masculine in nature, but they were not personally affected by this awareness. These women superintendents report views that do not align with other research findings, suggesting that women express power differently than do men. While almost 68% felt that women are more collaborative than men, more than half rejected the notion that men were more authoritarian and women more participatory in leadership style.

These findings are somewhat striking when considered in the context of the female superintendents’ responses to questions about their training experiences and networking exposure:

When asked if gender issues were discussed in university preparation programs, 71.3% of the superintendents stated that they had not been discussed. When asked whether some areas were serious barriers, somewhat of a barrier, or not a barrier to becoming a superintendent, 55.2% said that a lack of professional network was somewhat of a barrier. Also, 50.4% stated that exclusion from the “Good Old Boys” network was somewhat of a barrier. Having limited access to formal and informal training was not considered a
barrier at all by 67.5% of the superintendents, but lack of influential sponsors was somewhat of a barrier (53.9%). (Sharp, et al., 2000, p. 9)

Taken together, the female superintendents’ responses provide a complex picture of somewhat contradictory perceptions and conclusions. This may well speak to the difficulty of sorting out the subtle, but potentially profound, effects of socially-constructed normalization (Skrla, 2000a) on the analysis of the gendered superintendency. It also appears that training programs are not addressing issues of gender bias and gendered professional identity, despite evidence that the inclusion of such information can have a positive effect on male and female superintendent trainee’s sensitivity and awareness (Andrews & Ridenour, 2006).

Career Development

Wolverton and MacDonald (2001) reviewed data provided by over 1,900 superintendents working in the five-state region of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington, and initially collected in a survey conducted by the Washington State University’s Center for Academic Leadership. They were curious to learn whether clear patterns of career trajectory would emerge and whether gender would prove to be a factor in the process. They found, as reported elsewhere in this chapter, that women are less likely to list superintendency as a career ambition than were men; rather, they see themselves in “support roles,” (p. 8). It is useful to note however, that women and men pursuing superintendents’ positions essentially spend an equal amount of time on the job search: 73% of the female and 72% of the male superintendents landed their jobs within a year of beginning their search (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

There is also an evident difference in how men and women arrived at the superintendency. Grogan and Brunner (2005) reported that the recent AASA survey found that 58% of the female superintendents held undergraduate degrees in education, as opposed to 24%
of the male superintendents. The women also spent more time on average (by several years) teaching in the classroom than had their male peers. While virtually 60% of the men Wolverton and MacDonald (2001) reported on had been high school principals, less than 25% of the women pursued were drawn from the high school principal ranks. Rather they came from a lower level administrative position, most often the assistant superintendency. This is problematic for women who may be genuinely interested in pursuing the superintendent’s position. Wolverton and MacDonald speculate that some women “falsely believe the myth that by being loyal and remaining an assistant superintendent [and] when the current superintendent leaves they will inherit the position” (p. 11). Instead, they argue, school boards rarely promote from within and are much likelier to hire a recently retired superintendent, or one with an established track record in another district. They also tend to favor applicants with experience as a high school principal. Thus, many women are either consciously or unconsciously removing themselves from the most competitive career tracks leading most directly to the superintendency.

As Cook, Heppner and O’Brien (2005) note, career development for all women happens within a “specific cultural context: that is, the values, customs, and norms of society implicitly provide messages about appropriate and inappropriate career paths based on the cultural and gendered context,” (p. 166). For example, Grogan and Brunner (2005) report that 73% of the female superintendents surveyed by the AASA are more likely to engage in ongoing professional development in the curriculum and instruction arenas than were their male peers (39%). It is impossible to entirely ferret out the influences of these sociocultural factors from the lived experiences of women planning their career goals and making decisions about their professional future. It also may prove difficult for women to conclusively determine that they have experienced some form of gender bias in their efforts to pursue promotion to administrative
office. One of the fascinating findings of Kowalski and Stouder’s (1999) study of female superintendents in Indiana is that when asked if they had confronted and overcome barriers they perceived as gendered in nature, the women who reported that they had not reasoned that either perceived their career experiences to be unique” (p. 33).

This hearkens back to Skrla’s (2000a) claim that women superintendents remain largely silent about their experience of bias in their career development. The silence may be shameful in nature (“It’s only me”) or self-protective (“I don’t want to appear to cry wolf on discrimination”) or self-doubting (“Maybe it wasn’t really gender bias – how can I be certain?”). Regardless of its genesis, what is clear is that the lack of communication about these thoughts or concerns creates a sense of professional isolation that may further inhibit women’s pursuit of career mobility and advancement (Rusch & Marshall, 2006). It also underscores the importance of building community to counteract negatively-reinforcing narratives that shape the experience of a gendered superintendency.

Mentoring

The encouragement and support of female leaders through the provision of networking and mentoring opportunities is a theme that courses throughout the literature and is particularly prevalent in the research on women superintendents. Bierema (2005) cites research showing that women tend to be excluded from male networks in many work environments. This is problematic because, as the researcher notes, “women learn corporate culture . . . through relationships,” and that networks of these relationships serve “psychosocial and instrumental functions” that reinforce and support the women’s perceptions of themselves within the work environment (p. 208).
Issues in the Realization of Mentoring Opportunities

Given that women are underrepresented in the highest levels of administration across most professions, one of the challenges is the shortage of same-sex role models and mentors. Many researchers urge male leaders to serve in a mentorship capacity for up-and-coming women leaders (Hall & Klotz, 2001). However, some men may be hesitant to take on a female mentee for fear of being seen to exert power for sexual reasons, or simply because they assume that women administrators are inherently different and that they cannot effectively serve them as mentors (Watkins, et al., 1995). Another complicating factor may be a sort of reverse discrimination practiced by women already established within the profession. Researchers point to the tendency of successful women to defeminize their personal characteristics. In addition, some females advance by dissociating themselves from other women in the work force and gain entry to the profession through traditionally male networks (Bell, 1995).

These women often avoid associations and other professional affiliations that are dedicated to supporting and networking on behalf of other women, and they may be uncomfortable in discussing the repression they have experienced in a gender biased work environment (Skrila & Benestante, 1998). (Goodman, 2002, p. 130)

For these women, the need to separate from the “sisterhood” may be central to their own leadership identity and sense of urgency in their professional lives. There is evidence to suggest this is not uncommon and that women “do not support other women in getting and keeping a superintendancy” in part because of the “endemic cultural biases” which have shaped the perception of what the superintendency should be (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006, p. 29). Young (2005) refers to this as an aspect of educational “backlash” that shifts the attention away from women’s concerns by suggesting they have been overamplified.
This notion that women pursuing leadership might be “damaged” by their affiliation with women’s networks within an organization is identified by Bierema (2005). Her interviews with 10 female executives participating in an “in-company women’s network” reveals that a number of these women are concerned their participation might somehow harm their careers in a company that is largely dominated by men. They note that some male coworkers jokingly express concern that they are being “trashed” in the women’s meetings and, further, the women indicate that the men in the company view the existence of their network as confirming that women need “additional help” to get by in leadership positions. Also disturbing is Bierema’s determination that while some of the women resist the notion of any type of gender effect in their professional life – in terms of how they were treated or believed they were perceived – when it came to group discussions with the other female executives. In private conversation with the researcher, however, some of these same women acknowledge that their gender “was indeed an issue” in their dealings. Thus, they perpetuate the notion that gender parity was realized in their organization while genuinely believing the opposite to be true.

What this means in practical terms for the network is that no real action toward supporting or encouraging women’s efforts in the workplace occurs. Several female executives cite fatigue – the notion of taking on additional work or responsibility in the face of their already demanding duties at work, while most note the intractability of the patriarchal culture at the center of the organization, as reasons for not more committedly investing effort in the women’s network. Bierema (2005) concludes that in-company networks of women, like the one she studied, may actually further entrench the prerogatives of patriarchy, with women proving resistant to taking collective action to improve their work environment for fear of drawing attention to themselves that negatively reinforces stereotypes of female leaders versus male ones.
The research of McGlashan, Wright and McCormick (1995) observes a similar tendency in women managers working in a male-dominated profession. Bierema observes that those members most likely to acknowledge gender disparities are somewhat more motivated toward changing them through networking or mentoring efforts than those who are inclined to deny gender issues in the workplace. Finally, Bierema states that organizational culture plays a critical role in impacting network success. She illustrates her argument by pointing out these women executives who are extremely potent role models – successful in their own right having come up through a male-dominated profession to achieve positions of great weight –yet together, they are unable (or unwilling) to take on and change the corporate culture to support women executives. Thus, the “social context surrounding the network” has a dramatic part in limiting the network’s effectiveness.

*Mentoring in Education*

Goodman (2002) is adamant in her argument that university training programs for educational administration should provide these mentoring opportunities to female students. Mentoring and networking opportunities cannot just be assumed to occur as a byproduct of increasing numbers of women and minorities at higher levels of academia and administration. As Gupton (2002) states, “a simultaneous increase in their numbers occupying administrative posts” cannot simply be “taken for granted.” Rather, it must “be attended and strategically facilitated,” (Gupton, p. 178). In fact, Goodman asserts that the lack of such programming is in part responsible for the failure to draw more women leaders into educational administration. Salsberry (2002) picks up on this theme, advocating for university intervention in order to establish such mentoring and networking groups.
One such program, implemented at the College of Education at Kansas State University (KSU), is the centerpiece of Salsberry’s (2002) article. She notes that prior to the program, the college had only six female full professors on staff and, specifically, within its Educational Administration and Leadership Department, there had never been a woman with a full professor’s rank or more than one woman at any rank of educator in the department at a given time. In an effort to reverse this rather staggering deficit, the college created a structured mentoring program that assigned at least one mentor (associate or full professor) to every new faculty member, regardless of gender or race. At the time of Salsberry’s writing, the program had been in operation just two years and so had not yet resulted in outcomes of increased rates of women faculty at higher positions. However, the author suggests the mentoring program appears to be leading toward that end, and that adjustments were made along the way to improve the formalized mentoring process, including allowing new faculty to have more of a hand in selecting their mentors and identifying the issues they most wanted to focus on in their professional practice.

In her analysis of an educational leadership conference offered through the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Grady (1995) surveyed 127 women who worked as educational leaders in K-12 education and 116 who were postsecondary educational leaders to determine what prompted them to participate. She found the vast majority of participants cited the ability to network with other female leaders as the primary benefit of the conference. Beyond this, the women identified sponsorship or mentoring (ideally by other women in administrative positions) as the greatest need in their professional pursuits, leading Grady to assert that “women must serve as role models and mentors for other women” (p. 124).
The disturbing fact of the situation is that women working in education are much less likely than men to have mentors in their professional lives (Watkins, et al., 1995). Part of the problem is that men still outnumber women at the highest echelons of educational administration, so there simply are not as many women at this level of leadership who can take on the role of mentoring an up-and-coming educational administrator (Goodman, 2002). But Hall and Klotz’s (2001) study also indicates that, when female mentors are available, both male and female superintendents will opt to have a male mentor. According to the literature, female protégés select male mentors for assistance with career functions because male mentors share knowledge with female protégés about power issues and organizational politics (Gupton and Slick, 1996; Pavan, 1986; Phillips, 1977), provide advice [sic] on how to develop professional goals and objectives (Peluchette & Jeanquart, 2000; Ruhl-Smith, & Shen, 1991), provide coaching and sponsoring (Shakeshaft, 1987, 1989; Sheehy 1976, 1995), and teach them about the dynamics of team playing. In a like manner, “female mentors have chosen female protégés for assistance with psychosocial functions because women have served as role models” (Pigford & Tonnsen, 1993) or “have provided encouragement and support” (Gupton and Slick, 1996; Pigford & Tonnsen, 1993, Pavan, 1986).

In essence, a form of gender-stereotyping is evidenced here with male mentors regarded as providing important structural support, while women mentors to provide emotional and psychological support.

Watkins et al. (1995) advises that women could work towards correcting the structural and cultural barriers they face by building networks of similarly-situated women to provide support and contacts for each other. They notably identify the need for women administrators to willingly step up to serve as mentors to help shepherd less experienced colleagues in their pursuit
of career objectives. These researchers, as well as others discussed in this section, recognize that with a disproportionately small number of women at the highest levels of educational administration, it is necessary to become creative in devising mentoring strategies to assist up-and-coming female superintendents. Bringing male administrators into the process, fostering “gender-neutral” networks, encouraging training programs and school districts to implement structured mentoring and/or networking programs, may all help to create opportunity and provide ongoing support in the face of specific career challenges for women superintendents.

Conclusion

The review of the relevant literature provides some compelling evidence that women continue to be disadvantaged in their pursuit of the superintendency (Brown, et al., 2002; Lowery et al., 2002; Phelps, 2002; Herber, 2002; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). Some of the challenge can be traced to stereotypical notions that women may not lead as effectively as men, a discriminatory bias that impacts women across professional tracks (Barbuto, et al., 2007; Chen, et al, 2005; Choi, 2004; Young, 2004; Billott, 2002, Herber, 2002). But there is also evidence that education, despite the promise it holds out for enlightened understanding and progressivism, is a professional field where notions of women’s roles and men’s roles have become particularly entrenched (Al-Omari, 2007; Ramsay & Letherby, 2006; Timms, et al., 2006; Leathwood, 2005). The entrenchment has resulted in a social construction of the superintendency that fundamentally leaves women, as likely leaders, out of the equation (Skrla, 2000b).

The path to executive leadership in education is muddied as there is no clear consensus as how to best train or prepare candidates for the job. While there is literature on desirable traits or characteristics of superintendents (Hoyle, 2007; Eadie & Houston, 2003), there also is a widely acknowledged scarcity of research on the effectiveness of training programs (Kelleher, 2002;
Pankake et al., 2002; Wolverton & MacDonald, 2001). Further, it is clear that the particular challenges faced by women are left largely unaddressed and unchallenged in university and professional training programs on educational administration (Andrews & Ridenour, 2006; Cook, et al., 2005; Watkins, et al., 1995). Women have less access than their male peers to mentoring and networking opportunities and when they do occur, they do not necessarily materialize as planned (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Young, 2005; Goodman, 2002; Hall & Klotz, 2001). Consequently, we do not have a clear, empirically-supported picture of what works, and what does not (Bierema, 2005; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Hall & Klotz, 2001). As Skrla (2000a) wrote, “it is as if the problem of gender bias in the superintendency was enveloped in silence, encased in secrecy”.

It cannot remain this way if the rapidly emerging shortage of qualified American public school superintendents is to be confronted and reversed (O’Connell, 2000). Women constitute a significant and important pool of candidates for the position of superintendent and it is quickly becoming apparent that efforts must be made to encourage, recruit and support women leaders to step up and into the role, if a crisis in education administrative leadership is to be averted (Buell, et al., 2002; Glass, et al., 2000).
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Introduction

Much of the research on the topic of women in the superintendency and the barriers to accessing the superintendency, including gender privilege and gender bias has been qualitative in nature. However, there is a lack of research that examines this issue from the perspective and experience of both men and women in the same study. The purpose of this narrative study (Creswell, 2003) was to identify, describe and analyze the lives and the experiences of four men and four women superintendents in a western state in order to understand how gender affects their position. The participants participated in individual semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2006). Each participant was provided an opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview within eight weeks of the initial interview. Participants included current superintendents with a minimum of two years of experience. The interviews took place at a commonly agreed upon site. In this qualitative approach to examining gender privilege and bias in the superintendency this dissertation sought to better understand why women are so underrepresented in the superintendency and what role gender played in this phenomenon.

Qualitative Research

Methodology refers to the principles of procedure in theoretic or social science and more specifically to the principles and procedures by which a researcher approaches a problem and seeks to answer it (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The choice of methodology then should match the types of questions that the researcher is exploring. Maxwell (2005) suggests that qualitative data are not restricted to the results of a specified method, but rather a result of the researcher assuming the role of the instrument. It is the researcher’s eyes and ears that are called upon to
make sense of what is heard and observed. Likewise, Glesne (1999) asserts that the researcher as an instrument in the study assumes human interaction as an expected aspect of qualitative research. Researchers engaged in qualitative studies are interested in results, but also are cognizant of the central role that the researcher must play in conducting and interpreting research. Researchers are interested in depth and not breadth, as they seek to understand the participants’ experience, listening for their “voice.” This information is then retold by the researcher into narrative, thus merging the views from participant’s life with those of the researcher (Creswell, 2003).

The purpose of this in-depth qualitative narrative research study was to explore the lives, experiences and perceptions of four men and four women currently in the role of superintendent in a western state, exploring the underrpresentation of women in the superintendency and exposing any potential gender privilege or bias in the investigation of how superintendents perceive the office of the superintendency. This study was unique in examining and comparing gender bias from both the male and female perspectives. The study sought to illuminate how men and women superintendents understand their journey and experience in educational administration. Further, understanding the day-to-day experiences in the gendered- stratified role of the superintendent could potentially expose the effects of gender on human behavior and highlight the working relationships of men and women. The study served to expand on Riehl and Byrd’s (1997) study of the factor of gender in career mobility, which suggests that career advancement is structured in the context of the social work environment and the people within the environment. Specifically:

♦ How do these men and women describe themselves personally and professionally?

♦ What experiences in their career helped lead them to educational administration?
♦ What role did mentors assume in their path to the superintendency?

♦ What advice would they offer to men and women superintendent aspirants?

These research questions helped determine qualitative methodology to be the most practical approach to this study. This method provided an opportunity to explore male and female gender issues through naturalistic inquiry, utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed for personal contact between the researcher and the participant. It also allowed the researcher to cue into non-verbal behavior, such as gestures, body language, and facial expressions. Rubin and Rubin (2005) describe this process as “conversational interviewing.” This approach provided an opportunity for thick rich description and was beneficial in the understanding of elaboration of any potential gender privilege or bias when investigating how superintendents perceive the office of the superintendency. This study was unique in examining and comparing gender bias from both the male and female perspectives.

Criteria for Selection

Purposeful selection was utilized for this study. As Maxwell (2005) states, this type of selection can be used when one wants to compare variables common to participants. This method was chosen as a way to create a participant group that is similar across both gender and representative school district size and geographic location. Each participant had a minimum of two year’s experience as a superintendent. Selection was further defined by identifying superintendents within two ranges of experience. The two groups were defined as superintendents with zero to five year’s experience and those with more than five years experience. Participants were invited to participate through an initial email invitation, followed by a formal written letter of invitation. Because this sample was purposefully chosen, I was able to follow up with non-responders.
As I began the selection process, I sought out and included the input of experts in the field of education that have experience and systems knowledge about men and women currently serving as superintendents in this western state. Field experts were asked to identify male and female superintendents that matched the selection criteria. Additionally, these experts were asked to identify superintendents known for their success in the role of superintendent. The process helped assure that a representative group was selected as well as helped assure that those interviewed were willing participants that have rich and meaningful information to share with the researcher.

Site Selection

The site chosen was a western state. One state was chosen allowing for the data analysis to utilize a single state’s certification requirement and one state’s definition of a public school educational system. Further, due to the researcher’s inability to travel extensively and the plan to conduct in-person interviews, the choice of a single state made logistical sense. As Creswell (2003) points out, this will produce information that is more reliable, rather than contrived to facilitate finishing the interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

Open-ended semi-structured interview questions were used as the main instrument for gathering information. Rubin and Rubin (2007) describe the interview process as a conversation with a partner or responsive interviewing. The rapport between the researcher and the participant becomes more like a friendship. This approach allowed for flexibility in the interview process and allowed the researcher to follow the lead and ideas that emerge as the interview progressed. Wiersma and Jurs (2005) describe the interview process as an interview with an “expert.” The researcher assumed no knowledge or preconceived ideas and sought to learn from the participant.
Both approaches blended together to create an interview protocol that provided the necessary context for eliciting deep and meaningful responses.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. An additional recorder was used during the interview process as a back-up tool. During the interview process, probes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) were utilized to gain deeper meaning and rich descriptive responses. This approach provided the researcher with the opportunity to explore themes and ideas presented by the participants. Each interview was approximately one hour in length. Follow-up questions emerged from the interviews themselves. Notes were taken during the interview process in order to capture specific ideas and possible follow up questions. After each individual interview was conducted, the recorded interview was transcribed and reviewed. Following the qualitative interview strategies and techniques suggested by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995), memos regarding themes, concepts or ideas were jotted into the research journal.

Each participant was contacted by phone, email or in person for a follow-up interview within eight weeks of the initial interview. Anticipating that participants may contact the researcher prior to the post interview follow-up contact, the researcher prepared potential follow-up questions based on notes made during the initial interview and review of the recorded interview. The post interview process asked participants to comment on any post interview experiences or reflections. The length of time for the post-interview process was less than one hour. The initial questions were divided into four sections; personal, barriers, career and aspirations (see Appendix A).

Interview transcripts were transcribed and printed. Each participant had the opportunity to read their individual transcript for accuracy. Each participant had the opportunity to add any thoughts or ideas to the transcript. Each transcript was individually read using an open coding
process. Initial themes or categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) were recorded. The second reading of the transcripts resulted in a more focused coding process. This process helped determine recurring themes that became the foundation for the analysis. Maxwell (2005), states that “there is not a cookbook approach” to qualitative research. Understanding this assumption was critical as the researcher began the process of data analysis. Initial findings resulting in memos became the basis for the findings section of the study. Because of this, it was important to begin the writing process simultaneously with the interview process, as the total amount of data can be overwhelming to a researcher that relegates data analysis to the end of the interview process (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005).

Reliability

Reliability was an issue in qualitative research. Observations and interviews were conducted in a natural setting or context. Replicating the exact study was not possible. Reliability was addressed in the methods section. A methods chapter described the specific design of the study, allowing the reader to gain a clear and complete picture of exactly how the study was conducted and how the results were analyzed addressed this concern (Maxwell, 2005).

Validity

Threats to validity were addressed differently in qualitative research as opposed to quantitative research. The researcher was an instrument in the study and the human experience was a desired and critical aspect of qualitative research. Validity was addressed in this study through member checking and asking participants to read their transcript for accuracy, thus addressing the threat of inaccurate or incomplete information (Creswell, 2003).

Researcher bias was a potential threat in this study, as the researcher is an aspiring woman superintendent. Further compounding this potential threat is the very nature of qualitative
research, as the researcher is the data collecting instrument. To address this potential threat, the researcher strived to remain neutral during the interview process, suspending predetermined or preconceived ideas about the participants’ experiences and potential outcomes. The researcher practiced reflexivity during the interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2007). As data analysis began, follow up questions with participants were used to assess initial theme interpretation and categorization of descriptive responses. Further, as part of the data analysis, the researchers looked for data that contradicted the findings, specifically seeking incongruence in the data.

Ethics

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Washington State University. All participants were given an informed consent form (see Appendix B). The participants were provided a detailed description of the study purpose and design. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form before the interview. Included in the informed consent process is the assurance that a participant can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence and the anticipated amount of time required. Signed consent forms will be kept on file with the researcher along with notes and materials related to the study (Glesne, 1999; Wiersma & Jurs, 2005).

Anonymity was assured in this study. In order to protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms were used for individual participant names and the names of their school district.

Delimitations and Limitations

Qualitative research is not designed to be generalized. It is designed to illuminate a particular issue, person or context. The lack of scientific rigor is a criticism of qualitative research (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005).
A delimitation to the study was the fact that there was no triangulation of the data. Each superintendent responded to questions based on individual experiences and perceptions. The study potentially could have been strengthened by including additional participants, such as district personnel whom most closely work with the superintendent, such as the school board members, central office staff and principals. However, such personnel may have been compelled to speak only of their district and their superintendent in a favorable light. Such responses could limit the analysis and interpretation of the study.

A limitation of the study could be found in the purpose itself. Exploring and discussing gendered experiences can be socially undesirable. Further, as a female researcher, participants may not have felt comfortable responding honestly and completely to the interview questions, but rather constructed responses that are socially acceptable. It was incumbent upon the researcher to build rapport and create a trusting interview environment through active listening and reassuring comments (Rubin & Rubin, 2007).
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

This chapter consists of two sections. The first section provides a description of the participants and their school districts, including a brief listing of demographic information. The second section presents the analysis of the data. The three questions serving as the purpose of this study generated responses in two topic areas: factors related to professional journey and factors related to navigating the gendered role of the superintendency. The themes emerging from the two topic areas: 1) motivations and aspirations; 2) communication; and, 3) advice to aspiring superintendents. The analysis is presented in the context of the research questions, the literature on gender and leadership, the superintendency, mentors and the construct of career mobility.

The Participants and Their School Districts

The eight participants are four women and four men superintendents from a western state, representing schools diverse in population, size, and geographic location. Participants had an average of six years of experience with a range of two years to twelve years. Two of the four women have completed a doctoral degree. The two women not holding doctoral degrees do not intend to pursue one. None of the male participants hold doctoral degrees; however two of the four are in enrolled in education doctoral programs.

Mary

Mary is the superintendent of Lincoln School District, located in the southeast corner of the state. She has been superintendent for less than five years and this is Mary’s first superintendency. She has more than 35 years of experience in education. She began her career as a high school teacher and, by her own admission, had no aspirations beyond the role of high
school teacher. Mary describes a pivotal point in her career when the students she was instructing started asking her for help in areas in which she felt ill-prepared to assist them. This feeling of inadequacy coupled with a desire to help her students led Mary to earn an additional degree in counseling. When a colleagues’ unplanned medical emergency drew Mary into administrative duties, she again found herself unprepared, but intrigued by the new assignment and responsibilities. She found herself returning for an additional advanced degree, this time in administration.

Mary describes her journey to the superintendency as “always keeping as many doors and options open because you will never know when another door will open and if you don’t try a lot of options, you will be pigeonholed to do only one thing.” Mary had experience at the secondary level and central office before she was appointed to her current position of superintendent and she is the first female superintendent of the Lincoln School District. This distinction did not go unnoticed in her community.

At the time of my appointment, I can’t count the number of people that have commented on the fact that I was the first female superintendent in Lincoln, ever, and that’s when gender started to really, like, whoa, is that an issue?

Mary is married and has two grown children. Her journey shows a working mom who attended school, often along side her own children. However, they were grown and out of the house when she assumed the role of superintendent of Lincoln School District.

Lincoln School District serves more than 15,000 students. The school district is somewhat diverse, with its demographics comprised of 67% white students, 25% Hispanic and 6% representing a combined total of Native Americans, Asian and Black students. Forty-one percent of the students participate in the free or reduced lunch program. The district has about
1,300 students who qualify for language support through bilingual services as they learn English and nearly nine percent of district students receive migrant services. The special education population is approximately 10%.

On state mandated tests required in response to the No Child Left Behind federal legislation, the district outscores the state results in all but two grade levels. On-time graduation for this district is 70%.

Corey

The second participant, Corey, has been the superintendent of Wilson School District for eight years. Prior to assuming the superintendency in Wilson, Corey served as a superintendent for four years in a neighboring district. Corey, at 62, is the only participant in the study to have prior experience as a superintendent. She has 10 years experience as a classroom teacher, all of which were completed in states other than the western state chosen for this study. She has served in several leadership roles, including elementary principal, director of curriculum, assistant superintendent for curriculum and assistant superintendent of district operations for a total of 14 years of experience prior to assuming her first superintendency within the district in which she had been working. Corey is the only participant who did not complete a superintendent credential as part of her preparation and ascension to the superintendency. This is unusual, as the majority of current superintendents in this western state hold a superintendent credential.

At the time of this study, Corey has been single for several years and she has four grown children as part of a blended family. She thrives on being a grandmother to her five grandchildren.

Located in the northeast corner of the state, Wilson School District has approximately 950 certificated, serving more than 8,500 students in grades K-12. Of the staff members, 53%
have at least a master’s degree in education. Their average length of teaching experience is 13 years. Typical of public schools in this state, Wilson School District employs a variety of support staff including secretaries, paraprofessionals, food service workers, custodians, nurses, maintenance and facilities workers, bus drivers, and classified staff in special programs, business and finance and human resources.

Wilson School District is somewhat diverse. The demographics are 70% white, 12% Asian, 4.5% Black, 9% Hispanic and 1.5% Native American. Approximately 32% of the students participate in the free or reduced lunch program, and about 12% of the students receive special education services. Additionally, Wilson School District serves a small percentage of students qualifying for transitional bilingual programming. These demographics align closely with the demographics of the state.

Students in Wilson School District perform above the state average on annual mandated testing. The school district graduated 74% of their high school seniors in the 2005 school year, with an extended graduation percentage rate of 80%. Extended graduates are defined as those students completing high school graduation requirements after their cohort class has completed the requirements.

Sarah

Sarah has been superintendent of Fairmont School District for more than five years. Fairmont is her first superintendency and she is its first female superintendent. At 64 years old, she is the oldest participant in the study. Sarah began her career as a primary elementary teacher, and then held several district leadership roles, including responsibilities in grant management, human resources and the curricular areas of reading and bilingual education. Early in her career, she taught at the collegiate level. Her experience in higher education is unique to the other
participants in the study. Similar to six of the participants, her decision to pursue administrative certification was the result of someone else’s suggestion.

Nestled just outside a much larger area, serving a population of more than 200,000 students, Fairmont School District serves a community of about 6,000 residents. The community not only values education, but often looks to the district’s musical, athletic and school events for family entertainment. Serving fewer than 1,000 students, the district has a small enrollment when compared to the districts of the other superintendents in this study. It is this very quality that drew Sarah to the open position in the first place. “I knew I wanted to be the superintendent in a town where I would be involved in all aspects of the school operation and know everyone’s name. And I do.”

Fairmont is a somewhat diverse school district with a 21% Hispanic population. The district’s special education population is 10%, which is below the state average of nearly 13%. Nearly 55% of the families qualify for the free or reduced lunch program. Student achievement is lower than the state in all academic areas tested and reported.

The 58 teachers of Fairmont average 16 years of teaching experience. Over sixty percent of the staff has at least a master’s degree in education.

Morgan

Located near hiking trails and dozens of lakes, Danbury School District serves approximately 4,000 students. Morgan has been superintendent for less than five years. As with all but one of the participants, this is Morgan’s first superintendency. He completed a superintendent credential program prior to accepting the position in Danbury. Before assuming the role of superintendent of Danbury, Morgan was a high school teacher for eight years, high school assistant principal and high school principal and he held a central office position...
providing support to principals. Morgan has been an educator for 27 years and he respectfully acknowledges several people throughout his career who have been instrumental in helping him achieve the superintendency. He remains in contact with many of these people. Morgan is in the process of completing his doctorate degree in educational leadership.

Danbury School District demographics are comprised of 85% white, 3% American Indian, 4% Asian and 5% Hispanic. Approximately 41% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The district serves 15% of their student body through their special education program. Students generally score higher than the state average on mandated annual tests. The district graduates nearly 85% of their seniors on time, reporting a drop out rate of only three percent.

Teachers in Danbury School District have an average of 14 years’ teaching experience. An impressive 73% of the teachers hold at least a master’s degree.

Paul

Paul has been the superintendent in Livingston for more than five years and this is his first superintendency. Livingston School District, with a student population of 2,800, is situated near the border of a neighboring state. This border town district is a predominately white, lower-to-middle class working community. Paul completed a superintendent certification program as part of his preparation for the superintendency. He began his career as a coach and substitute teacher. Prior to becoming a building administrator, Paul taught at the high school level. Early in his teaching career Paul was encouraged to seek a master’s degree in educational administration. His family has ties to education and he grew up believing that teaching was “a noble profession.” Paul considers his family values and the support and encouragement of high school teachers and previous administrators as instrumental in guiding him toward his current role as superintendent.
When asked if he would have pursued administration as a career without support and encouragement, Paul responded, “I don’t know.” Paul is currently in the process of completing his doctorate degree in educational leadership.

Livingston School District employs approximately 150 teachers. Approximately 60% of the teaching staff holds a master’s degree and they have a combined average of 15 years’ experience. Nearly 48% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch program. Fifteen percent of district students qualify for special education services, which is slightly higher than the expected state average. This district is not diverse. The demographics are 90% white with the remaining 10% collectively representing American Indian, Asian, Black and Hispanic. Students in this district score below the state average on mandated tests in all but two grade levels.

Mitchell

Mitchell has been the superintendent of Morrison School District for less than five years. At 47, Mitchell is the second youngest participant. Prior to becoming superintendent, Mitchell, like Morgan, was a high school teacher and coach, an assistant high school principal and a high school principal in a different district within the same state. Mitchell speaks highly of his tenure as a high school principal, stating “I thoroughly enjoyed the job, the people, [and] the community.” During his tenure as a high school principal, Mitchell completed his superintendent credential. Mitchell, like Sarah and Mary, does not plan to pursue a doctorate degree.

Located in the northeast section of the state, Morrison School District supports a small rural community. The district serves nearly 2,000 students and is the least diverse of the eight districts represented in this study. The demographics are comprised of 95% white, with the remaining five percent collectively representing American Indian, Asian and Hispanic. The
district serves just 10% of its population through special education services. Nearly 60% of the students qualify for the free and reduced lunch program. The district does not serve any migrant population and less than one percent of the students qualify for language enrichment services through the transitional bilingual program. Students in this predominately white, lower-middle class school district score near or above the state average on mandated state tests.

Teachers in Morrison District have a combined average of just more than 13 years experience in education. Nearly 65% of the teaching staff holds at least a masters degree.

Tony

Tony is the superintendent of Porter School District. At 40, Tony is the youngest superintendent among both male and female participants. He is ten years younger than the youngest female superintendent. This difference is even more pronounced when considering Tony has just completed his seventh year as a superintendent of the Porter School District. Prior to assuming his current, Tony was an administrator in a small school district located in the central part of the state. Because of the small student population of his previous district, Tony assumed the role and responsibilities of all building and central office administrative duties. Tony completed his superintendent credential during his three year tenure in this small district. In reflection, Tony realized that his career path from the role of classroom teacher to the role of sole administrator in charge of all central office responsibilities may not have been the best choice. “I would not recommend my path to where I am right now, because I was a teacher and I went from teacher to the [administrative] position.”

Porter School District is located in the eastern half of the state. The student enrollment is under 1,000. The district demographics are comprised of 57% white, 40% Hispanic and a combined American Indian, Asian and Black population of approximately 2.5%. Nearly 60% of
the student population qualifies for the free and reduced lunch program. Thirteen percent of the students qualify for special education services. The transitional bilingual program provides language support for about 170 students and 10% of the student population is identified as migrant. Students in Porter score near the state average on the annual mandated tests.

Of the teachers working in Porter School District, nearly 81% have at least a master’s degree and their average teaching experience is 11 years.

*Monica*

Monica has 22 years experience in education. She is in her first superintendency in Lewis School District. Monica has less than five years experience in this position. Prior to becoming a superintendent, she taught special education, held elementary administrative positions, and served in various central office position including roles in technology, teaching and learning and assessment. Monica made the decision to complete her doctorate and superintendent credential simultaneously, first finishing the requirements for the superintendent certification and then, two years later, completing the doctorate. Monica decided early in her career that “I maybe need to do my continuing education in something that might cross over to other areas so I have choices available to me.” She had no desire to become a principal or a superintendent at the time she went back to school, but rather sought professional certification that she believed would provide ample future career opportunities. “I was looking at what was practical,” quipped Monica. It was not until she was immersed in the certification program that she recognized that administration was an appealing option and a role in which she could see herself.

Located in the northern part of the state, Lewis School District encompasses the boundaries of multiple cities. Since there is no downtown or central area served by the district, the geographic make up creates communication challenges. Lewis School District serves nearly
15,000 students and demographics for this community are 59% white, 15% Hispanic, 14% Asian, 5.2% Black and 1.6% American Indian. This diversity also represents approximately 75 different languages. These demographics come close to representing the demographics of the state. The district supports nearly 40% of its students in the free and reduced lunch program, with schools having individual percentages ranging from nine to 75 percent. Twelve percent of the students in Lewis School District require special education services. The district does not have a migrant population, but serves nearly 15% of its students in language development in the Transitional Bilingual program. Students score above the state average on mandated tests in all but one grade level. The on-time graduation for high school seniors in the district is 65%.

Approximately 53% of the teachers in Lewis School District hold at least a master’s degree. The average number of years of experience for teachers is just slightly more than 11 years.
Table 1

Participant Demographics and their District’s Name and Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Supt. Cred.</th>
<th>Years Adm</th>
<th>Years Supt</th>
<th>District Name</th>
<th>District Size¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corey</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Langdon</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lewis</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Fairmont</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Danbury</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Porter</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Small < 3000; Medium 3000 – 8500; Large > 8500.
Data Analysis

The participant’s responses were analyzed for emerging themes or common patterns related to the research questions. Content analysis was conducted utilizing the coding categories generated from the research questions. How do these men and women describe themselves personally and professionally? What experiences in their career helped lead them to educational leadership administration? What role did mentors assume in their path to the superintendency? What advice would they offer to men and women aspirants? Further analysis used the construct of career mobility found in the research of Riehl and Byrd (1997).

The coding process began with an initial review of each completed interview transcript and a review of the digital recordings of the interviews. The coding process continued by organizing the data into meaningful chunks, based on commonalities among the participants’ ideas, phrases, or use of language patterns. The data was then labeled according to defined categories. In some instances, participant statements, such as “in the driver’s seat,” were included in more than one category, allowing the importance of the statements and impact of the responses to be captured in the analysis. Also included were statements made by the participants about how they view their ascent to the superintendency and how they describe their journey. The use of these terms was not necessarily present in the current literature; however, excerpts of the transcripts facilitated coding under these categories based on the participants’ statements (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Creswell, 2003; Seidman, 1998). For example, one participant attributes his ascension to the superintendency as “the spiritual side…I was designed to be an administrator.”

The three questions serving as the focus of this study generated responses in two topic areas. These include factors related to the professional journey and factors related to navigating
the gendered role of the superintendency. Three themes emerging from the two topic areas were: 1) motivations and aspirations; 2) communication; and, 3) advice to aspiring superintendents.

As the shortage of interested qualified superintendents looms, and the underrepresentation of women superintendents persists (ASAA, 2007), it is paramount to expose barriers related to career mobility and to illuminate successful strategies, thus paving the way for not only any interested potential superintendents but, more importantly, providing guidance and access for women aspirants.

Factors Related to the Professional Journey

The findings of this study are consistent with the current literature. The women did not aspire to the superintendency. When the opportunity of an open superintendency position presented itself in their respective districts, neither Mary nor Monica desired the open position. Mary was shocked when she found herself faced with the suggestion of an appointment to the role. Monica had to be talked into applying. Supporting this perspective, Skrla (1999) notes that women superintendents often admit to an “accidental superintendent” narrative. She refers to reported accounts of women superintendents who indicate they do not necessarily pursue the position of superintendent, but are asked to consider the possibility. This explanation reinforces the notion that women are “modest” about their capabilities, a culturally-reinforced desired trait of femininity. This phenomenon was mentioned by three of the women participants. Sarah sums it up this way, “oftentimes women don’t see themselves in a driver’s seat. They see themselves in a support role.” Conversely, the male participants, once committed to education administrative credentials, set their sights on obtaining a role as an educational leader and further speak of their intention of becoming a superintendent. Shepard (1999) finds differences in aspiration levels between male and female educational administration graduate students. While
all of the graduates identify the goal of becoming an administrator, more than half of the men indicate that the superintendency is their ultimate career goal.

A study of 13 women superintendents leading school districts in Indiana reveals that they had higher educational and professional qualifications than their male peers in the state (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). The participants in this study are similar. Two of the four women hold doctoral degrees. None of the men in the study hold this credential, although two of the men state they are in pursuit of a doctoral degree. Morgan even suggests that he might not complete his doctoral degree, stating “if I could finish” as opposed to using the words “when I finish.” The fact that they have not earned a doctorate has not negatively impacted their ability to obtain a superintendent’s position, suggesting women might assume they need to be better prepared before seeking the superintendency.

Analysis of the interview data allowed for coding factors related to the professional journey of each participant. Participants did not articulate their responses using the term professional journey, however, the process of analysis led to specific patterns and coding categories that were present in the literature (Cook, Heppner & O’Brien; 2005; Grogan & Brunner; 2005; Skrla, 2000). Final analysis of exposed the first topic area: factors related to the professional journey and emerging themes motivations and aspirations.

Motivations and Aspirations

The participants shared a variety of factors that contributed to their ascension to their current role of superintendent. The literature (Stelter, 2002; Yoder, 2001) is clear: the way in which women achieve positions of leadership and the conditions in which they live out this leadership, are different than those experienced by male leaders.
The attainment of leadership positions demands the development of a leader’s persona and the pathway for women must differ to that of men for they occupy different socially constructed regimes. Women work with the conflicts that often accompany their ascendancy to such positions, including the question of identity, balancing socially constructed and normalized roles and responsibilities, and the issue of marginality both in their professions and the public mind (Curry 2000, p.4).

The participants in this study suggest this journey harkens back to early motivations and aspirations, or lack thereof. Their early experiences suggest that the socially constructed role of educational leadership developed long before their formal education began. And further, it helped shape individual identity and define acceptable roles and responsibilities for men and women.

Mitchell’s parents were both involved in education. His dad was a teacher and his mother a secretary. Even though the influence of public education was part of Mitchell’s daily life as a child, as he grew and found himself contemplating his future, he did not start his college career with the goal of being an educator. He went to college in hopes of becoming an attorney. For the first time in his life, he found himself disillusioned with school. “I didn’t enjoy it,” he said. It was during a test in business class that Mitchell says he had a personal epiphany, realizing “I could care less about this.” This self-realization caused him to change majors, which resulted in a teaching certificate. It wasn’t until he had an unsuccessful school experience that he realized that his parents’ influence was a motivator towards becoming an educator, Mitchell responded, “I was always around educators.” Although he didn’t realize it at the time, his future aspirations can be attributed back to the influence of his family.
He became a high school social studies teacher and coached a variety of sports. Mitchell found his way into educational administration by default. As he was contemplating the requirements of a fifth year or a master’s program, he decided “that the master’s in teaching didn’t appeal to me and it probably should have but it didn’t…so I ended up getting into administration just ‘cuz I wanted to get a master’s while I was doing my fifth year.”

There were two key factors that motivated his decision not to apply for a superintendent position. His family did not want to move at the time and he was “pretty happy” in his current position. However, a new superintendent came on board, and changed how Mitchell felt. It “was just time to go,” he said. He knew that he would be a principal at some point and, after encouragement from the superintendent in his first superintendency he thought “it would be kind of neat to be a superintendent.”

Similar to Mitchell, Morgan started his career as a social studies teacher and basketball coach. During his first six years, he completed his master’s degree and principal’s certification. Morgan was sure about his decision to pursue administration because “I sort of knew I wanted to do that at some point.” However, there were other motivators. In particular, the first two principals he worked for were “horrible,” and one of the reasons he went back to school “right away” was his thinking that schools “deserve a different kid of leadership.” Morgan describes his motivation and aspiration according to the findings in Chen, Takeuchi and Wakabayashi (2005), who discuss two terms for gender and leadership: “instrumentality” versus “expressiveness.” Instrumentality speaks to “independence, self-confidence, proactivity and self-orientation” and is associated with men, while expressiveness is marked by a facility for interpersonal relationships and caring for others (and therefore, associated with women).
He believes that what ultimately led him to his first superintendency was his good fortune to get an assistant principal position in a district where he had only been working for two years. He also believes experience in more than one district has been helpful in his superintendent role. In his path to the superintendency, he notes that “since my very first administrative job, I’ve never applied for [a job]…and gotten another one that I wasn’t asked to apply for.” His first superintendency was not a random choice. A board member from the Danbury School District that he knew fairly well had shared how strongly she felt about the district. Never “did I think someday I will be at Danbury,” he says. So he was predisposed when he was approached about the superintendency in Danbury and replied that “Yeah, I probably would be interested.”

Paul comes from a family of educators. His father was a superintendent, a brother is a principal, and a sister is a former administrator. Paul’s family believes education is a “noble profession.” Like Morgan, he had thought about administration prior to becoming a principal, because his “dad had done that.” Billot’s (2002) study would suggest that Paul learned about the complex social, psychological and cultural pathways inherent in the negotiation of the gendered role of leadership through observing and conversing with his father. He was thus motivated to aspire to administration through early development of a leadership persona.

He thought he’d go teach and then become an administrator. In reflecting on this decision, he states “when you are young and naïve, it’s a piece of cake.” Paul was encouraged by a high school teacher and a coach, and also encouraged by his principal in his first year of teaching to “go back and get your master’s degree and at the same time you need to get your administrative credential.” These early suggestions from mentors have “guided and directed” him throughout his educational journey. He remains in touch with these influential people today.
As a high school principal, he received strong encouragement to pursue the superintendency by people in the central office, including the superintendent.

Tony’s journey into educational administration harkens back to a failed attempt at passing an entrance test in an unrelated career field. “I kept failing the test and pretty soon, I guess, you can only take it two or three times before the program says no.” Tony shares thoughts of feeling directionless, “I don’t know what to do. What am I going to do?” Again, Chen et al. (2005) can help explain the self-directed questions through the term “expressiveness.” Even though Tony shares momentary thoughts of being unsure of his future, he knew enough to ask the questions and seek answers.

Tony found his direction through the words suggested by a woman, as he worked on her home computer. As he helped her learn how to use the newly installed software programs, she advised him that “you should be a teacher; you’re very good at this.” This exclamation proved to be a pivotal point for Tony, as he returned home and said to his then girlfriend, “Hello…I’m going to be a teacher!” However, Tony’s newfound direction and excitement were slightly dimmed when he realized he must also select a major. His final course of action led him to a middle school teaching position.

During his tenure as a middle school teacher, Tony found himself facing another crossroad. He began courses that would prepare him to be a counselor. He interacted with a couple of people along the way, who said,

You really ought to consider the school administrative track because school administration has more doors [and] probably fits your personality a little better and so I said ‘well, oh okay’ and I was young and impressionable of course so I went off on the school administration track. So, I wasn’t originally thinking I was
going to be an administrator and so the spiritual side of me would say I was designed to be an administrator.

Tony completed his administrative credentials during the five years he spent as a middle school teacher. Then, unique to the other male participants in this study, Tony assumed his first superintendency prior to completing the superintendent certification process.

In reflection, Tony strongly advises, “I would not recommend my path to where I am right now. I was a teacher and I went to that [ABC School District] so I did not have any other administrative official titles at all.” This is a remarkable statement considering Tony realized times where his future was in flux. And yet, he not only completed administrative credentials, his first role as an educational leader was as a superintendent. Although Tony did not speak at length about his upbringing, his journey implies he was motivated by social, cultural, environmental or demographic factors. Billot (2002) explains that since identity is so profoundly impacted by societal values, the role of “gendered identity” must be considered as a potent factor in the leadership equation. Thus, for Tony, gender identity more than likely was shaped early and was at play as an influence as he considered his ascension to the superintendency.

Monica does not identify early influences that led her to the field of education. She begins the story of her journey to the superintendency with a description of her reasoning for obtaining an administrative credential. It was a practical decision, based on her understanding that,

I was teaching special education, and I heard the burnout rate was high, maybe I need to do my continuing education in something that might cross over in other areas, so I have choices available to me. That is why I looked at administration, not because I had a desire to be a principal.
When she got into the program she decided “I can do this.” Once she was in the program, her principal was encouraging and remains in contact with her today. It is possible that Monica’s skills and leadership orientation can be described similarly to those studied in Thompson (2000), suggesting that regardless of gender, the women in this study exhibit a combination of “fully balanced” or “moderately balanced” cognitive-behavioral responses to situation and are viewed to utilize a complex command of appropriate and measure responses, as are the men. Consequently, there is no difference in how they are rated by those that they lead. Minus data from Monica, and acknowledging that the work of Chen et al. (2005) applies, it can be assumed that Monica understands the socially constructed definition of educational leadership. Coupled with the practical approach to her career path, she exhibits “instrumentality” suggesting she acted more like a male. Thus, she was self-motivated and negotiated her future.

Monica’s first administrative position was with a male principal. She expressed a desire to be the principal at a new school that was being built, and he agreed to help her prepare for the position. She states that female mentors have come “after the fact.” Her “initial observation was that women don’t aggressively seek out other women and encourage them to administration [like men] always do. But they are great mentors once you are in there and on the path.” A new male superintendent was hired in her district, and Monica did her internship with him. And while she believes that he would “probably tell you that he was sure that I would go ahead and be a superintendent,” she says she “did not necessarily see that in myself.”

She describes the challenge of doctoral work and “always having choice in what I do” as important, rather than the goal of a superintendency. She obtained her superintendent credential because, again, it was a practical move. She discovered that “you might as well get the credential because you pretty much have taken all the coursework anyway and you could do an internship.”
When Monica moved to a different district, she assumed various different central office roles. After several years, she moved to a new district and assumed a central office position in the teaching and learning area.

An unexpected vacancy in the superintendent’s position in that district created the opportunity for Monica to gain her first superintendency. Although qualified and credentialed, she initially was not going to apply for the position. In her view, she was the youngest and least senior of the central office leadership. However, the deputy superintendent took her aside and said, “we want you to apply for the job.” Initially, she did not take the suggestion seriously, but when she returned to work after the weekend, she was again approached and told the cabinet was serious in encouraging her application. At that point, she decided to apply and was successful in gaining the position.

Sarah has always looked for challenges. She taught several different elementary grade levels and taught college classes at nights. Her fifth year program completion was followed by a program manager’s credential. A divorce “geared me into doing more things, and then I started working on a master’s degree.” She had always enjoyed administration as part of her program manager’s role. She decided to try the principalship and got her administrative credential. For 15 years, she was a principal at different schools, specializing in “cleaning up messes.” Sarah discovered that “I didn’t like staying in a particular position for too long.”

After these 15 years Sarah decided “that was enough. I needed some kind of challenge.” She went into the superintendent’s office and told him she needed a challenge of some sort. He told her “I’ve got an opportunity for you.” She then entered the superintendent’s program. She liked the idea of being a superintendent because “it was very similar to a principal’s position” in
that it had “the direct line power to make direct changes.” This was the first time she intentionally sought a different position.

Sarah describes gaining positions in this way: “it was always like I fell into things, more than being very intentional. Once I decided I wanted to be a superintendent I was very intentional about that.” This self-reflection suggests that once Sarah made up her mind to learn something different or pursue a different position, the concept of drift (Riehl & Byrd, 1997) did not apply. Sarah’s actions, like Monica’s, suggest she has an understanding of the superintendency as a gendered role, but at the same time possess self-efficacy, allowing her to aspire to the role regardless of the challenges she may face. It was during the time she was a human resources director in a larger district that Sarah says she “decided that I wanted to go to a small school district because I like the people contact.” She interviewed for several jobs before being offered a superintendency. She was encouraged to apply by an acquaintance, who said “oh just apply for the position and let them turn you down.” She applied, interviewed, and left on vacation for six weeks. On her return, she was re-interviewed as one of two finalists and then offered the position the next day.

Thirty six years ago, Mary “never, never expected that I would be sitting in the role I am now in a district with over 15,000 students.” When she began her career as a high school English teacher, she had no aspirations beyond her current role and she believed she would retire as an English teacher. Mary’s emphatic acknowledgement of her lack of aspirations demonstrates two concepts found in the literature. First, she did not see herself as an educational leader early in her career and then, experiences throughout her career influenced her motivations, leading her toward the role of superintendent. This implies there is room for outside influences to alter the
assumed masculine role of the superintendency, opening the door for current superintendents to reach out to others and plant the seed of possibility.

Her first position outside of the classroom was as a counselor and that was prompted by her students who had issues that she did not feel qualified to address. Her response was to get a master’s degree in counseling. The next pivotal point in her journey was a medical problem experienced by an assistant principal. “They asked me to go into that role for a semester while this gentleman was on administrative leave. I realized that, in administration, that was new range of skills.” This experience led her to an administrative degree. When the leave turned into a retirement, and she interviewed for and accepted the position. Her continued education was prompted by her belief that she was in roles that required training she did not have. These experiences are aligned with beliefs she was raised with, and advice from her father. He told her always keep as many doors and options open because you never know when another door will open, and if you don’t keep a lot of options and try different things, you will always be pigeonholed to do only one thing.

The third change for Mary came when she was asked to move into the central office administration, holding several positions over the years. She notes, “and it’s kind of an interesting thing, of the last four administrative roles I’ve had, I’ve only applied for one of them. The others have all been appointments.” She believes this has happened “because somebody else saw some skills in me that fit whatever that position was. And when I became principal of the middle school, I was assistant principal there first and then became the principal in the same school of about 900 students.” She was the first female secondary principal and superintendent in her district.
Corey began her career in another state as an elementary teacher. Her first position in the state was as a reading specialist. She then became an elementary principal in another district, beginning her administrative career. The principalship led to central office positions, including assistant superintendent. She became superintendent in that district after serving as the assistant for two years. She assumed her second superintendency eight years ago in a larger district. She moved many times because of her husband’s career. Corey believes this had a positive impact on her own career, stating “I would never have had this path if I hadn’t moved because of something else. But once I moved, I had the opportunity to work with strong mentors who said to me, “you can do something else, and encouraged me along the way.” The advice she was given was “you should get a master’s degree and then you should get a doctorate because you’re almost there anyway. And then you should consider being a principal rather than just working in curriculum.”

Did this encouragement make a difference in her career path? When asked if she would have pursued the degrees or opportunities without this encouragement, Corey answers “probably not.” She believes that geography played a part in her career path, stating “moving to [this state] was probably the quantum leap step that enabled me to be successful because [this state] is a much more liberal place and is more accepting.” She is from the south and believes that if “you returned to [names home town] you would still find that it has not changed there.” She has moved upward in spite of her family influence, not because of it.

Her parents were pleased when she attended community college, and her mother thought it was really important that she learned to type and take shorthand, because she might have to work sometime. Her mother did not understand when she became a principal, asking “why would you want to do that?” The farther away from traditional roles she moved, the less understanding her mother became. It was acceptable to be a teacher, because teaching “was okay
for a girl.” When Corey received her doctorate, her mother told her “you’ll be sorry,” because she believed that if you make more money than your husband, he will leave you.

Men and women in this study describe their journey to the superintendency by sharing different circumstances and experiences. The women expose lack of aspirations, speak to inner-motivation, concern over being ready to assume the role of superintendent, and lack of early encouragement as explanations as to how they arrived at the role of superintendent. These same reasons explain why there continues to be few women superintendents in the nation. As stated earlier, in spite of the lack of early aspirations, these women did achieve the role of superintendency, providing hope and promise that other women can be influenced at any point in their career.

The men articulate a clear focus on their career goals, whether as an educational leader or in a different career area. Regardless, they were focused in their efforts to follow their plans. Moreover, when two of the male participants realized their initial goal needed to be adjusted, they created new goals and quickly acted. The men exude confidence, exemplifying the findings in Chen et al. (2005) that “independence and self-confidence” are masculine leadership traits. They name formal and informal mentors as early influences in their careers. Three of the male participants had fathers in roles of educational leadership. While the men did not name their fathers as overtly influential, the day-to-day exposure to their fathers’ work and careers cannot be ignored. These differences, when compared, support the findings of Riehl and Byrd (1997), suggesting that the factor of gender influences career paths and advancement of educational leaders.

The women in this study provide various reasons that describe and explain how and why each rose to the role of superintendent. One description includes self-reflection. Sarah states a
need for a change in career in order to combat boredom and fulfill her self-proclaimed need to “be challenged.” Sarah fell into a superintendent’s preparation program by happenstance. She sought advice from her boss and was directed to a preparation program. It wasn’t until after she was enrolled that she acknowledged this role might be for her.

A second rationale for seeking superintendency is shared by Monica. Her desire to be a more versatile and employable educator in the future led her to educational administration and, ultimately, the superintendency. Mary’s ascension to the superintendency was fueled through self reflection of perceived inadequacy of training and preparation. She was compelled to gain the necessary skills “because effectiveness in your role is based on your merits and your integrity and your ethics and your morals.”

Corey attributes her opportunity in educational leadership and her subsequent ascension to the superintendency to cross-country relocation upon her husband’s job transfer. She believes this geographic factor was the reason she was allowed to move into leadership.

Two of the women, Mary and Monica, did not actively seek out the superintendency. Both of these women were inside candidates and were asked to apply for the open superintendency position in their respective districts. Mary was asked to assume the role of superintendent by a board member and the outgoing superintendent. In Mary’s case, she did not go through the interview process, but rather, she was appointed as the superintendent. Monica was asked to apply for the open superintendent position and when she was approached, she “did not necessarily see herself as the leader of a school district.” When viewed collectively, these women seem to have “drifted” into their role as a superintendent (Riehl and Byrd, 1997).

While the participants in this study are all technically qualified for the role of the superintendent, the fact that two of the women hold doctoral degrees supports the literature
suggesting that women believe they need to be better prepared in order to assume the position of superintendent (Shakeshaft, 1989), provided that they believe that they even see themselves as the top leader of a school district.

Factors Related to Navigating the Gendered Role of the Superintendency

Gender is salient in the day-to-day experiences of school superintendents, to the degree that these men and women admit to acting and responding differently in relationship to situations, issues and responsibilities they encounter on a daily basis. Much of the research, regardless of philosophical orientation, is in agreement that the mechanisms by which women achieve positions of leadership, and the conditions in which they live out the leadership, are qualitatively different than those experienced by male leaders (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Stelter, 2002; Yoder, 2001; Glass Bjork & Brunner, 2000). The journey to leadership involves negotiation of complex social, psychological, and cultural pathways and these are gender-specific (Billot, 2002, p.10). In analyzing the participants’ responses, this same gender-specific negotiation emerged. The men and women refer to experiences they perceived as gendered, as Paul reflects

there’s a filter there that should say, is it because of gender? Is it because of location? Is it because of language? All of those things that we should be thinking about and part of my responsibility is to help them acquire the skills that level the playing field so that gender is not an issue, language is not an issue. Whatever the content [issue] is, I don’t want our administrators to have to worry about [am] I going to be treated a certain way because I’m female or I’m treated a certain way because I’m male.
The filter that Paul suggests using “is it because of gender.” is substantiated in the literature which suggests that many issues confronting superintendents are universal regardless of gender. However, women superintendents confront an added layer of challenge because they are female and working in a man’s world (Ramsay & Letherby, 2006). This is supported in the framework used by Riehl and Byrd (1997) which posits that women’s participation in educational administration is constructed through a wider social context based on the different sex role stereotypes.

Skrla (2000b) speaks about the “social construction” of the superintendency as a masculine one, thus ensuring that women who assume the roles of top educational leaders will experience difficulties because they are female. Further, Leathwood (2005) expands on this idea, suggesting that some women are able to understand and utilize a “feminized” management style without too much difficulty. The respondents in her study seeking to uncover the social constructs of professionalism found that learning to manage as a woman caused conflict. Although they persisted in their role, these women spoke to continual struggle and negotiation as they assumed their duties and created their professional identities.

For these superintendents, exploring how they experience their day-to-day lives as part of the interview process led to conversations that, when analyzed, led to the second topic: factors related to navigating the gendered role of the superintendency. Two emerging themes, communication and advice to aspiring superintendents, arose during the topic area analysis. Although both themes are independent concepts, the final analysis determines that themes of communication and advice to aspirants were indeed interrelated.
Communication

Schroth (1995) draws on research in business to identify features of leadership that appear more typical among female leaders than male ones. She writes that women business leaders often view their organizations as circles, with them situated at the center, gathering information and conveying ideas to others. In this way, they believe they are sharing responsibility for and creating stakes in the business enterprise for staff at all levels, letting them know their opinions are valued contributions. Schroth lists a series of “common traits” seen in female business executives. They:

- are available to listen to and provide feedback to employees;
- prioritize positive working relationships as central to business success;
- are committed to long-term organizational health;
- readily share information with peers and subordinates;
- empower and support others in their decision-making processes;
- identify good communication as central to the organizational environment;
- are responsive to others by exhibiting strong listening skills while being especially astute at reading body language (Scroth, 1995, p.128).

These common traits signal the kind of democratic (as opposed to autocratic) Dunn & Brasco, (2006) style that Eagley and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) explore in terms of gendered leadership. Their review of the literature on male and female leaders suggests that women are somewhat likelier to demonstrate a democratic leadership approach than men. This assertion is illuminated in this study as participants describe communication between and among constituents as a tool to mitigate or manage gendered experiences.
Reflecting on how he and his colleagues have experienced their working environment, Mitchell quickly offers examples of how men and women superintendents act during their tenure as superintendents. He describes, in vehement terms, the actions of one male superintendent who he worked for prior to assuming the superintendency in Morrison. “[George] was a tough guy to work for. He was an ass. He was narcissistic. Then again, you talk about gender; he was so overly harassing of females at times, sexually harassing. It was just embarrassing.” When asked how someone like this stays in his position, Mitchell believes [George] deliberately “spun” the way he responded to the voiced concerns. This type of communicative behavior aligns with the findings of Dunn and Brasco (2006), which exposes the autocratic leadership style that is used more often by males than females. Thompson makes a similar analysis when he cites research by Rosener (1990, as cited by Thompson, p. 2.), that “males characterize themselves as transactional leaders in which they ‘use power that comes from their organizational position and formal authority,’ reinforced through rewards and punishments.” Administrators started leaving the district. When [George] was asked why, he “sold it to them” by telling the board “I’m new. I have to bring in my own team,” explaining the departure of current administrators. [George] remained superintendent for three years before he “finally” left. As Mitchell acknowledges the communicative spin used by [George] to explain away concerns, he also finds it “incredible” that “he’s gotten two bigger promotions” since his departure. When asked how someone such as [George] continues to be promoted, Mitchell sighs, takes a breath and replies, “I’ve found that once you’re in the club, you’re in the club. This behavior, contends Mitchell, is not gender neutral. He describes a woman superintendent he knows who has very similar characteristics. [Katherine], according to Mitchell, violated her own stated communication expectations.

My God, what she said and what she did when she was superintendent…were
diametrically opposed. For example, if you wanted to meet with her, she would drive to your school, roll down her window and you would go out to the parking lot to talk to her… [Katherine] and I got along fine, but I never called her on any of these things…and maybe she just learned how to play the game really well.

However, Mitchell does have a desire to be candid with [Katherine] “I’d love to be able to have a conversation with her and ask her if she regrets any of the things she did.” But he believes that current and past superintendents have power and he can’t afford to “piss any of them off.” It is interesting to note, as an educational leader, Mitchell did not feel he could afford to engage in an honest dialogue with [Katherine] because at the time she had positional power and he believes that open communication, even though it is the right thing to do, could be detrimental to his future. The concept of power, gender and leadership is not new (Shields, 2005), however the idea of a woman holding a higher position in educational leadership, gaining presumed power over has less to do with how women approach their role and more to do with the title and the assumptions of others. This begs the question, did Katherine realize the power she held or was she oblivious to her influence?

When asked to consider superintendents who are effective, Mitchell again describes them based on how they communicated. [Anna] “you know she listens…she includes people in decision making [and] is willing to make hard decisions.” Mitchell is further impressed with Anna’s approach to conversations. Interestingly, her son was a student in the school where he was an administrator. “I didn’t know her from Adam. She was just a mom coming in to talk about her son. She didn’t come in as Dr. [Anna], superintendent, but just a mom coming in talking about her son.” It wasn’t until almost two years later when Mitchell and [Anna] were having a discussion that he discovered she was a superintendent in a neighboring district. “I
didn’t put two and two together, I mean how many Dr. [Anna’s] are there?” Without prompting, Mitchell made his own comparative analysis of these three superintendents’ communication approach.

I appreciate the fact that [Anna] did not come in and say ‘as superintendent of…and tell me ‘here’s where you are missing the boat [with my son]’…had it been [Katherine] and I or [George] and I, it would have been, ‘hey, I know what the heck I am talking about and you need to straighten this out my way. I don’t care what you’re thinking, just do it this way.’

Mitchell provides vivid examples of how communication influences and impacts the day-to-day lives of superintendents. Further, he describes how perhaps he has learned from observations of and interactions with other superintendents. For example, when a personnel issue arose, Mitchell recalls,

you know, my initial reaction…is I’m mad and I want revenge. I really need to call and say to [a trusted colleague], hey what do you think? Am I overreacting? I know these people well enough where they’ll say, ‘yeah, why do you want to fight that? It’s not that big of deal, you’re letting your ego get in the way of that.’

The ability to sense when a voice of reason may be necessary in order to assure a positive outcome suggests his openness to hear others’ opinions and new ideas (Haar, 2002), possibly revealing a leadership trait more likely to be labeled as “feminine.”

Additionally, Mitchell offers his thoughts on the importance of understanding that school boards vary in their make-up. He speaks of the decision making process and suggests that the words that are used to describe and explain difficult or polarizing issues are foundational communication skills,
stay away from win-lose or black and white decisions. Make sure your decisions are the right thing to do. If you have issues in a district with the superintendent or other people, don’t crucify them. Talk about them with dignity and respect because they probably know somebody or are related to somebody, somewhere. You’ll be amazed at how stupid people can be at times.

Recalling a time in which communication backfired; Morgan shares an experience that caused him to ask himself, “what were you thinking?”

At that high school, we did this thing on the last day of school and recognized people for a million different things…As I was recognizing Laura I said, that Laura had decided she was going to be a full-time mom. I didn’t mean it any other way than Laura was going to stay at home full-time with her kids. At the end of the meeting Sylvia…was an incredible teacher and educator, [and] a dear friend. She came up to me and she said, ‘Morgan, with all due respect, I’ll have you know I am a full-time mom’ and she was absolutely right! Laura has been a full-time mom the whole time. I should have said she was going to be a full-time, stay-at-home mom.

Morgan, like Mitchell, readily exposes experiences that serve to illuminate his lack of understanding and awareness of being “male” when communicating and interacting with females. Mitchell’s acknowledgement of growing up naïve in the area of gender could be true for Morgan as well. During his principalship at a high school, he was the leader of a three person all male, all white administrative team. While hosting a ninth grade orientation barbeque Morgan remembers,

once I had finished speaking and we were breaking up in the theater and moving out to the barbeque, a parent came up to me and said she had a daughter who is starting
high school and she was very concerned that we didn’t have any female leadership. Again, just as Mitchell did, Morgan drew his own conclusions. “That was probably the first time that I had to really step back and say boy, what are we missing here in terms of both a) our perspective and b) what we are modeling for all the students at our school.” However, even this self-proclaimed epiphany did not provide full clarity to the exposed issue, as Morgan reflects,

I continued, to be honest, not to fully understand that, if in fact it is fair to say I ever did understand it, until I went to [a different] school district where we did have a female on our leadership team and that certainly brought a perspective that I then knew in retrospect [what] we had missed.

When asked what perspective he gained when he joined a team with female leadership, Morgan quickly states, “she would remind me of things that we needed to pay attention to that I simply had not thought about.” When asked to be more specific, Morgan shares,

for instance, when I used to have meetings…those things you need to do that I never thought about. We ought to have food. [Shelia] was always reminding me that we are dealing with human beings that we care about and so we have to tend to their sort of creature comfort sorts of things so [the meeting] can be productive. It just didn’t occur to me that those types of things would be important.

As Morgan continues to seek understanding from his perceived “gendered” experiences, he talks with his female colleagues. He reports a specific conversation that once again provides a female perspective of the same lived experience. A female colleague had recently applied for an open superintendency and did not get the position. Perhaps more upsetting was the content of the interview process. “For example, the [school] board was interviewing for a new superintendent, one of the questions that were raised around Margaret was, ‘she is a mom with two little girls, I
wonder how she will do this?’ This type of question is inappropriate by itself, but when examined in the context of the questions asked of a male candidate for the position, its inappropriateness is exacerbated. The male candidate was not questioned about his ability to perform the duties of the superintendency, and “he had three kids and has since had a fourth.” Moreover, he was offered and accepted the position. Morgan agrees with Margaret’s assessment of the process. It was unfair. The experience left Morgan wondering, “why we would think about the age and how many kids a woman might have versus a man.”

When asked why he thought people would ask such questions, he did not have a reply. However, during the follow up interview, Morgan recalled this example and made a parallel connection to the current presidential campaign.

I think right now, this whole thing around Sarah Palin…very fascinating. NO ONE has ever said anything about Obama [raising two girls] and being the president…[but] questions like, how could she [Sarah] possibly be a good mother and be vice president? [People ask,] Why did she go back to work? It is a fascinating study of where we are, still…in this country.”

Reflecting on Morgan’s varied gender experiences, the work of Hoyle (2007) outlining eight standards for considering how an effective superintendency is determined comes to light.

1. Executive vision and shaping district culture
2. Executive leadership in societal and school board governance issues
3. Executive leadership and internal and external communication
4. Executive leadership and managing resources
5. Executive leadership and curriculum
6. Executive leadership and instructional management
7. Executive leadership and personnel management

8. Executive leadership and personal values and ethics

(Hoyle, 2007, p. 157).

Morgan appears to have utilized the uncomfortable experiences as the catalyst for thinking about leadership, using the information and insights gleaned and applying them to future situations. The more informed Morgan, the one that can ask himself “what were you thinking?” implies that there is opportunity for men and women to learn from gendered experiences.

Interestingly, Paul also learned a lesson from a female staff member. “I had a situation early in my career where it started off with a joke that had occurred. And there was a female staff member who said it was harassment. She was joking, but she jerked my chain pretty hard.” Paul states, “the joke wasn’t that offensive, but it certainly could have been seen as off color.” Paul’s lesson and subsequent advice suggests, “you better make sure you know the arena you are in.”

When Paul was asked to talk more about knowing “the arena” he explained that certain individuals or people that they meet with, they treat them differently and yet when there’s a person of different gender in the room, they behave differently. Some individuals, when there’s a female in the room behave very differently than when there’s a male in the room or if there’s another person in the room with them.

So what does Paul make of this observation in the context of knowing “the arena?”

It has taught me that what filters [you] use to recognize non-verbally, verbally…and what language patterns do you use to explore [issues, incidents] so that you can get the right people in the room so you can get the conversation to go in the direction you need it to go. Sometimes it’s as simple as having another person [male]
in the room, just to say ‘hi, how are you?’…just use matching behaviors in terms of some nonverbal stuff, to get the person to calm down. Sometimes just having a female in the room so the person will be polite.

Paul does not spend much time worrying if he is going to be treated appropriately in meetings, nor does he worry about the conversations he has with male or female colleagues. He believes that he gets the outcomes he needs and wants for two reasons: “one, I have positional power and two, I have the ability, just from a language standpoint to be able to maneuver the conversation to get where I need to go. I don’t ever worry ‘am I being treated this way because I’m a female…never had to worry about that.” When prompted to provide an example of what he meant by this explanation, Paul offered this.

I think there is a conscious decision to handle [an issue]. And there is a time and place. Is there a conscious decision with regard to gender? Depending on what the issue is, I think I would answer yes. Might my language patterns be different with a male than a female? They may be. The message, intent and outcomes, you want the same thing.

But you will match a person’s style…to make sure you are getting the message across.

He uses the words, maneuver, navigate and manipulate synonymously as he strives to “try to get consensus.” Paul pushes himself to “create the culture and the climate where people are going to talk about [issues] openly” and that is what he does with his administrative team. Paul contends that “people are starved for those kinds of conversations and the more you can have those kinds of conversations, the better you’re going to be.” Women may use the terms “passion and commitment,” as suggested in Pankake, et al. (2002), in place of maneuver, navigate and manipulate, but the desire to create an optimal culture for open communication is an essential goal of all of the participants. Paul takes this belief all the way to the level of the district’s
governing body. “We’ve had a conversation with our board around males and females and how they learn.” These strategic conversations were designed to explain, explore and influence instructional choices, but to also expose the school board members to the potential perceptions and working environment of “having males and females on the board and…when it’s an all male board or when it’s an all female board.”

Advice to Aspiring Superintendents

One of the difficulties in assessing the effects of training and preparation for the superintendency and how they might impact the experience of the female superintendent is simply that there is not been enough research attention devoted to the question of professional preparation. Glass, et al. (2000) say as much in noting that training for school superintendents “has never been a high-visibility program in either university educational administration programs, state departments of education, or the profession itself,” (p. viii). It is because of this, that the present study was conducted. Listening, learning and exploring advice from voices in the field can begin to identify experiences that influence the career paths of women. Exposing and engaging in discourse around the topic of gender can also serve to influence the expectations women will have upon entering leadership preparation programs.

The participants acknowledge paying attention to gendered experiences, share reactions to and offer possible suggestions for navigating gender in the superintendency. Paul states, “I know some of my colleagues and some of my administrators who are female sometimes they have to wonder, ‘am I being treated this way because I am female?’” So what reflections does Paul have to share with an aspiring superintendent? In a follow up interview Paul emphatically replied, about becoming a superintendent,

it’s harder for a woman. They have to operate in a whole different world. As a white
male, I don’t have to worry about gender. I can make decisions and it never crosses my mind to think about gender. I just do what I need to do. Women have to pay attention and think about it [gender].

When asked to expand on how he perceives women “think about gender,” Paul believes the responses are situational.

Women ask, ‘am I being treated this way because of the topic or the decision I made? Would I be treated this way if I were a male? This makes women work harder. They have to have more information. They have to communicate more. They don’t get the benefit of the doubt like I do.

Yet, even with these clearly defined differences, when asked if this perceived reality should dissuade a woman from becoming a superintendent, Paul quickly and passionately responds, “no, gosh no!” This is encouraging, yet disheartening. Encouraging to the extent that Paul believes that women can and do become effective superintendents, disheartening because he overtly states they have to work harder, not just to achieve the position but to maintain the position. Eliciting the question, Why would a woman want to do this?

Tony appears to agree with other men in this study when he suggests an awareness of gendered issues is important. Specifically,

the two key words are awareness and responsibility. Sometimes I think we spend time trying to be that which we are not. And I think we spend a lot of time worrying about it. Should women try to be like men? Should men try to be like women?...There maybe a necessity to talk about [gender] because it does pop up. Is it fair? Nothing’s fair, so, where are you better? In my opinion,…you better say…this is what I’ve got to do to get there and am I okay with that?
When expanding on his perspective of how men and women address gendered issues, Tony believes “gender’s a factor in both directions.” And agreeing with Paul, Tony thinks “ladies worry about it more than men do.” And while he acknowledges that this happens, he asserts “that there’s probably more productive thinking to do with your time to get to where you want to get.” He suggests,

recognize it. Realize it. We all get the same 24/7 and we all do what we want…and so I would say spend more time saying ‘how do I positively go from here to here versus all the reasons I can’t.’ I am not trying to downplay the fact that…there are gender challenges, there are. It’s how you approach those…and [what] mental framework do you spend to get there?

While Paul shares strategies for using language to mitigate gendered experiences, Tony seems to suggest the power of positive thought or mind over matter. Both of these men differ from Morgan and Mitchell in that they acknowledge their gendered experiences and attempt to act in ways that neutralize the effects of these perceived gendered experiences, whereas in their own reflections, Morgan continues to “try and understand it” and Mitchell doesn’t “pick up on” gendered issues. Tony theorizes that, by the very purpose and title of this study, there is an inherent assumption “that there is a gender issue. And ‘that’s because people are saying… there is a challenge and that it probably needs to be dealt with and/or studied…so there’s really a sociology question…society in Western culture.” When asked to consider what this means to men and women aspiring to or serving in a superintendency, Tony states,

I think there’s the ability to focus on it [gender] and say, ‘okay, this makes a nice excuse for me.’ It might be a reality, but what do you do with the reality? You know, if you’re not okay with it, then do something. [But], boy the percentage of time I spend
worrying about it isn’t a whole lot. But I am aware, very aware. Because it can also, because of my [position], it can knock me from my position very quickly because of the legalistic society we live in.

Tony’s view of advice seems to support the findings of Watkins, Gillaspie, Stokes, Bullard and Light (1995) who speak to barriers, both structural and cultural in nature, which impede women in their efforts to achieve roles as educational leaders. They suggest subtle, virtually invisible ways in which female educators may suffer gender bias. Tony’s struggle with acknowledging, accepting and acting on perceived gendered experiences appears to contribute to this subtle but present affect of gender bias.

When asked what advice Mitchell would offer aspiring superintendents, he noted as his primary advice, that regardless of being a male or a female,

you should create nurturing relationships and do them well. The person with competent relations will be successful. This is not specific to just education; it is also true for those looking for non-educator roles. You always have to be who you are, wherever you are.

Regardless of his experiences and inclusive of any thoughts shared throughout his interview, Mitchell, like other participants did not specifically speak to gender in his advice to aspirants. This is interesting in light of his self-description of his life as a superintendent and reflecting on his experiences. As in the context of advice, Mitchell states,

I think I grew up in a ‘Beaver Cleaver’ household. I was naïve about things like gender. I had never had gay people talk about what it was like to be gay. I just don’t pick up on things. It wasn’t until the experiences in the [ABC] school district that I told you about earlier that had an impact on me.
Exploring the idea of advice further, Mitchell calls attention to the reasons people might choose the superintendency. He cautions “people who want to become superintendents should avoid power and prestige. What should drive them…and what they should enjoy the most, is the impact they can have on an entire district.” Mitchell’s advice aligns with the work of Eagly et al. (2001), arguing the influence of gender roles in an organization occurs not only because of the manner in which people react to leaders in terms of gendered expectations and the subsequent response of the leaders, but also because most people have internalized gender roles to some extent. Consequently, as a result of these differing identities, men and women have somewhat different expectations of their own leadership behavior within the context of the organizational setting.

The women in the study differed in their degree of acknowledgement of how or if gendered experiences exist or influence their daily business and interactions. They also differ in their advice to aspiring superintendents when compared to the work of Brown and Irby (2002) which asked superintendent participants to identify areas in which they felt they weren’t adequately prepared for the superintendency and, therefore, can be assumed to be areas to which aspiring superintendents should pay attention. Eight topic areas were identified: “legal issues, organizational culture, climate, ethics, working within the cultural/political system, collaboration, networking, and use of mentors and interviewing practice (Iselt, Brown & Irby, 2001, as cited by Brown, et al., 2002, pp. 164-165).

Monica attributes her success and ability to thrive as a superintendent to the fact that Lewis School District “is a really good fit.” As she ruminates about her experience in her role as a superintendent, she does so while simultaneously suggesting to aspirants that they should seek
and desire the same type of experience and not settle for anything less. She speaks appreciatively of how happy she is with her current role. She is just as quick to state “I could not be a superintendent just any place at any time.” Monica speaks with an authoritative voice and a sense of knowing herself and what it means to assert herself in order to prioritize and manage her days. When she decided to add a morning workout routine to her schedule, she enlisted the help of her assistant in order to complete the work. Monica credits her as instrumental in helping balance the multitude of duties that can consume a superintendent’s schedule. “She has been so supportive…she adjusts how she calendars things to try to allow me the time on the front part of the day because the middle of the day there is no way I can do it.”

Monica has a sense of what it might be like to be a male serving as the superintendent. “Males, I think, they tend to be much more confident going in…[thinking] I know how to do this job and I’ll be just fine; I already know everything about it.” Additionally, she believes “that because females tend to question themselves more, women who do get into the role of the superintendent are more confident, in general, than the body of males.” Reflecting on why this might be true, she says, “often times I find that some of the men are cocky going into [the superintendency] where I think, ‘man, I’d be scared to death.’ And maybe it’s the culture of being okay, that it is okay to say [for women] and not okay for men.” Although Monica suggests men assuming the superintendency may be over confident, she asserts that successful women superintendents may overcome their lack of confidence. Whether it is artificial or real, Monica exudes confidence. She talks about “purposely changing the structure” of her day in order to better accommodate family, exercise and unscheduled time. This confidence is further illuminated when it is understood that a major change in her daily schedule was not part of a formal discussion with the school board. “I’m very good at separating…by the time I leave my
office and I don’t live very far away, I can shift and not be thinking about work when I get there.”

Interestingly, when asked to compare her hours to those of her male colleagues, she supposes that “my male colleagues in my area where I work…most of them work a lot fewer hours. When pressed to explain how she gets everything done in the time she has allotted for the work and knowing how much there is to do and how busy she is, Monica first compliments her cabinet group.

It is a unique group. We sit and argue and sometimes we’re not very nice and sometimes we have fun…They are folks that you can say pretty much anything or talk about the most confidential information. And as a group…they have their specialty areas and need to advocate and help us all understand who and what they represent.

The good of the organization is what they keep in mind.

Another strategy that Monica uses to help her manage and lead is to have “our folks that are experts in ESL or assessment or whatever…come in and talk to me so… when I’m out in the buildings, I can engage in conversation, because it is not possible to know everything.”

When considering the responsibility of the superintendent’s work with the school board, Monica senses that a female superintendent may have unique challenges as compared to males. She cites “the expectation [of the board] when you move in there. But my husband would just die if he had to do things with the school board.” Additionally, she speaks of the potential differences of being a single woman as a superintendent because it “puts you in a different situation.”

In sum, Monica does not speak to gendered experiences in her superintendency. When she shares her observations of men and women superintendents, current or aspiring, she cites differences, but the differences do not show up in her reflections on her role as superintendent,
nor does she assume that the named differences are positive or negative. However, she does share examples of how she works with people, plans her schedule, capitalizes on the strengths of the leaders in the organization, exudes confidence and focus and is overt in her belief “I can learn anything. I might not know it today, but I can learn anything.” One could assume that the stated differences between males and females, real or perceived, are not part of Monica’s day-to-day lived experiences. Yet, she has a clear idea of what a great superintendency looks like, and subtly implies that men and women aspirants should aspire to a similar experience within the role of the superintendency.

On the other hand, Sarah offers a variety of experiences that she perceives as gendered. Her reflections begin nearly simultaneously with the start of her career. Her husband was the parent that was always there for the kids when they were in “need of lunch money.” So balancing her family was “shouldered” by her husband while she did her “career climb.” This role reversal of sorts worked for her husband, “…he had fun with it. He loved it. He had fun with it and they [the kids] had fun with him.” And it was a good thing; because Sarah loved what she was doing and could not imagine staying at home. “I think I would have been a real [dissatisfied with the] role of being at home, having them [kids] totally dependent on me? That would have been very difficult for me.” Despite a family schedule that worked for everyone in Sarah’s family, the outside world wasn’t necessarily prepared to think about the family structure of responsibilities in the same way. “You get in a niche, people look at you differently. We travel a lot. And it’s always, ‘what does your husband do?...but nobody ever asks me what I do, never! She found the same type of reaction within the world of education. As Sarah thinks back to her early years in administration, “I’d be the only woman administrator in the room and all the guys would go off to the bathroom and make some decisions there and come back and…I wouldn’t know what the
decision [was]! And in emphatic terms and animated voice, what really galls Sarah now is the realization that in 30 years she is no further ahead.

I’ll tell you what; I wouldn’t have thought that when I got into administration…in the early years…[remembering] how women were treated in an administrative council meeting, [that in 2008] it’s exactly the same!! It’s exactly the same! It’s exactly the same. That’s 30 years ago and it’s exactly the same in the [meetings]… [with a sigh] it’s so frustrating.

When prompted to hypothesize why women appear to be no better off than they were 30 years ago, Sarah rationalizes a prime reason for this type of treatment. “There is a level that people are communicated with, so the major men [big districts]…they don’t want to listen to anybody else. They just want to talk.” However, Sarah notes a difference when a female colleague leads the meetings.

[Sally] did the best job that I’ve ever seen. She made sure people had the time to talk and she’d cut off people and say, ‘okay, that’s enough. None of the men really had done a very good job [leading] because they all let other men just talk all the time.

Reflecting on why female leadership seems to have had a positive influence during the meetings, Sarah mused, “I think Sally is more considered a good ‘ole boy… Not a good ‘ole boy, I don’t want to say that. But, she is more accepted, I think.” The manner in which female guests were treated during such meetings also causes Sarah angst. “We had a very good representative from [an organization]. If she didn’t know the answer…she’d call you back. She was excellent. [And] they treated her like crap. I am not kidding. They treated her like crap! It was like very attacking.” It is obvious that this experience clearly upset Sarah. So what did she do about it? “One of us [women] would say, ‘hey, we don’t kill the messenger.’ The guest’s reaction? “She could always respond to them in a very calm, collected way.”
The passing of time and the arrival of a new organizational representative did not lessen Sarah’s frustration. She is even more frustrated. “Now we’ve got this guy. He doesn’t have the information …and he’s not very good. I bet the guys just love him. The meetings are highly gendered.” Sarah and her colleagues attempted to mitigate perceived gendered experiences through communication, but their cautionary words “don’t kill the messenger” fell on deaf ears. What else could Sarah do? “I was at the point I was going to discontinue [attending the meetings]. Sarah decided to stay only because another woman is taking over the leadership role. “I think we will be very productive again.” But Sarah has reason to be skeptical. “Right now, well, here’s an example. We go through our agenda and [Mark] always skips me on the agenda, just flat out skips me!” And, when Sarah called the oversight to his attention, “he didn’t even acknowledge that. They just don’t. [voice trailing off] They just don’t.” She remains cautiously optimistic about the professionalism and productivity of these meetings.

When Sarah considers how she would advise aspiring superintendents, she first thinks about her position. “I plan to retire here” as the first female superintendent, she says and “when I retire I would sure like to see at least a couple of [female] administrators here be viable candidates for the position.”

But, as I talk to young women, I say ‘hey, I think you’d make a good superintendent and they just go ‘oh no,’ you know, and I go ‘yeah.’ And it is usually because of the marital situation and they’ve got a good job. It sounds old fashioned. They’ve got a job at home and they’ve got a job at work and when you are a superintendent…it does take time away from your home…And they don’t have the home support whereas I think men have more support to do that. I’ve approached…a principal that I know…and I have watched her career since she was a substitute teacher, a student in
one of my buildings and she is just [wonderful]. I said to her, and her husband was standing there, I said [to him], ‘you know, your wife is so talented. I see her one day as a superintendent.’ She kind of laughed and said ‘oh yeah’ and he, oooohhhhh, talk about a scowl on his face. You know the body language was definitely there.

The principal’s reaction aligns with Monica’s thinking that women often don’t see themselves as the leader of a school district. Sarah joins Monica in this perspective.

I think oftentimes women don’t see themselves in a driver’s seat. They see themselves in a support role. And until women can see themselves in the driver’s seat, [they won’t see] it’s easier to be a superintendent than it is to be an assistant superintendent. Women don’t ever think they’re ready enough so they get lots of experiences on the way, so it seems like you don’t see too many young [female] superintendents, whereas you’ll see males who are younger, going into the superintendency. They’ll go from teacher for a couple of years to principal for a couple of years and then bang! into a superintendency.

However, in closing Sarah states “you’ve got to be ‘to your own self be true.’ I guess it is the old saying that you do need to know and understand your value system and can articulate it.” It is fascinating as Sarah offers the most vibrant examples of gendered experiences that she is already thinking about her replacement and in doing so, is seeking qualified women candidates for the position.

As Mary reflects on her years in education and, in particular, the experiences she has had as a superintendent, she believes the choices that are made and actions that are taken are “person dependent, not position dependent.” In the role of superintendent, “you have to be pretty perceptive to kind of try and figure out…where some issue are coming [from].” Asking herself
“are the issues more political [or] do they feel like hidden agendas in the discussions?” She has taken her own advice and found “that I’ve had to really develop my own skills…those real reflective questioning skills, so it is not the first question that I ask [that is important]; it’s the second and third question.” She theorizes that this approach allows her to “really get down” to the meaning and thus, more effectively address the issue at hand.

In her daily interactions with constituents, however, she explains how others have not necessarily developed the same skill set. While she thinks in terms of how she is “either respected or not respected,” she expects the interaction to be “based not on my gender, but on my skills.” But, “people do take pot shots.” Mary offers examples of such comments, for instance, “oh, look at her hair or look at that suit she’s wearing, is that ugly?” suggesting that physical attributes or characteristics should not be commented upon. “They don’t say that about men.” But as Mary thinks aloud, she wonders if similar “pot shots” thoughts ever cross the minds of men. “Do men…[think poorly of men] because they are bald?” She seems to reconcile her observations and ponderings by believing,

it is what it is and you can either get so hung up on that, that it keeps you from being effective in your job, or you can choose to ignore it and go ‘that’s their issue, not mine,’ and continue ahead on your own merits and figure that people that know you and work with you respect you for your skills and your ethics and your integrity.

When asked to consider whether anybody would ever say anything about the content or tone of the conversations that come across “pot shots” in the moment that they occur, Mary reluctantly acknowledges “I probably should, but it’s not in my nature…I’m not going to lower myself to that level. It’s a personal thing. It’s not a gender thing, [although] it can be interpreted that way.” As she continues reflecting, she recalls she is “often amused” by some of the banter, deciding she
is “okay” with it and because she accepts the conversation, she lets it go. When pushed further on her comments Mary admits that if a conversation were to get “really outrageous” she would respond in some way. However, she hasn’t felt any comments were “outrageous enough” because she reports that she has not spoken up. Although Mary is cognizant of gendered conversations and has created a filter for deciding if the comments have crossed the line or not, she feels she may fall short when self-reflecting, “so [I ask myself], was I chopped liver?” She remembers having this thought during a meeting with other area superintendents. She describes herself as being the “neophyte” in the room, explaining she assumes that because the men feel ‘we’ve been at this game a lot longer than you have…you’ve got to earn your way into the club,’ her voice may not be valued or welcomed.

Exploring this contradiction of feelings and actions, Mary suggests that, “this is my reality and it’s my perception and it [the actions and comments] may not have ever been intended” to be exclusionary or condescending. “I can drive myself really crazy thinking [about gendered issues], so I choose not to.” She appears to be conflicted as to what interactions, behaviors or comments to pay attention to and what to ignore. She states there are times that “I still think, ‘oh my, that good ‘ole boy network is still alive and well.’ I can go into a room at the same time as an older male superintendent and the other male superintendents who have been in their roles for many years, they will always say hello to the male and then it be like, ‘oh, hi Mary.’” She is aware of this phenomenon because she confesses that she “plays a little game” with herself indicating she purposefully watches how each person is greeted as he or she enters the room. When she observes this perceived good ‘ole boy behavior, she just “smiles a little bit” and determines it is one of those “experiences.”
Even though Mary is able to articulate examples of perceived gendered experiences in her day-to-day interactions, she is clearly conflicted in her decision to acknowledge, address or ignore the incidents. This may be why her advice to those aspiring to the superintendency would be simply the same for men and women aspirants, “experience as many different things [as you can] and be the best you can be in those experiences…it is not a gender thing.”

Corey, like Mary, refers to her upbringing and family influence as she thinks about her role and responsibilities as a female superintendent. “I went to college in the late sixties…girls were allowed to be a nurse or secretary and for sure a wife. I wanted to be a wife, so I’m not putting that down, but that was the primary goal.” Corey knew she wanted more as a young lady growing up in this type of value system, “and so that’s why I’ve always thought, I have to be smarter, I have to try harder, and I have to work more in order to achieve.”

Other women in the study have suggested that women have to work harder in order to access and assume leadership roles in education; Corey is the only one who articulated this perception as foundational in her thinking. This early thinking has proved itself true in the eyes of her 38-year-old son. He shares with his mother that ‘women have to be smarter, they have to be more knowledgeable and they have to be willing to work hard.’ Corey relates that her son works in a “man’s world” and his wife also works in that world. Her daughter-in-law’s position is “at the top of the food chain,” which Corey concludes is impressive. “There are thousands of employees, [maybe as many as 25,000] that work for the company worldwide and there are only seven women in the top leadership position.” This is important to Corey because her son’s perspective is based on the lived experiences of his wife and his observations of his mom’s career. It may be a mom’s pride talking, but Corey was struck by a conclusion drawn by her son.
He said to her, ‘in order to have a position like you have as a woman, you have to be in the top 1% and men can be in that position and be in the top 20%.’

While Corey had the belief that she would have to work harder, and be smarter and try harder in order to get ahead, her strongly held convictions were not based on the fact that she was a woman, but rather the fact that she was fighting against the expectations learned as a young girl. “I’ve always thought that in order for me to be there, I’d have to work harder. But I didn’t always think it was because I was a woman. I thought it was because of where I came from.”

During the conversation, Corey did not offer many examples of gendered experiences. But she does recall early on in her administrative career, noting that she was the only woman in a central office position, that she “was not always included in conversation, because they didn’t always happen in a meeting. The [conversation] happened other places where they didn’t invite me.” Interestingly, this realization of being left out did not occur at the time of the affront. Corey remembers thinking about the incidents, but explained the apparent exclusion by determining “if they are not including me, then it is not for me to know. I didn’t really think of it as gender thing at the time. I thought of it as a positional thing.” The full impact of this early experience was not realized until much later when Corey was “treated respectfully.” She found herself in a position to “see the way things operate, where everyone was included in decision making, as opposed to just the two or three men at the top.”

Corey’s ability to reflect on her childhood and familial expectations in conjunction with her early experiences in educational leadership influences to some degree her advice to superintendent aspirants. Although not an easy question to answer Corey suggests that first of all, I think you just have to think of yourself as a leader, rather than a woman,
even though you are a woman. You don’t have to give up being a woman but you just kind of set that aside in your thinking. You can still wear lacy blouses and high heels and jewelry, because if that’s who you are, you can do that. You need to look like who you are and be who you are but in your thinking, you need to not think about ‘this is happening maybe because I’m a woman. They are not listening to me because I’m a woman.’

Expanding on her advice, Corey asserts, “if you [women] think that way, you will project something that you don’t mean to project. So, what you just need to think is ‘I am the superintendent, how can I help?’”

Possessing strong communication skills, participating in varied educational positions, and being willing to “work 24/7, 365 days a year and accepting a job “you love” also make Corey’s advice list. A person needs to be “able to present themselves articulately and in a knowledgeable way.” For Corey, this translates into having to know what you are doing. You have to be able to understand what the role is and you have to be able to present yourself as a person who can handle everything, but at the same time, not look arrogant.

It is clear from the conversation with Corey that she believes the more diverse experiences you have on your resume, the better off you will be. “I have had a variety of jobs in a variety of places which enabled me to get a better grasp on the whole system and the superintendent has to have a grasp on the whole system. You need to put “yourself into some learning that you possibly have never thought about.” While this advice is offered for consideration of men and women aspirants, it also aligns with Corey’s belief that women have to work harder and know
more in order to be successful in educational leadership. “You [women] have to do it better because there are a lot of people out there…who think that women can’t do this work.”

Perhaps the best way to conceptualize the combined experiences of these women is to acknowledge the work of Riehl and Byrd (1997) who suggest socialization is a process that by definition is rooted in contexts bounded by time, space and culture. This is of particular importance because these women represent different eras of preparation, different size districts and different geographic locations. Further, as Cook, Heppner and O’Brien (2005) note, career development for all women happens within a “specific cultural context: that is, the values, customs, and norms of society implicitly provide messages about appropriate and inappropriate career paths based on the cultural and gendered context,” (p. 166). It is impossible to entirely ferret out the influences of these socio-cultural factors from the lived experiences of women planning their career goals and making decisions about their professional future. It also may prove difficult for women to conclusively determine that they have experienced some form of gender bias in their efforts to pursue promotion to administrative office. One of the fascinating findings of Kowalski and Stouder’s (1999) study of female superintendents in Indiana is that when asked if they had confronted and overcome barriers they perceived as gendered in nature, none of them perceived their career experiences to be unique (p. 33). This can serve to explain why the advice of these participants did not address the issue of gender.

Chapter Summary

The analysis of the data led to discussion on the participants’ professional journeys and how they navigated the gendered role of the superintendency. The analysis served to expand on the work of Riehl and Byrd (1997), which explored gender differences among newly hired administrators. The authors explored three broad sources of influence on individual career
mobility. The first area explored is a person’s own identity and personal situation. The second relates to the occupational and organizational context in which one works. And the final source is the wider social context.

The first section of the chapter discussed the factors related to the professional journey. The process of analyzing the data exposed two themes related to the professional journey: motivations and aspirations. The power of family values, self-held expectations, outside influences and having parents as role models were lived experiences for all these superintendents. However, these factors did not impact or influence the men and women participants in the same way.

Family values shaped a deep and unwavering belief in a higher power for Tony, suggesting that his identity and destiny is preordained. The other men in the study do not overtly link their interest and eventual obtainment of superintendency to their family or upbringing. However, each of them shares the various roles that their fathers held in administration. Their fathers obviously went to college in order to be qualified for the jobs that they held. Education was talked about and valued in each of their homes. While the expectation of educational administration might not have been stated, having family members serving as role models in educational administration as a child growing up did indeed shape the future for these three men.

Conversely, only two of the women in the study even talk about their family in their discussion of their journey to educational administration. The opportunity to attend college was true for both of these participants; however, the expectations differed between the two women and among the men. Mary was expected to go to college, but her degree would be in nursing or teaching, reflecting the traditional expectations of the decade. Corey’s mother allowed her to go to college because she might need the learned clerical skills to survive. Neither woman had
parents as role models in the field of educational leadership. The familial influence impacted to what degree these participants saw themselves as future educators. It also impacted their motivation in pursuing educational administration. The men benefited from early role models. This opportunity was not present for the women in this study.

The work of Riehl and Byrd (1997) explores the sources of influence on individual action. The participants in this study share experiences that clearly helped shape their identity: their personal situation, personal values, ambitions, family influence and role models.

The last section presented the topic of factors related to navigating the gendered role of the superintendent. The work of Riehl and Byrd (1997) exposes factors related to men and women’s ascension to educational leadership. This study served to advanced their findings, as the participants were currently serving as superintendents, the pinnacle of educational leadership roles. Allowing participants to discuss their day-to-day lives and to explore how these experiences influence their advice to aspirants provided an opportunity for a reflective review of the participants’ journeys to the superintendency and their experiences as a superintendent, as well as, an occasion to compare and contrast the experiences. The two themes emerging from this analysis are communication and advice to aspiring superintendents.

The women participants describe several instances which they perceive as gendered. Some of these experiences include being left out of important meetings, being ignored while speaking or when entering a room, having to be better prepared with facts and data prior to addressing an issue, being strategically left out of professional opportunities, being excluded from promotions because they have children, and having to work harder and have more experiences than their male peers.
In comparison, the men share an awareness of gender and speak of the importance of acknowledging its potential influence, but they collectively share very few examples of their own gendered experiences. These include misspeaking in public, resulting in sexist comments, having to ask women colleagues to address perceived sensitive topics with other women and using language and communication in different ways when talking with women.

Without exception, these superintendents were able to articulate specific behaviors or skills which they employed to help mitigate gendered experiences, suggesting that gender does impact the role and the day-to-day lives of these superintendents. Some of these strategies were utilized by both men and women, while other strategies appeared to be gender dependent.

Communication was also named as a common strategy. The manner in which topics, issues and conflict were approached, the tone and delivery of the message, the use of reflective questions and intentional conversations and the ability to speak succinctly and with knowledge were knowingly utilized as a means to address gender differences. Communication was also used to create a culture of openness and mutual respect in the workplace. Participants believe that creating a work environment in which everyone is valued and each is able to say what they need to say diminishes the chances that people are overlooked or treated less than equal.

However, the participants share frustrating times, when specific communication was avoided. Women assume that honest dialogue might make them seem like less of a professional. Additionally, attempts at honest dialogue left the women doubtful that their next efforts would result in a different outcome. Men, in turn, don’t always recognize an opportunity to use communication as a strategy because they don’t recognize the gendered situation. And, in the case of one male participant, the cost of being honest with a superintendent colleague was
assumed to great a risk, fearing that addressing a concern would result in negative repercussions as part of his future.

Unique to the some of the women in this study was the strategy of ignoring perceived gendered situations. They rationalize different explanations for their experiences, such as assuming the issue is related to position or power, rather than assuming the experience is gender related. Sometimes women believe that because they are relatively new in their position, they have not earned the respect of their male peers; therefore, they have not earned the right to engage in the conversation.

A second theme emerging from the analysis was advice to aspiring superintendents. All of the participants were thoughtful in their discussion of advice for aspiring superintendents and offered a variety of suggestions. These superintendents urged potential superintendents to create nurturing relationships between and among the many stakeholders, including, school board members, the community, administrators, and parents. They agree that superintendents who foster and maintain effective relationships will be hired and will be successful in their roles. Additionally, because the participants assume that the aspiring superintendents will come from within this state and are currently serving in an administrative leadership position, they cautioned aspirants to keep negative experiences to themselves. Since the educational network is tightly knit, they felt talking disparagingly or with malice could potentially thwart the career ambitions of an aspirant. Another consistent strand of advice warned participants to be aware of their audience, to pay attention to how they act and what they say and think about how others may perceive their words or their actions.

Men and women speak of the advantage of having a variety of experiences. These experiences can serve to make you more employable, but these superintendents talked about how
the varied experiences can make the job easier once the position of the superintendency is obtained. In other words, in their collective perspective, if you have the ability to learn, think and work hard, lack of experience won’t hurt you. But, you might have more to learn on the job.

Embedded in their advice to aspirants, these superintendents talk about loving their job, being able to influence an entire district and having the potential to really impact kids. They emphasize the importance of being true to your self, stating that skills, integrity, and ethics should be foundational. They believe these traits should be the required criteria that a school board seeks in the hiring process, but acknowledge that school boards can be unpredictable and biased. Moreover, these biases do influence the selection process.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, SUMMARY, AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter consists of four sections. The first section provides a review of the research problem and purpose of the study. The second section presents a discussion of the data analysis. The final sections present the summary and implications.

Review of the Problem Statement and Purpose of the Study

The problem addressed by this study is the need to expand on current research exploring the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency. Much of the research on the topic of women in the superintendency and the barriers to accessing the superintendency, including gender privilege and gender bias, has been quantitative in nature. Additionally, as reasoned in Riehl and Byrd (1997) “socialization is a process that, by definition, is rooted in contexts bounded by time, space, and culture” (p. 48), thus, offering an explanation for the different outcomes that are found in past and current research. The present study offers an update on women’s career mobility by examining responses to questions about their journey to the superintendency and exposes perceived gendered experiences. Moreover, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring this issue from the perspective of men and women within the same study.

Therefore, the purpose of the present narrative is to identify, describe and analyze the lives and experiences of four men and four women superintendents, exploring the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency and exposing any potential gender privilege or bias in the investigation of how superintendents perceive the office of the superintendency. Further, it seeks to expand on the quantitative study by Riehl and Byrd (1997), which focused on factors associated with gender differences in development of administrative
careers as construct for understanding what may contribute to the underrepresentation of women in school administration. Riehl and Byrd (1997) utilized three general classes of theoretical explanations to create a model that suggests career development as a constrained and contextualized individual action. The first class of explanations highlights the importance of women’s self-perception and actions, and suggests that women have not been socialized to aspire to administrative positions. The second class of explanations determines that women’s career mobility is suppressed because of the formal organizational structure, which excludes women. The third class of explanations suggests the root cause of women’s lower participation in school leadership is a result of male dominance in society overall.

The following research questions guided the study: (1) How do these men and women describe themselves personally and professionally? (2) What experiences in their career helped lead them to educational administration? (3) What role did mentors assume in their path to the superintendency? (4) What advice would they offer to men and women superintendent aspirants?

While there is ample evidence of the underrepresentation of common career barriers to women becoming superintendents (Gwertz, 2006; Herber 2002; Phelps, 2002; Irby & Iselt; 2002), there is not much research devoted to those who have succeeded to high levels of educational administration (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). Literature on the current state of the public school superintendents represents a strand of research which illuminates the “social construction” of the superintendency (Skrila, 200b). Her work illuminates how gender has become an inextricable part of how society envisions the job of the superintendency and is supported by the work of others (Al-Omari, 2007; Boonsathorn, 2007; McNeill, 2007; Ramsay & Letherby, 2006; Timms, Graham & Caltabiano, 2006; Aladejena, & Aladejena, 2005; Kjeldal, Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2005; Leathwood, 2005; Chan, 2004). Much of this research provides
quantitative data on the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency with a preponderance of the studies including only women participants. The use of qualitative methodology in this study provides an opportunity to explore the story behind the numbers and factors reported as a result of quantitative research. This in-depth study of four men and four women superintendents allows an exploration of their professional journey and their day-to-day experiences, providing an acute analysis of their perceptions and perspectives. Further, using the construct of career mobility affords an opportunity to explore the professional journey of both men and women through a specific lens, one that takes a look at three broad sources that influence career mobility including, an individual’s identity, motivations, and sex role stereotypes.

Discussion

Riehl and Byrd (1997) sought to explore the factors associated with the career move from classroom teacher to building level administrator, using nationally representative data on nearly 4800 public school teachers. The goal of their two-year study was to update the current landscape of women’s career mobility by examining a sequence of questions about gender differences in socialization to school administration. Summary results from the study indicate that while teachers did prepare for administrative careers, there seems to be a phenomenon of “drift,” since the majority of those who prepared for administration did not express strong interest in leaving the classroom. This concept is substantiated in the work of Buell, Schroth and DeFelice (2002) which found that a growing number of educators are making the decision not to pursue careers in educational administration, even though openings exist. This is most troubling in light of a described increase in open positions and a presumed shortage of qualified candidates (O’Connell, 2000). While the majority of study participants indicated they would seek the
superintendency, if they had to do it all over again, Monica would only consider a position if “it were the right fit,” suggesting that even those women who obtain a superintendent’s position are not necessarily career superintendents.

A second finding shows that while the men and women were prepared equally, the women had educational training in more fields. However, the standards to which each was held accountable did not generally differ. This phenomenon is supported in the literature exploring gender and leadership. Much of the research, regardless of philosophical orientation, is in agreement that the mechanisms by which women achieve positions of leadership are qualitatively different than those experienced by male leaders (Mannix & Neale, 2005; Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000). Corey articulated it best when she said, “I’ve always thought that in order for me to get there [the superintendency], I’d have to work harder.”

A final result concludes that new elementary administrators have a more stable family context, while secondary administrators tended to be single or divorced. The authors utilized a logistic regression analysis to determine how or if these socialization factors; aspirations, qualifications and context were interrelated. The results indicate that these factors were prominent for both men and women. Nevertheless, the positive effects of these factors for women did not overcome other factors, thus the predictability of their becoming administrators remained below that of their male counterparts. These findings are counter to a study (Buell et al., 2002) which demonstrated that many of the socialization factors facing men and women—concerns over relocation frequency, job stressors, and impact on the family—plague male educators at a rate of significance equivalent to that for female educators. The researchers conclude that the problem may not be so much a matter of gender inequity in recruitment and support of qualified candidates, but a problem with the administrative environment itself. These
findings expose the possibility of a time in educational leadership in which an intersection of gender bias, white privilege, requirements and demands of the role of the superintendency, and family priorities have coalesced and created an educational environment that discourages qualified candidates, men or women, from pursuing the role of public school superintendent.

The present study seeks to expand on the Riehl and Byrd (1997) study through interviews with four men and four women superintendents. The interviews gave the participants an opportunity to share perceptions and perspectives about their experiences related to their journey into school administration, including reaching the pinnacle role of the superintendent, and also provided the opportunity to understand subsequent experiences related to their day-to-day lives in the gender-stratified role of the superintendent. Their responses led to the initial coding categories including career path, obstacles and barriers, mentors, sacrifices and regrets, job satisfaction, and advice to aspirants. The final analysis of the participants’ statements utilizing the construct of career mobility led to the coding categories of personal experiences, mentors, and navigation strategies.

Two main topic areas were generated from the analysis: factors related to professional journey and factors related to navigating the gendered role of the superintendency. The themes emerging from these topics were: 1) motivations and aspirations; 2) communication; and, 3) advice to aspiring superintendents.

These superintendents offer a variety of anecdotes exposing and illustrating the early influences of their family on their personal identity and socialization to a career in educational administration. The participants do not necessarily understand or articulate the profound impact their upbringing had on their choice of career. The salient points are inferred and interpreted by the researcher. Tony shares that his religious foundation guided and continues to guide his life.
He was the only male participant who did not indicate having a parent in school administration. But his belief in a higher power, he asserts, served to direct him to his current role as superintendent. As the youngest participant and the one with the most experience in the role, he believes his destiny was influenced by God. The other men in this study acknowledge the experience of their fathers and the idea that education was a respected avocation in their family’s lives. From their perspective, their ascent into school administration is attributed to fortunate circumstances, outside influences, such as the encouragement of teachers or coaches, and an “inkling” that educational leadership might be of interest. Riehl and Byrd (1997) suggest that culture influences the career paths of educational administrators. In this study, the male participants were able to articulate how the influences of the culture around them were also influential in their career advancement.

Glaringly missing from the perspective of these three men is the fact that their fathers were educational administrators while they were young and during the years when conversations and decisions shaped the future of some young adults. It is curious as to why these men, these successful superintendents, attribute their career choice to someone other than their fathers. Perhaps, because these men grew up with their fathers in education, they did not realize that their lived experiences, including the talk around the dinner table, the evenings their fathers spent away from home dedicated to serving other children and the inherit message that education is important provided a daily mentoring lesson. In a different era, this could be analogous to learning how to take care of the animals and the crops, knowing that one day the farm would belong to the son.

Only two of the women participants spoke about familial influence in relation to their careers. Mary’s father always assumed that she and her brother would attend college, keeping
their future possibilities open. However, the degrees sought by women at the time, if women did attend college, resulted in a nursing or teaching certificate. Mary’s choice to attend college can be attributed to her father, but it is not clear as to whether a degree in teaching, which ultimately led to a role in administration, was a personal choice or one that resulted in choosing between nursing and education. Relying on Riehl and Byrd’s (1997) definition of career socialization, and considering that Mary entered college in the 1960s, it is conceivable that her career options were bound within the era she began higher education.

On the other hand, Corey was not groomed or destined for college as a child. When she approached her parents about attending college, her practical and supportive mother agreed, acknowledging that it might be important to Corey’s financial future and survival to have the skills of typing and shorthand. Although both parents agreed to her attendance at a community college, they “would have been happier if I’d gotten married.” They also became less enamored with Corey’s choices as she sought more and more education in order to further her career. “They were okay with me being a teacher, because a teacher was okay for a girl.” However, when Corey announced her plans to become a principal, her mother cried, “why would you want to do that?”

These early familial influences served to shape the personal identity and ambitions of the participants. Further, these early experiences facilitated the socialization of men towards the goal of educational leadership, more so than the women. Sarah sums this up nicely when she states, “I think often times women don’t see themselves in the driver’s seat. They see themselves in a support role.” This way of thinking by these women superintendents is supported in a number of research studies which contend that women superintendents confront an extra layer of challenges because they are women trying to get by in a man’s world (Ramsay & Letherby, 2006). Shepard
(1999) finds differences among female and male educational administration graduate students. Fifteen percent of female students identify “assistant superintendent” as their final goal, whereas none of the men do. Skrla (2000b) speaks of the “social construction” of the superintendency as a masculine one, ensuring that women who take on the role “will necessarily have difficulties caused by their femaleness,” (p. 293). The literature is rife with examples of this same social construction across nations and cultures (Al-Omari, 2007; Boonsathorn, 2007; McNeill, 2007; Timms, Graham & Caltabiano, 2006; Aladejena & Aladejena, 2005; Kjeldal, Rindfleish & Sheridan, 2005; Chan, 2004). This suggests that the answer to the question, “are women socialized toward administration?” is no. And the women in this study, through their shared experiences about their journey to the superintendency are not any different than the women studied before them. This is a disheartening commentary on the state of educational leadership in the 21st century and the plight of aspiring women leaders.

All participants name a myriad of influential people, called mentors, as being instrumental in their journey to the superintendency with their influence, in time, becoming motivation for career advancement. Paul remembers being encouraged by his principal, during his first year as a teacher “to get [his] administrative credential.” Early influence of this type was not part of the women participants’ experience. These mentor relationships seem to have developed as part of their day-to-day routines and interactions and were not initiated as part of a formal program. Falling outside of educational mentors, as a student facing college and career choice, Tony was influenced by a chance encounter with a woman during a house call as a computer support person. Her words, “you should be a teacher” were all Tony needed to hear. He listened. And his career in education began. The men, more than the women, offer examples of people taking notice of their skills early in their teaching careers. As Morgan relates, he was
buoyed by his relationship, as a “pretty young graduate” student with a professor working on her Ph.D. at the same university. He believes establishing a personal friendship and professional association early on in his administrative career helped position him for the future roles and positions he ultimately assumed.

The women in the study name influential and helpful people, but these mentors primarily supported career decisions that these women had already made. Sarah moved ahead in her career because she sought out challenges. Monica took a practical approach; she wanted to make sure she had future job options. Mary found herself in roles in which she felt under prepared so she went back to school. Corey didn’t have any other women leaders to rely on early in her career, so she was forging ahead in uncharted territory. And, although each of these women had support along the way and acknowledge that support was readily available for the asking or after the fact, they were not necessarily mentored and encouraged at the beginning of their career. Monica offers this perspective and her observation appears to be true for the other women in the study, “I don’t think that women aggressively seek out other women” as mentors. Mary is more specific in her choice to avoid women as mentors, “I think women tend to be spooky. They want to create emotional drama out of things that for the most part, men don’t create the emotional drama.”

Perhaps this occurs because women set goals and go about completing them without reliance from outside mentors or that the organizational context in which they operate does not provide the necessary type of role models or mentors. Maybe the notion that women pursuing leadership might be “damaged” by their affiliation with women’s networks within an organization as identified by Bierema (2005), which reveals that a number of women are concerned that their participation in such networks might somehow harm their careers in a field largely dominated by men is acting as the catalyst behind the lack of early and formal networks
or informal associations. Regardless of the reason or reasons behind the lack of early and ongoing mentorships and networks for women, the absence of this opportunity negatively impacts their ascension to the superintendency.

The participants offer a multitude of perceived gendered experiences. The women shared the most perceived gendered experiences including times in which they were ignored when they entered a room, dismissed when providing a response during a meeting, overlooked for professional committee appointments, excluded from decision making meetings and believed to be less capable, therefore of little worth, due to fewer year’s of experience as compared to their male counterparts. While these women acknowledge gendered experiences, the fact that these experiences did not cause them to confront these issues suggests their reactions align with Skrla’s (2000a) claim that women superintendents remain relatively silent about their experiences of bias in their career development. She submits that the silence may be shameful in nature (“It’s only me”) or self-protective (“I don’t want to appear to cry wolf or discrimination”) or self-doubting (“Maybe it wasn’t really gender bias-how can I be certain?”). Rusch and Marshall (2006) believe that the lack of communication about these experiences or concerns creates a sense of professional isolation that may further inhibit women’s pursuit of career mobility and advancement. It also sets the stage for the importance of engaging in discourse in the area of gender bias and white privilege to counteract negatively-reinforcing narratives and cultural context that shape the experience of a gendered superintendency.

The men acknowledge gender as a factor in their roles as superintendent. However, they collectively report that they don’t spend much time thinking about it, nor do they think they need to. They even suggest that women shouldn’t think about it either. However, when their belief statements are compared to their day-to-day actions, these men offer contrary responses. For
example, Tony asserts “I’m not trying to downplay the fact... there are gender challenges, there are,” and he seeks out the counsel of his wife when he needs the perspective and insight of a woman. He also utilizes the skills and talents of a female administrative assistant in order to deal with difficult or sensitive gendered topics among the women in his office. When pushed on this practice, Tony acknowledged that if his current administrative assistant was not available, he would seek out a trusted female to address perceived sensitive issues.

Interestingly, and most puzzling, is the acknowledgement that gender is a factor in the role of the superintendency, yet the advice offered to aspirants by these men and women participants do not address their gendered experiences. These men and women suggest that aspiring superintendents should experience as many different roles as possible; Morgan believes that his varied experiences “helped” him get to where he is now. However, he realizes that spending the first 19 years of his career at the high school level was “pretty limiting.” Mary asserts you should participate in more district-wide activities, opening yourself up to working with different groups of people. This really facilitates someone from being “pigeonholed” into only a certain role. Further, during these varied experiences, participants believe you should be the best that you can be and avoid using your current role as the stepping stone to the next higher position. Monica cautions, “...be careful what you wish for. If you move too fast, is that really what you want to do? If you are a principal at 28 or 30, what’s left?”

The participants assert that aspiring superintendents should know themselves and be true to themselves. Additionally, they suggest the role of the superintendent as leader is one of relationship building, and if you “don’t like people,” asserts Tony, the role would not be for you. The participants name a variety of traits and attributes that aspirants should possess or cultivate. They include integrity, knowledge and skills, and ethics. Mary strongly believes “your actions
really define [you], not your gender.” Morgan concurs, stating, “be as clear as you can be about what you believe in terms of the fundamental underpinnings of what you bring to leadership” and “that it is not about being better than somebody else, but being who we are.”

The collective and independent consensus of these men and women, on the issue of advice, suggest their ideas should not be ignored and more than likely represent critical pieces of information that can positively influence career mobility. Interview responses indicate that when given the opportunity to reflect on their individual experiences, the influence of gender in the day-to-day lives of these participants exists. However, the absence of advice on the topic of gendered bias, some of which were compelling enough to cause anger and frustration is contradictory. Why is this so? Perhaps the self-reflection and divulged perceived gendered experiences, regardless of how significant, become seemingly distant, irrelevant or isolated after each has been shared, thus losing the emotion and energy surrounding the affront or biased encounter, as to not influence the advice they would offer aspirants.

This disconnect between lived experiences and advice to aspirants can possibly be explained by the findings in Leathwood’s (2005) research on social constructs of professionalism and identity in a population of female administrators in the United Kingdom. She concludes that the professions are “clearly gendered” and that the efforts in the educational field to restructure the profession result in women attempting to apply their feminine strengths to the normalized goal of “improving economy and efficiency,” (p. 405). This, she contends, takes a personal toll on the women leaders and hurts the profession by failing to capitalize on the potentially positive paradigmatic shifts in theory and practice. If women can acknowledge their attempts at navigating gender, and speak about these experiences with other women and men, women’s
leadership styles may be more valued and thus the role of the superintendent as a professional, regardless of gender, may become less stratified in the future.

Summary

The analysis of the interview data exposes the influence of gender on the career mobility and day-to-day lives of men and women superintendents. Further, the analysis illuminates an intriguing phenomenon. While perceived gendered experiences are vividly described by both men and women, none of the participants offer superintendent aspirants advice on the issue of gender. The participants in this study provide rich, detailed perspectives about their journey to the superintendency and about their experiences in the roles of superintendent. The eight men and women offered a clear picture of their ascension to the superintendency and a multitude of examples depicting perceived gendered experiences. Accepting Riehl and Byrd’s (1997) definition, “socialization is a process that by definition is rooted in contexts bounded by time, space and culture,” the experiences and perspectives of the men and women in this study serve to revisit the concept of career mobility and add to the current literature and research on the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency.

Implications

While this study offers the perspectives from a small number of superintendents, four men and four women, the results demonstrate that gender bias is experienced at a variety of levels in the day-to-day lives of the superintendency. Additionally, regardless of the perceived gendered experiences, the superintendents enjoy their job and perhaps because of their job satisfaction, these men and women did not offer aspiring aspirants any advice in regard to the potential of gender bias or white privilege in the superintendency.
The illuminating examples of perceived gendered experiences from the participants can add to the current literature on the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency as well as the topics of the factors related to their professional journey and the factors related to navigating the gendered role of the superintendency. To this end, the experiences of these successful superintendents offer an opportunity for educational researchers to explore why the advice offered to aspirants was absent any mention of the gender bias they experienced.

Educational leadership preservice and certification programs could find this information useful in assisting aspiring superintendents as they learn about the profession and the reality of the gendered role of the superintendent. Moreover, creating an awareness of gender as a factor can play a critical role in helping them be successful. Men and women learning about themselves and each other, and understanding the effects of white privilege and gender bias, can better prepare the superintendents for the day-to-day challenges they will face during their careers. This can best be accomplished through professors, both men and women, who have a clear understanding of the influence of gender in educational leadership and will create opportunities for purposeful dialogue and exploration of this topic throughout the preparation courses. Offering a class or suggesting gender bias become a unit of study within a course of study will not serve to create the type of learning environment needed to seriously embrace and discuss the topic. Gender bias must become a strand of dialogue which permeates all aspects of the preservice and preparation courses. It is not something that can be separated and understood in isolation. Gender must be talked about in the context of the learning, specifically in preparing for educational leadership.

Acknowledging gender as a critical factor in the superintendency and being stymied by their silence of the issue in their advice to aspirants is a call to arms. Men and women alike must
realize and respond to the influence of gender bias and white privilege. As they work with young and aspiring leaders, they are compelled to engage these future leaders in serious discourse about these topics. This form of mentoring can include opportunities for aspirants to reflect on their own experiences and their belief about leadership. The practice of reflective thinking can lead to a better understanding of who they are and how they interact with those around them. This understanding in turn, can influence their ascension to the superintendency. And further, influence their day-to-day experiences once they have assumed the position of superintendent. Moreover, exploring these topics with others can serve to foster a continued individual understanding and self-reflection of the influences of gender including the strategies that serve to mitigate perceived gendered experiences.
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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Leaders in Educational Administration

The purpose of this study is to identify, describe, and analyze the lives and the experiences of 4 men and 4 women superintendents in order to understand if and how gender effects their position.

Interview Procedures

The following questions will be utilized for the semi-structured interview. The interview will be recorded and transcribed in order to examine the interview further.

Demographics

I’d like to begin by asking a few general questions.

♦ Current Age

♦ Race

♦ Years as an administrator

♦ Current Position

♦ Superintendent credential

♦ Highest Degree held

♦ Married

♦ Number of children

♦ Number of grandchildren
Interview Questions

Personal

1. Describe your career path beginning from your first position in education until now.

2. Describe yourself as if someone who knows you were talking. What would they say about you?

3. What do you think were the three or four major events or steps that took place during your rise to superintendent that helped you achieve this position?

4. What personal sacrifices did you make to attain the current role as superintendent? Do you regret any?

5. Did your school district support you in the attainment of the role of superintendent? What more could they have done to help you?

6. Do you plan to stay as a superintendent and retire, or do something else?

7. What gives you satisfaction as the superintendent of ________________?

8. Who do you trust around here?

9. Who do you go to for advice?

10. What types of professional organizations provide you support?

11. Are there other superintendents with whom you work?

12. Are there other administrators, who are not superintendents, with whom you work?

13. What types of support do you rely on in your position?

14. Are there any other comments you would like to give that I have not covered?

15. Describe your career path beginning from your position in education until the present.

16. Why did you pursue the position of superintendent?

17. What significant event persuaded you to interview for this superintendent position?
18. What has been the most difficult issue you've dealt with in your personal life as it relates to your role as superintendent?

19. If you had to do it all over again, would you accept the superintendent position?

20. Did you have a mentor, coach, or sponsor to support you into the superintendency?

21. Describe the hiring process you went through for this superintendency?

**Barriers**

22. What are the impediments that would prevent someone from attaining the superintendency? What should aspirants avoid?

23. Did you experience any gender discrimination before or during your tenure as the superintendent?

**Career**

24. When and where did you begin your career in the role of educational administrator? What was your position?

25. What do you enjoy most about your position as superintendent?

26. What types of job assignments can enhance a superintendent aspirant’s credibility?

**Characteristics**

27. What positions or jobs should aspirants have to prepare them on their move to the superintendency?

28. What main two or three factors helped you attain an administrative position?

29. What advice would you give to anyone aspiring to the superintendency? In terms of attitudes, skills, experience, and any other pertinent information.

27a. Would you modify that response any if you were advising a woman rather than a man?

30. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I have not yet asked?