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A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FEMALE
SUPERINTENDENTS WITHIN A SOUTHERN STATE: PERCEPTIONS OF
LEADERSHIP AND CAREER PATHS CHOSEN

By
Stacy V. Fuentes

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University College of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University
2023

Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Stacy V. Fuentes under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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Abstract

A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FEMALE
SUPERINTENDENTS WITHIN A SOUTHERN STATE: PERCEPTIONS OF
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This qualitative study examined perceived leadership styles and the chosen career path of female superintendents within a southern state. While teaching is an occupation chosen primarily by women, the role of superintendent is filled predominantly by men. The superintendent of a school district is responsible for meeting the daily operational needs of the district as well as the instructional needs of the students the district serves. A great deal of research has been done which focused on overcoming obstacles and barriers as women move toward becoming superintendents. The research within this study focused on providing insight into lived experiences and perceptions of currently serving female superintendents in public schools within a southern state. The in-depth interviews yielded descriptions that provide aspiring female educational leaders a map to navigate through the predominantly male career path to the superintendency.

Keywords: superintendent, transformational leadership, gender bias, career path, mentor, social role theory

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Serving as a liaison between stakeholders in a school district may be the primary role of a public school superintendent, but liaison is just one of many roles included in the job description. While the superintendent provides support and direction in every aspect of a school district's operations, the role is extended even further to include meeting the instructional needs of the students within the district. The superintendent manages all these tasks daily with the help of district office staff, educators, administrators, custodians, bus drivers, and maintenance crews. Additionally, the superintendent determines the most responsible and effective use of both human and financial resources. The superintendent performs all these tasks and more while being the spokesperson for the district and listening to all stakeholders from parents to community members. Grissom and Anderson (2012) explained providing the best environment for all stakeholders hinges on successfully executing management functions within the district.

Background

Women significantly outnumber men as educators in public schools across America. Recent statistics suggest women outnumber men three to one in the role of teacher (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The number of qualified female candidates who ultimately become superintendent is certainly not reflective of the male-to-female ratio of classroom educators.

The path most often followed to the superintendency begins as a classroom teacher. The classroom teacher must seek promotion to positions of leadership within the school prior to taking on district responsibilities. School-level leadership positions like instructional coach, assistant principal, or principal provide the first steps on the path to

the superintendency. These school-level leadership positions then lead to district-level leadership roles for those who choose this path. In 2016, Domenech predicted that within 5 years, 30% of the current superintendents would be ready to retire. Consequently, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2021) reported a retirement rate of 32% among superintendents nationally. This statistic surpassed Domenech's prediction. The increase in the retirement rate created a greater number of open superintendent positions. The increased number of open positions could translate into a window of opportunity for women. Unfortunately, the window of opportunity did not provide the influx of women as expected. Maranto et al. (2018) stated that only 24.1% of school superintendents are female. In 2020, the percentage increased to 28.1%, but data have shown no significant increase in the number of female superintendents over the last 10 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Simply increasing the number of superintendent positions available does not equate to an increase in the number of sitting female superintendents. The reason women are underrepresented in the position of superintendent cannot be wholly attributed to the number of open positions. Maranto et al. (2018) suggested the discrepancy in female leadership was largely because "the pipeline to district-level leadership is narrower for roles that are dominated by women" (p. 13). For example, elementary school principal and instructional coach are two leadership positions dominated by women. While both positions require leadership skills and could be potential stepping stones to the superintendency, neither provided the most direct path to the office. These factors narrowed the pipeline to district-level leadership for women.

Much of the literature concerning aspiring female candidates for superintendency focused on overcoming barriers and successfully meeting challenges (Blount, 1998; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Gender-structured systems, the nature of the job, the career path, and

interview and selection processes are perceived barriers for aspiring female educational leaders. Identifying barriers may not be enough to level the field on the path to the superintendency. Examining the experiences of successful female superintendents will not only confirm the existence of barriers but will provide possible solutions for overcoming these barriers. Illuminating the path chosen and the leadership styles employed to navigate obstacles by successful female superintendents may provide female educators with valuable information to prepare them for their journey to the superintendency.

Statement of the Problem

Underrepresentation by women in the superintendent role is reflective of a problem faced by females as they traverse the path to the top spot in the district. The push for equal opportunities for women and people of color in the late 1960s led to a focus on education for an entire generation. The rights of women and people of color were championed and reflected how they were just as qualified as White men. Since then, strides have been made, but progress toward gender equality in the superintendency has been slow. Even now, in the 21st century, women and people of color are still demanding equality and consideration. Arriaga et al. (2020) stated concerted efforts by women must happen for women to make personal strides forward, break glass ceilings, and dump baggage associated with the past. While providing aspiring female educational leaders with information about barriers and pitfalls they may face is beneficial, perhaps providing models of successful navigation of the path to the superintendency through research could be the impetus for change. To provide aspiring female educational leaders with information regarding the path to the superintendency, the details and lived experiences of female leaders who have successfully navigated the path must be examined. These

lived experiences should include an examination of barriers and obstacles, but most importantly, examples of successful navigation. Providing these models could be the key to equal representation within the office of superintendent.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

To provide aspiring female educational leaders with information about the path to the superintendency, lived experiences of current female superintendents were examined in the research study. By limiting the focus of the study to reflect lived experiences, stories of successful navigation were gathered and analyzed. Providing aspiring female leaders with models of success as a means of navigating the career path to the superintendency through an understanding of self-perceived leadership characteristics and career path navigation drove the research study. Aspiring female leaders can learn from this study, and it may help them navigate their way to the superintendency. Sperandio (2015) highlighted the need for additional knowledge of the career paths “pioneered by successful women leaders” (p. 416). This knowledge is valuable for those who aspire to follow in their footsteps.

The significance of this study reflected the lived experiences of female superintendents. The significance was further supported by the design of the examination of these experiences, which illuminate successes of female superintendents. The research showed aspiring female leaders, through the experience of others, how to navigate the career path successfully. The study also revealed inequities in the role of superintendent to district leaders and school boards. These district leaders and school boards make decisions regarding hiring and need to be cognizant of the part they play in perpetuating the discrepancies.

The study was conducted in a southern state, where one fourth of the public

school superintendents are female. This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to identify themes within the stories of lived experiences of female superintendents. Specifically, themes relating to perceived obstacles and barriers within the career path and the leadership characteristics exhibited by these women were examined.

Theoretical Framework

In the 1980s, Alice Eagly developed the social role theory. Primarily concerned with the gendered division of labor and its impact on society and stereotypical behaviors of men and women, Eagly “set out to determine whether biology or society determined our behaviors” (Dulin, 2007, p. 105). The structural approach to gender differences in social role theory makes it the perfect lens through which to view organizational leadership and the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency. Social norms are behaviors or characteristics that are regarded as acceptable within society for men and women (Dulin, 2007; Eagly, 1987). Historically, women have not displayed leadership characteristics based on social norms (Arriaga et al., 2020). As a result of gender role expectations through division of labor, both men and women learn what are acceptable characteristics and behavior. These ideas perpetuate the cycle of gender differences based on gender roles, which could be the reason for underrepresentation in the role of superintendent by women. Dulin (2007) stated societal norms determine expectations based on gender, and as individuals do what is expected within these societal norms, men and women learn different skill sets, perpetuating the existing stereotype.

Male Behavior According to Social Role Theory

As a male in society, the expectation is to engage in typically masculine behaviors. Males engage in behaviors like risk-taking and removing danger, also known as heroic behaviors (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). Men, in general, act more instrumentally

than women in the same situations, according to the tenets of social role theory (Ridgeway, 2001). Being assertive, independent, and willing to take risks are traits associated with being male. These traits reflect the more instrumental actions displayed in general by most men (Bassoff & Glass, 1982; Ridgeway, 2001). Social role theory and gender-associated stereotypes linked with it reinforce and perpetuate the existence of a patriarchal, male-centered abundance of leadership within the top levels of corporations and government (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Male-centered leadership is also evident within education, specifically within the superintendency.

Female Behavior According to the Social Role Theory

Eagly and Diekmann (2006) described the role of females as centered around supportive, cooperative, and nurturing behaviors. Society further reinforces these nurturing behaviors through motherhood and even in the art of teaching. Roles like homemaker fit into the preconceived ideas and societal norms associated with being female. Ridgeway (2001) suggested that even when roles are not reinforced openly because of gender, men and women still develop and act using gender-differentiated skills. These gender-differentiated skills in leadership include men who focus on self-promotion and accomplishing tasks, as opposed to women who focus on input from others and building relationships.

Social Role Theory and This Study

For this study, the theoretical framework of social role theory was used to inform the research process. Social role theory was used to provide boundaries and focus for all aspects of the research. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained qualitative research uses a theoretical lens or perspective to shape questions and inform data collection and analysis. Themes were not excluded if they did not fit within the lens of social role

theory, rather the theory established the parameters for discussion of data points.

Determining what issues are important to examine was guided by the lens of the social role theory.

Research Questions

The following questions were formulated as the primary research questions for this study:

1. What are the self-perceived leadership characteristics exhibited by the selected female superintendents within this southern state?
2. What are the common career pathway characteristics present among the selected female superintendents within this southern state?

Key Terms Defined

The following terms were used in this study.

Agentic Behavior

Refers to goal-achieving and task-oriented behavior, decisiveness, and assertiveness (Bakan, 1966).

Communal

Refers to maintaining relationships and social functioning, benevolence, and trustworthiness (Bakan, 1966).

Educational Leadership

The process of guiding and enlisting the talents of students and teachers to achieve the common goal (Austin, 2008).

Gender Bias

The unintentional mental association of gender based on tradition, perception, norms, culture, or experience (Arriaga et al., 2020).

Gender Roles

Role or behavior learned by a person as appropriate to their gender (Eagly, 1987).

Laissez-Faire Leadership

Leadership style in which leaders trust the members of the team to accomplish the goals within the organization with little or no direction from the management (Schwartz, 1999).

Leadership Style

Characteristics exhibited by a person when leading or managing a group of people (Lewin, 1951).

Mentor

Trusted advisors who guide the decision-making process through experience for someone younger or with less experience (Arriaga et al., 2020).

Nurture

The act of caring for and encouraging the growth and development of something and the center of female roles (Eagly & Diekmann, 2006).

Situational Leadership

Leadership style in which the way leadership is expressed is dependent on a task or unique situation and designed to meet the needs of the team and individuals.

Social Role Theory

A social psychological theory referring to gender differences and similarities in social behavior. The theory's basic principle informs social roles in society based on gender (Eagly, 1987).

Transactional Leadership

Leadership in which an effective transaction or exchange between leaders and

followers occurs to reach desired outcomes (Schwartz, 1999).

Transformational Leadership

Leadership style in which collaboration and building capacity in others result in desired outcomes set forth in an organizational-wide vision (Schwartz, 1999).

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Limitations and delimitations are factors that could impact the data and findings from this study. Limitations are factors beyond my control, and delimitations are factors I chose to limit to facilitate the study in an effective and timely manner.

Limitations

Potential limitations impacting this study were determined to be

1. Honesty on behalf of the participants during the interviews. While the interview questions and follow-up questions were designed to allow participants to honestly explain their lived experiences, I relied on the honesty of all participants when gathering data.
2. Bias on my part could be considered a limitation. As a female who aspires to the role of educational leader, I have preconceived ideas about the path to leadership, which can limit this type of qualitative study. Through qualitative validity, I mitigated the bias associated with the collected data within my study (Creswell, 2014).
3. Access to female superintendents in this southern state was also a limitation. There are currently 20 female superintendents in the southern state where the study took place. Gaining access to them in a timely manner for the study presents itself as a limitation. Additionally, travel for interviews was considered a limitation.

4. Access to interviews in person due to COVID-19 pandemic protocols. In-person interviews provided me with an increased ability to read subtle nuances in speech. The pandemic protocols that limited access through social distancing made it more difficult to schedule in-person interviews.

Delimitations

Delimitations of the study were determined to be

1. Geographically limiting the participants to currently serving female superintendents within this southern state.
2. Specifically targeting superintendents rather than including all levels of educational leadership.
3. Choosing lived experiences and a qualitative data collection method to gather information for interpretation.
4. Limiting data points to leadership style and career path information.
5. Choosing to replicate a previously completed study using participants from another state.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 introduced the significance of the underrepresentation of women in the role of public school superintendent. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature relating to the problem described in Chapter 1. Scholarly literature that focuses on social role theory, the role of the superintendent in the public school system, women as superintendents, characteristics of educational leaders, and the pathways to the superintendency are examined, discussed, and synthesized. Chapter 3 examines the methodology of this study. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used, and all components of the research are discussed within these parameters. Chapter 4 presents the

findings from the research, and Chapter 5 offers an interpretation and analysis of the findings in Chapter 4 along with recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

This chapter presents a cumulative review of the literature reviewed to complete the study. It is divided into seven sections. The first section discusses social role theory and the theoretical framework used to examine the data and guide the research. The second section reviews literature related to the history of the superintendency. The next section examines the roles of a superintendent within a public school district. The fourth section discusses women in the role of superintendent. Barriers and obstacles faced by women in educational leadership can be found in the fifth section. The sixth section covers literature concerning transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership styles and the characteristics associated with each. Additionally, each style is examined regarding effectiveness. Situational leadership is also discussed. Finally, the seventh section discusses the pathway to the superintendency and associated literature. Each section in this chapter supports the research study and informs the questions asked of the participants. An exhaustive search of the literature provided the most recent information available on the topic and supported the need for the research study. While an effort was made to use the most recent research and applicable studies, some of the literature dates further back, which might be indicative of a slow progression of change.

Social Role Theory: The Theoretical Framework

Eagly (2007) suggested that women are oriented toward nurturing behavior and, because of the nurturing behavior, perform better in roles fit for these characteristics, like nursing or teaching. These assertions are a product of years of studies that support the development of social role theory. According to Eagly (1987), men and women behave

differently because of cultural expectations regarding gender more so than biological or sociological factors.

Differences in the way men and women behave are determined in large part by the influence exerted through structures found within society. Societal structures such as family and community create expectations based on gender. These expectations create societal norms, which, according to Eagly (1987), are gender-appropriate behaviors or qualities. These expectations, based on gender differences, cause differentiation in the learned skills of men and women, which further amplifies these differences (Dulin, 2007). Additionally, Eagly (1987) reported a distinct difference between gender roles and social roles. Social roles emerge through structural constructs like family and organizational structures like the workplace.

Agentic and Communal Traits

Bakan (1966) defined the two-dimensional division in traits of men and women in society as agentic and communal. While these two terms are not gender-specific, agentic qualities are largely attributed to men, and communal traits are considered more feminine. Agentic traits pertain to self-assertion and independence, while communal traits pertain to concern for others and selflessness (Dulin, 2007; Twenge, 2009). These two terms are used to differentiate male and female roles in society's structured environments. Application of the terms, agentic and communal traits, are associated with the workplace, specifically hierarchy in educational leadership.

Eagly (1987) suggested the differences between men and women according to social role theory stem from the division of labor. The division of labor into male and female roles creates gender role expectations, which lead to each participant having a skill set reflective of gender (Dulin, 2007). Success, regardless of gender, comes from

living up to these societal expectations. For men, agentic behaviors like assertiveness and competence are rewarded. Females are rewarded for communal behaviors like trustworthiness and relationship building. Living up to the expectations established by society reinforces social roles and associated behaviors. These successes, brought about through social roles created by the division of labor, support the existing gender roles, which perpetuate the status quo in the workplace (Dulin, 2007; Eagly, 1987).

Eagly (1987) determined that perceived agentic and communal qualities were largely assigned because of job status. In this study, the comparison was between those who had jobs and those who were homemakers. Agentic qualities were largely assigned to both males and females who were employed; however, when job status was unknown, agentic qualities were assigned more frequently to men. Eagly (1987) determined that being employed informed assigning agentic or communal qualities notwithstanding gender.

Conway et al. (1996) further researched the status of one's job and its impact on assigning agentic or communal qualities. Agentic qualities, largely attributed to men, are described as competence, decisiveness, and assertiveness. Qualities referred to as communal are largely attributed to females and include relationship-building, trustworthiness, and benevolence. Through this research, Conway et al. also determined agentic qualities were reflective of high-status jobs, and conversely, low-status jobs reflected communal qualities. From this research, implications regarding the agentic qualities, typically assigned to males, would make males better suited for higher-status jobs. Using the same logic, the converse would be true for women since communal qualities are associated with lower-status jobs.

Societal Norms

The gendered division of labor in modern society creates societal norms or workplace expectations based on gender. Research also suggests further division by gender in high-status and low-status jobs (Conway et al., 1996; Eagly & Steffen, 1984). These societal influences, supported by the expectations created through the division of labor, impact career choices for women. Research also suggests overcoming societal expectations creates an additional obstacle for women, which does not impact their male counterparts within an organization (Dulin, 2007).

History of the Superintendency

The superintendent serves as chief executive officer for the school district. There are four levels of educational structure: federal, state, intermediate, and local (Kowalski, 2006). Each of these tiers is represented by a superintendent at the top of the organizational hierarchy. While schools are reported to have been established as early as 1640, the role of superintendent did not exist until the mid-1800s. Additionally, the role of superintendent did not become widely accepted until the early 1900s (Kowalski, 2006). The Industrial Revolution brought increasing enrollment into school districts, which brought about a need for specialization within the administration of the district; from the need for specialization, the role of superintendent was established (Kowalski, 2006). More recently, the role of superintendent increased in complexity during the transitions from the 20th to the 21st centuries. The position, sometimes demanding and controversial, has been acknowledged as the most significant position in public education (Kowalski, 2006). The superintendent must fill all assigned roles well to be considered successful. The diversity in the required roles of a superintendent, such as teacher, communicator, manager, and data-driven decision maker, requires skills that are not often

found in just one person. These required skills make the superintendency a position filled by one person which requires the skills of many.

Five Roles of the Superintendent

Much research has been done regarding the role of the superintendent since the position was instituted in the mid-1800s. In general, researchers agree there are five roles or categories attributed to the superintendency. Kowalski (2006) defined these roles as teacher-scholar, organization manager, democratic statesman, applied social scientist, and communicator and attributed the first four roles to research done by Raymond Callahan in 1966. The fifth role of communicator was developed much later in response to the increasing technology and the push toward an information-based society (Kowalski, 2003).

Superintendents, while accommodating all stakeholders, must rely on professional knowledge to develop school improvement recommendations. The many roles of the superintendent are important. Some would argue the importance of one role over another. Notwithstanding the implied levels of importance by some, all roles reflect skills necessary to do the job well. The superintendent, by overseeing daily district operations, executes the vision established by the school board and works with school-level leaders and stakeholders to ultimately do what is best for students (Martens, 2012).

Teacher-Scholar

There are several points of view when it comes to what the instructional background of a superintendent should be. Kowalski (2006) stated that many people believe that superintendents require a solid background in pedagogy and experience in the classroom. Contrary to these people, there are those who argue the superintendency is just a generic managerial position. These people also argue pedagogy and classroom

experience are unnecessary skills for a superintendent and were only added to the job description to protect the interest of the education lobby (Kowalski, 2006). Regardless to which school of thought one subscribes, a superintendent must provide educators within the district necessary tools and professional development to meet the needs of the students. It is reasonable to expect the superintendent to have knowledge of pedagogy and classroom experience. The educational success of the district hinges on the leadership of the superintendent and knowledge of curriculum and instruction.

Over the past 20 years, the superintendent's role has shifted from managerial to more curriculum and instruction oriented. The shift in roles comes from the laws and mandates enacted to provide accountability for student learning and to raise the standards of practice to increase student performance. These high stakes assessments and accountability have forced superintendents to increase understanding and develop expertise in matters of curriculum, such as scope, sequence, and alignment (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). Increased accountability forced stakeholders to work together within the public school system to maximize student achievement. The increased collaboration among all district stakeholders in response to the increased accountability demanded the role of superintendent include an understanding of human relations to better lead and support all stakeholders (Martens, 2012; Skrla, 2010).

Organization Manager

Glass (2002) stated that while the managing duties are important in the role of superintendent, the size of the district enrollment often impacts what managerial duties fall to the superintendent. In larger enrollment districts, there are generally more support staff available to handle the organizational aspects of the district. Glass cautioned about broad generalizations regarding managerial duties and the superintendency. While

superintendents in larger enrollment districts may have the support staff to cover these managerial duties, it is still the responsibility of the superintendent to ensure these things are done. Superintendents in any size district must be effective leaders and effective managers (Kowalski, 2006). Increased demands on the superintendent should not make them choose between being a good leader or a good manager. The mark of a good superintendent comes from establishing equilibrium between managerial and leadership roles associated with directing, monitoring, and evaluating school administrators in the pursuit of district goals (Kowalski, 2006; Martens, 2012).

Democratic Statesman

The superintendent is the liaison between all stakeholders within the school district. It is the job of the superintendent to gather support for district initiatives from all groups within the district. Being skilled in conflict management and understanding research-based collaboration strategies support the superintendent in these endeavors. The role of superintendent has been described as political in nature (Keedy & Bjork, 2001; Martens, 2012). Demonstrating adaptability to change, conflict management, and flexibility in situations while maintaining an unyielding commitment to the district's vision through collaboration are characteristics of an effective superintendent (Kowalski, 2006; Martens, 2012).

Applied Social Scientist

School reform, social justice, and the emphasis on data-driven decision-making influence the superintendent to employ the role of applied social scientist (Fusarelli, 2008). Identifying deficiencies within school reform initiatives and recommending policies based on research are expected of the superintendent as an applied social scientist. Additionally, addressing social issues and the impact of these issues within the

district requires knowledge and skills from social sciences like psychology and sociology (Kowalski, 2006). Additionally, DeMatthews (2019) cautioned superintendents about inserting themselves into contentious political situations but also encouraged them not to neglect their status as community leaders to advocate for marginalized populations and leverage resources when necessary.

Communicator

Keedy and Bjork (2001) stated public schools are influenced by human interactions occurring inside and outside of the organization, and these interactions are often between people who have fundamental philosophical differences. Kowalski (2006) discussed how communication and culture are inseparably connected. The role of the superintendent as communicator will ultimately impact the culture of the organization. Through effective communication from the superintendent, a more inclusive and change-ready culture will emerge. Martens (2012) stated the importance of the superintendent's ability to communicate both needs and accomplishments in a variety of ways, like visibility at school events, written reports, and media interactions.

Women as Superintendents

In the 19th century, education, both in the classroom and at the level of leadership, was dominated by women. While the nurturing behavior of women and the acceptance of lower wages by women perpetuated female dominance in the 19th century, the 20th century brought a desire to add a level of professionalism to educational leadership (Maranto et al., 2018). Reflective of the time and opinions held by the majority, women were not factored into the shift toward professionalism in education. The word professional, at that time, was most often associated with men, which led to the hiring of men as superintendents and other educational leaders (Maranto et al., 2018).

Consequently, female dominance in education as principals and superintendents diminished.

In August of 1909, the Chicago Tribune reported Ella Flagg Young was named the superintendent of Chicago Public Schools. Young was the first female public school superintendent in the United States and served from 1909 to 1915 (Blount, 1998).

Statistically speaking, it is difficult to know if hiring Young made an impact on women in the superintendency nationally since surveys to gather data regarding the superintendency in the early 1900s did not include gender (Blount, 1998).

The 1960s brought new data collection techniques through the Kennedy administration's initiative to gauge female impacts in society. These new data-gathering techniques and the discrepancies uncovered gave rise to the women's advocacy groups that followed. Inaccuracies in reporting and documentation offered little help in determining a true account of female representation in the office of superintendent, but in 1971, one study estimated females accounted for 1.3% of superintendents in the United States. Data from 1993 indicated female superintendent percentages had increased to 7% nationally but also stated that 7% might not be an accurate number due to irregularities in collection methods and intervals for collection (Blount, 1998).

Statistics of females and the superintendency from World War II until the 1970s also reflected a decline. The low point in 1970 was marked by a slow but steady rise in the number of female superintendents nationwide. Today, women are becoming superintendents of public school districts, and the increase is evident through statistical analysis. Blount (1998) explained these "numbers fail to express the meaning people attach to their actions, thoughts, and experiences" (p. 201).

Barriers for Women in Educational Leadership

Many research studies have been done over the past 20 years to determine what barriers female educational leaders face in obtaining the superintendent's position. These research studies, along with the voices of current and former female superintendents, might rank these barriers differently; however, one thing is certain, being female increases the difficulty of successfully overcoming barriers and successfully meeting challenges associated with rising to the position of superintendent (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006).

Many barriers prohibit female educational leaders from ascending to the top spot within the public school district. Barriers include gender bias, lack of mentoring by females, misrepresentation, or lack of representation in the hiring process (McGee, 2010). Additionally, societal expectations and workplace culture were also included as barriers to women created by gender bias (CEDA, 2013). Each of these obstacles requires skills to navigate and overcome. Gender bias is the overarching barrier that impacts the other barriers. Navigating these barriers will be easier and a clearer path will be provided for female educational leaders by understanding what it takes to navigate the barriers. Successful navigation of barriers to the superintendency will lead to a generation of females who are better prepared to traverse the pathway to educational leadership and less likely to self-impose boundaries (McGee, 2010).

Gender Bias

Women must work harder to establish themselves in networks that are largely dominated by men, like the superintendency. Once women break through and establish a place for themselves within the network, it becomes imperative for these women to find a way to earn respect. Often, establishing respect comes through activities created within

the network. The inability of women to comfortably participate in these activities is where gender bias clearly impedes our progress. While the number of female superintendents has increased, the increase has been very slow because the position is still viewed as masculine (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Networking opportunities often revolve around activities that are most associated with men. Golf outings, fishing, and hunting excursions provide perfect opportunities to network, but these specific opportunities, in general, are not as appealing to women as men (LeMasters & Roach, 2012). During these networking opportunities, discussions regarding career advancement can occur; however, gender bias, “unintentional mental association stemming from tradition, perceptions, norms, values, culture, and/or experience” (Arriaga et al., 2020, p. 94), precludes women from comfortably participating in events and activities such as these. Sexism and gender stereotypes often preclude women from comfortably taking part in these networking opportunities, and opportunities for advancement are lost (CEDA, 2013).

Sperandio and Devdas (2015) stated that along with the inability to relocate and undervaluing their own worth, gender bias is one of three factors that impede the progression of women into the role of superintendent. Additionally, Derrington and Sharratt (2009) stated women must not only fight more battles to achieve a role in educational leadership but must also be ready to continue to fight to maintain the position. Often, women who find themselves in positions of leadership feel it is necessary to deemphasize their femininity (Silva, 2008). Shifting away from stereotypically feminine behaviors is a strategy some women in leadership use to overcome existing gender biases. The deemphasis of stereotypical feminine behavior is a way women fight to maintain the position once it is achieved.

Gender bias associated with responses to stress and uniquely female responsibilities in the home creates another obstacle for women. Due to the demands placed on a sitting superintendent, the position is considered a high-stress job with a substantial turnover rate (Hawk & Martin, 2011). Gendered responses to stress were separated into problem-focused for men and emotion-focused for women (Hawk & Martin, 2011). Stress related to the superintendency was equally distributed among males and females, but additional stressors for women regarding family responsibilities and home were noted by Robinson and Shakeshaft (2015). Women who left the superintendency found it difficult to balance life between work and home. Most of these women felt like they were not spending enough time at home with family because being female in the superintendent's office required a higher level of performance than her male counterparts (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015).

Mentoring

Mentoring increases success by providing support to those individuals who wish to lead others (Gardiner et al., 2000). Additionally, Arriaga et al. (2020) defined a mentor as “an experienced, well-seasoned, veteran educational leader who imparts knowledge and personal experiences to women leaders who have been identified as candidates for future executive-level positions” (p. 12). For women who aspire to higher levels of educational leadership, it is difficult to find another woman to be a mentor. Neal et al. (2021) described several reasons for the lack of female mentorship. The primary reason discussed was women are not being asked to provide their services as mentors. If no one is asking women to be mentors, perhaps women should ask to be mentors to increase the pool of possibilities for aspiring leaders. Women often are accused of being too competitive among other females who aspire to positions of leadership to be considered

for mentoring positions. The competitiveness factor is based largely on gender stereotypes and bias based on perception and is far from the truth (Neal et al., 2021). Overcoming these stereotypes is part of the problem. The lack of female mentors causes many female leaders to be mentored by men. Increasing the number of women in education who hold high levels of leadership could provide women with more opportunities to be mentored by women. Garrett-Staib and Burkman (2015) stated for district and school culture to change, female input in superintendent preparation programs and mentoring must occur. A culture change could happen if the number of women in these higher-level educational leadership positions increases. Research suggests women who are mentored by other women can move into the superintendency faster than women who are not mentored by other women (Muñoz et al., 2014).

Traditional mentoring situations of men being mentored by men have historically been in place. Serby and Tripses (2006) proposed these male mentoring relationships not only provided men a path to leadership but also have been successful in keeping women and people of color out. Gardiner et al. (2000) stated traditional mentoring perpetuates the status quo. To break this cycle, women must step into the roles of mentors.

Until gender becomes irrelevant for those women who aspire to high levels of educational leadership, women must navigate the path ahead of other generations. Once ensconced in the superintendency, women must seek to change the culture of the superintendency. Mentoring other aspiring female leaders is one way to make an impact. Since males outnumber females in educational leadership currently, aspiring female leaders are often mentored by men. Sadly, research shows men do not always feel comfortable as mentors for women (Arriaga et al., 2020). Additionally, Hill and Ragland (1995) stated mentoring relationships can be made uncomfortable and awkward when

gender differences exist. Mentoring requires one-on-one conversations and occasionally lunch or dinner meetings. Workplace harassment and discrimination movements have put men ill at ease with components of mentoring a female, and 86% of men report avoiding mentoring women or being mentored by them (Arriaga et al., 2020). Providing aspiring female leaders with qualified mentors is being made increasingly more difficult because of these factors. Women are missing out on possible opportunities to advance because qualified female mentors are scarce (Arriaga et al., 2020).

Sperandio (2015) reported access to mentors is essential for navigating the path to leadership. These mentors provide valuable guidance and preparation for aspiring leaders. The feeling of isolation experienced by aspiring female leaders should compel female leaders to seek out these women and support them as they navigate their path. Arriaga et al. (2020) stated that despite mentoring efforts for women, males were still more likely to advance their careers through mentoring. The discrepancy in advancement is attributed to inequity in active mentoring. The inequity comes from several factors. The unwillingness of men to mentor women is one factor. The other factor reflects components of social role theory and gender bias regarding leadership styles. Because leadership characteristics can be perceived differently when displayed by women and men, many male mentors find it difficult to assist female mentees when it comes to being assertive. Arriaga et al. stated behaviors associated with leadership such as assertiveness are often deemed less attractive when associated with women.

Traditionally the mentor-mentee relationship features an older, more experienced leader who offers advice and assistance to a younger, less experienced person. The mentor in traditional situations provides advice based on personal experiences. For females who aspire to the superintendency, finding a mentor who traveled a similar path

is more difficult because women and men face different challenges along the way (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011). The difference in challenges faced by men and women underscores the importance of mentoring by women who are currently sitting in positions of leadership. Daca (2017) described the story of a sitting female superintendent who considered her female mentor a very valuable resource. Through a positive mentor-mentee relationship, she became the superintendent and sees the opportunity of mentoring aspiring female leaders as a privilege. Women must support women in their leadership journey. Sitting female superintendents play a critical role in leadership through the support of other women as they navigate the path to leadership (Sampson et al., 2015).

The Hiring Process

Women are acquiring advanced degrees, completing educational administration programs, and acquiring other positions of leadership at the district level and principal positions. All these factors support women in their quest to the superintendency, yet women are still not being hired as superintendents (Katz, 2004; Pew Research Center, 2021). In addition to the obstacles that clutter our path to the superintendency, the hiring process further exacerbates our climb to the top spot in educational leadership.

One of the main responsibilities of the local school board is to hire the superintendent for the school district (Campbell, 1994). The school board is also charged with the task of evaluating the superintendent's performance. While larger districts may hire an outside firm to search for a candidate, the process is largely the same across districts (Tallerico, 2000). The position is advertised, interviews are conducted, and then a selection is made. Smaller districts handle the search process without the help of a search firm (Glass, 2002; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). One school district lists the

requirements to become a superintendent as having a valid teaching certificate, having 3 years of classroom teaching experience, and having served in an administrative capacity for 2 years. Some districts might prefer candidates with a doctoral degree, but it is not a requirement (Glass, 2002; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Local school boards are not required to report additional qualities preferred for candidates who apply or data regarding the number of applicants; therefore, determining the number of women who apply for these positions is currently not possible.

Weissman (2012) reported while women are primarily seen as instructional leaders, their male colleagues are viewed as better managers and more fiscally responsible. Additionally, Brunner and Yong-Lyun (2009) determined school boards frequently assert women are not as adept in budgeting and finance-related issues. Interestingly, there is no actual evidence to support these notions. Padgett (2014) reported female superintendents were very adept in matters of finance and were also great instructional leaders. Research suggests there is no real difference in performance regarding district financial decisions between male and female superintendents (Wallace, 2015). These stereotypes and prejudices based on gender from those charged with hiring and evaluating continue to keep women out of the superintendent's office. Because of the stereotyping and gender prejudices, the hiring process emerges as an obstacle for women aspiring to the superintendency. The reluctance of school boards to hire women based on the prejudices and stereotypes regarding a female's ability to lead the district is reflected in research but mostly from the point of view of the candidate (Richard & Kruse, 2008; Sharratt & Derrington, 1993). Additionally, Glass (2002) stated that research regarding the selection and hiring process from the perspective of the school board is scarce.

Leadership Characteristics of Superintendents

The superintendent's capacity to lead impacts every facet of the school district. Regardless of gender, a successful superintendent must possess several leadership characteristics including strong communication skills, the ability to build trust among the stakeholders within the district, discernment in human resources matters, a focus on team building, the ability to delegate and build capacity in others, and a strong initiative coupled with the ability to enact change and a genuine desire to do what is best for the students in our schools (Martens, 2012; Stephens, 2009). A successful superintendent practices these leadership characteristics and impresses the importance of these practices to all stakeholders to establish a culture of collaboration within the district. Additionally, Garrett-Staib and Burkman (2015) stated the importance of strong, consistent leadership skills on both student success and teacher performance.

The superintendent is the liaison between all stakeholders within the district, which requires strong applied social skills (Kowalski, 2006). On an average day, the superintendent could have the opportunity to communicate with everyone from board members to community members and parents. Being able to communicate with everyone while being perceived as authentic, requires the superintendent to be adept in many social situations. Authenticity, resiliency, cultivating relationships through skilled communication, and building capacity in others consistently are leadership characteristics found in effective superintendents (Martens, 2012).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is one of three leadership styles exhibited by men and women in positions of authority, as discussed by Stempel et al. (2015). The other two leadership styles are transactional and laissez-faire. Transformational leadership focuses

on developing employees through the creation of common goals and visions and by appreciating and supporting employees to facilitate their motivation to work toward the common goal. Transactional leadership is largely demonstrated through an exchange between leader and employee. When the transactional leadership style is implemented, good things done by the employee are rewarded and failures are punished. Laissez-faire leadership is a hands-off approach to leadership (Stempel et al., 2015). Laissez-faire leadership works well if the team surrounding the leader is highly skilled and self-motivated (Farley, 2018).

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) named transformational leadership the preferred method of leadership. Research suggests transformational leadership and its integrative approach result in positive, transformational changes where it is implemented with fidelity (Martineau, 2012; Stephens, 2009). Many characteristics can be attributed to transformational leaders. Inclusion, showing empathy, attention to detail, and a strong sense of collaboration are all indicative of practicing transformational leadership (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Transformational leadership is often associated with reaching goals within an organization. Likewise, productivity from teams who have transformational leaders is often greater because of an observed increased level of commitment from the team (Farley, 2018).

Eagly et al. (2003) researched male and female leaders and assigned certain leadership styles based on gender, and women were primarily viewed as transformational leaders. Reflecting gender bias and stereotypes, the research defines characteristics of a good leader as gender neutral, but masculine terms are still used to define leadership (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Empowering the team and building capacity in the team through communication and understanding are associated with female leaders, and

rational thought processes, building independence among the team, and a spirit of competition are associated with male leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2007). While competition is usually a benefit, it reflects a more transactional leadership style (Stempel et al., 2015).

Hackman and Johnson (2009) stated the differences in male and female leadership styles are largely due to perception. While perception might contribute to what is perceived as male and female leadership styles, many researchers have exposed actual differences based on gender in positions of leadership (Austin, 2008; Bass & Avolio, 1994).

The position of superintendent is a liaison between all stakeholders in the school district. The liaison position requires the ability to communicate, collaborate, and build capacity in others. These characteristics are examples of transformational leadership characteristics and are considered by most as female leadership characteristics.

Owens and Valesky (2015) took transformational leadership a step further and stated moral leadership is the pinnacle of the transformational leadership style. There are three basic tenets associated with moral leadership. They include open and honest sharing of ideas between the leader and the organization, the team is involved in the processes, and promises made to the group by leadership are kept (Owens & Valesky, 2015). Collaborating with the team while cocreating a vision for the organization produces a level of trust among stakeholders in the organization. These transformational leaders are intuitive and develop a shared vision with their team for a better future, and through collaboration and communication, their vision is realized (Bird & Chuang, 2013).

From the perspective of teachers and staff, research shows having a transformational leader is best. Hauserman (2005) shared findings that reflect favorable opinions of faculty and staff for transformational leaders. Teachers reported these leaders

were motivational, dependable, and student-centered. Teachers also stated that they felt included in decision-making, empowered by their leader, and appreciated.

Being a Visionary. Fullan and Quinn (2016) stated that as a leader, one is responsible for establishing a clear vision for the organization and creating a dynamic environment that allows progress. If these factors are in place, the vision will become reality within the organization. The superintendent of any school district should be cognizant of the need for a common vision but should also possess the leadership skills to enact and realize the vision. Villa and Thousand (2017) referred to creating a vision as creating and communicating a picture of the future and persuading others to work toward the realization of that future.

Fullan and Quinn (2016) cautioned that the absence of vision in an organization is detrimental. Once a vision for innovation is established, leadership cannot complete the task alone. Fullan and Quinn called the leader the North Star, which implies the leader provides a pathway and guidance for the team. A great leader collaborates and communicates with their team, not only in the creation of the vision but throughout the innovative process. Additionally, Wheatley (2011) discussed the importance of the vision and the need to insert the tenets within the vision into the everyday workings of the organization. Through inserting the vision into everyday practice, great leaders establish a pathway for change where individual input is welcome, but team success is the desired outcome. Through a concerted group effort, goals associated with the clear vision are realized (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Robinson et al., 2017; Villa & Thousand, 2017).

Martineau (2012) argued that while vision is very important, successful implementation of the innovations held within the vision is equally important. Failing to realize goals associated with a vision often comes from not including staff and faculty in

every step of the creation process. Simon (2015) discussed the difference between managers and visionaries and clarified the characteristics of a great leader. Visionaries are farsighted and see the future associated with the vision clearly but cannot see the path to that future. Managers see the inner workings of what is happening right now and are nearsighted without seeing the future. Great leadership is a blend of both, and their vision is 20/20 (Simon, 2015).

Designing a well-planned vision for the future, which includes input from those in the organization, and watching the vision become reality through collaboration and hard work on the part of all stakeholders, is the mark of a truly great leader. A true visionary leader aligns both actions and speech with the vision. All actions are planned and lead the stakeholders closer to realizing the vision (Simon, 2015).

Building and Maintaining Relationships. As the superintendent, the liaison between all stakeholders in the school district, building and maintaining relationships prove to be necessary skills for success. The relationship between a leader and those who are in their charge should be one of mutual trust and respect. Disregarding any titles or positions, the relationship should offer a safe space for communication and collaboration.

Transformational leadership happens when leaders and followers inspire one another to increased levels of motivation and morality (Goethals et al., 2004). Engaging and motivating each other further support leadership as a process rather than a title or position. Bass and Riggio (2006) discussed the importance of leaders in finding balance within the position to inspire confidence and trust. The skill of building and maintaining relationships with all stakeholders impacts the overall culture of the organization.

There is power in the skill of building and maintaining relationships (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Through building relationships, leaders improve culture and facilitate

innovation for positive gains (Sampson et al., 2015). By employing transformational leadership, superintendents use relationship building to develop capacity in others. Developing capacity in others as a leadership strategy benefits all stakeholders. The employees are empowered and supported, innovations are implemented to benefit the whole, and the superintendent is seen as successful.

Research claims relationship building leads to collaborative decision-making and positive interactions within the organization (McCool, 2012; Schmidt, 2011).

Additionally, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) reported a concerted effort on the part of the superintendent to build and maintain relationships lowers the level of resistance to change within the organization. Student achievement is another benefit of collaboration because of relationships established among community stakeholders (Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2013).

Building Capacity to Empower Others. Helping others achieve success is selfless and is the mark of a true leader. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) stated leaders who model selfless behavior are inspirational and effect change. Transformational leadership is sometimes referred to as servant leadership, which implies the leader must have the mindset of effecting change for the good of the whole over personal gains. Through the skill of building capacity in others, successful leaders manage to accomplish goals. Grogan and Shakeshaft compared the standard pyramid structure of traditional leadership styles, where the leader is at the top of the pyramid, to the more web-like organizational network established by using transformational leadership practices like empowering others.

Garrett-Staib and Burkman (2015) reported information regarding best practices of leadership. From that study, six practices emerged as key indicators of success for superintendents. The six practices included developing a shared vision, adhering to

shared values, learning from failures, celebrating successes, recognizing strengths within the organization, and empowering others within the organization by building capacity in the team. While the study was done to inform the differences between male and female superintendents regarding leadership styles, an interesting result emerged. Female superintendents identified with empowering others more frequently than the other qualities. The results were not significant to the study, but the information adds support for the nurturing nature of female leaders.

Effective Communication. Successful school districts rely on effective communication. Communication can be defined in many ways, creates meaning through an interaction between people, and can be verbal or nonverbal in nature.

Riggio et al. (2003) discussed the integral part communication plays in leadership. Leaders can disseminate new ideas and directives as well as messages of thanks and congratulations through communication. The art of listening is part of communication and keeps the channels open between leaders and their teams. A leader who exhibits strong, effective communication skills builds trust with their team. Often, through communication, leaders inform employees about high expectations while simultaneously showing confidence and support for those employees to meet those expectations (Avolio & Gibbons, 1988).

Differences in communication styles can impact the culture within an organization. Transformational leaders often use effective communication as a means of empowerment and encouragement. The success of a superintendent often hinges on being able to effectively communicate with all stakeholders. Keeping in mind the two-way nature of communication, a successful communicator needs to understand their audience. Understanding the concerns of parents, students, board members, the community at large,

and teachers prior to communicating will avoid misconceptions and miscommunications (Rebore, 2014). Likewise, Hilliard and Newsome (2013) discussed the need for intentional communication within the district, which encourages collaboration and community input, and ultimately reaching district goals.

Isernhagen and Bulkin (2013) compared the challenges and successes of two first-year female superintendents. One participant exhibited effective communication skills. Effective communication with the school board was determined to be the key factor in her success. The other participant was not as successful in building relationships with the school board because of a lack of communication. The participant who did not build relationships based on trust through communication was determined to be ineffective, which emphasizes the importance of effective communication in achieving success as a superintendent.

Resilience. Resilience is the ability to recover from difficulties. Often resilience is compared to being tough and tenacious. Today, being resilient is a leadership skill necessary for leading in any school or school district. Day (2013) stated resilience from the superintendent, defined as adaptability and flexibility, has never been more necessary than today. Increasing demands and changes in education require leadership resilience, which breeds organizational resilience.

Reed and Blaine (2015) reported common characteristics found in leaders who are resilient. Resilient leaders want to know what is going on in their organization, whether it is a good thing or a bad thing. These leaders use the information to foster positive outlooks for the good of the organization. Additionally, resilient leaders build capacity in others, and they feel confident in acting on decisions.

Choosing to respond positively to disruptions in an organization indicates

resilience as a leader (Leading Effectively Staff, 2021). Resilient leaders stay in the present and view outcomes, whether favorable or not, through the lens of learning opportunities. Keeping in mind the ability to adapt and be flexible, resilient leaders have a strong sense of purpose and direction (Reed & Blaine, 2015).

Transactional Leadership Style

The effectiveness of any leadership style depends largely on the size of the organization and those who are being led. In general, leaders are expected to inspire collaboration through their influence while generating commitment to the goals of the organization. Leaders who exhibit transformational leadership characteristics generate collaboration and build capacity in their followers to reach organizational goals, but goals are also met when leaders exhibit other leadership styles. Transactional leadership characteristics are employed by leaders in many organizations effectively (Avolio et al., 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1997).

Burns (1978) developed the transactional leadership theory, which focused on exchanges between employees and employers. By using rewards and punishment, transactional leaders motivate their employees to accomplish the goals of the organization. The goal-oriented approach of transactional leadership does not allow creativity by or value input from the employees within an organization (Howell & Avolio, 1993). While transactional leadership styles are found in many organizations, this style is not typically found in educational hierarchy.

In transactional leadership-led organizations, rewards and negative consequences drive the team toward organizational goals. While transactional leadership is often thought to squelch creativity, it does produce comfortable routines that lead to stable work environments. Top managers who lead with transactional leadership characteristics

are often seen as coercive by their team (Schwartz, 1999). Performance by the team to reach the desired outcomes of the organization is driven by three factors in transactional leadership; these factors are active management and passive management, and contingent reward (Avolio & Gibbons, 1988).

Contingent Reward. The success of the use of contingent rewards as a leadership technique comes from concrete rewards for reaching desired outcomes within an organization. Often, these rewards come in the form of bonuses for exceptional performance and a series of lesser rewards for other levels of performance (Avolio & Gibbons, 1988). Transactional leaders who implement contingent reward leadership characteristics offer a list of high expectations to all members of the team but only reward those members of the team whose performance meets the criteria in the expectations they communicated (Schwartz, 1999).

Active Management. This leadership method is driven by the need to evaluate subordinates through a lens focused on finding mistakes or counterproductive performance indicators; these mistakes result in corrective action against the subordinate in the form of verbal or written reprimands (Avolio et al., 1999). This type of management or leadership style is often used when production numbers need to be met in factory-type situations. Active management requires a system to track numbers and observe performance within the work setting, which shortens the time necessary to implement corrective actions (Schwartz, 1999). Personal relationship building is not a foundational skill for this management style.

Passive Management. Passive management and active management styles are similar in being focused on evaluating subordinate performances through the mistake-finding lens but differ in the level of urgency associated with finding mistakes. Passive

management does not require a leader to correct the mistake until the desired outcome or goal has been impacted by the mistake. Within any form of transactional leadership, the leader maintains expectations based on a set criterion usually beyond their control. These leaders are satisfied to accomplish goals set by others and do not look for ways to create growth within the job (Avolio et al., 1999).

Laissez-Faire Leadership

The effectiveness of laissez-faire leadership depends largely on the characteristics of the employees. The hands-off and passive approach to leadership works best with self-directed, intrinsically motivated employees. Additionally, laissez-faire leadership characteristics do not work well in large organizations and are minimally effective in small businesses (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008).

Laissez-faire leaders rarely offer feedback and often allow daily operations to continue as usual. New team members are often impacted by this leadership style because they are not given proper training, which leads to ineffective job performance and poor levels of job satisfaction (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008).

Combining Leadership Styles

Hersey and Blanchard (1969) developed the theory of situational leadership, which reflects components of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles. While leadership styles are important in determining the effectiveness of a leader, situational leadership includes the competence level of employees as an indicator of which style should be used. According to Hersey and Blanchard, educators operate with a level of competence and professionalism, indicating a transformational approach from leadership would be most effective. The superintendent leads the whole district, not just the educators. All stakeholders look to the superintendent for leadership. While

transformational leadership characteristics exhibited by the superintendent are considered effective in most situations, instances may arise that warrant another leadership style to lead effectively.

Leadership Styles in Practice

The type of leadership exhibited within any organization is reflective of the type of organization (Schwartz, 1999). The preferred method of leadership must match the organization and be congruent with the goals and desired outcomes reflective of the organization. Schwartz (1999) stated that enhanced productivity within an organization is directly proportional to confidence in the leader. In education, the leader is the superintendent, and confidence in the superintendent's ability to lead is paramount to the success of the school district. Arguably, higher satisfaction in the leadership within the district provides greater security, which results in increased productivity by all stakeholders within the district. Satisfaction in leadership leads to greater retention rates among the team members and overall positive outcomes for the organization (Schwartz, 1999).

While all leadership styles serve a purpose and have a place within organizations, transformational leadership offers a level of capacity building in team members that is largely absent in other styles (Schwartz, 1999). The superintendent is responsible for the vision within the educational organization. The desired outcomes for the district often reflect the stakeholders' buy-in to the superintendent's vision, which must be communicated in a way that builds capacity and breeds collaboration (Schwartz, 1999). These key components of transformational leadership are integral in educational leadership throughout the organization but especially from the superintendent.

Career Pathway to the Superintendency

Men and women enter education for different reasons. Primarily, women enter education to meet challenges and to provide engaging learning experiences for students (Stephens, 2009). Changing the lives of children for the good seems to be the impetus behind a career choice in education for most women. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) reported that most women choose to enter education as a teacher, and original aspirations go no further than the classroom for most.

The appeal to pursue anything beyond the classroom also differs between men and women. For those women who do choose to aspire to levels of leadership like the superintendency, reasons include providing service to others and opportunities for personal growth and development. Male counterparts desired the same office as a means of achievement and salary increase (Muñoz et al., 2014). According to Wallace (2015), the top influences on females were listed as service to community and positively impacting student growth. Not only are female's factors of motivation different than men's, but the path females take to get there is significantly different too.

Traditional Pathway

Each state sets its own guidelines for requirements associated with becoming a superintendent (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). This southern state requires 3 years of classroom experience and 2 years of administrative experience. The required 2 years of administrative experience can come from being a school-level principal or assistant principal. A district-level administrative position outside of the superintendency would also fulfill this requirement. A master's degree is also required by this state. Currently, a doctorate is not required at the state level, but many districts list a doctorate preferred when posting open positions for the superintendent's office.

Regardless of the state, most school district superintendents come from a background in education (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). Most begin their career in the classroom. Traditionally, the next step after the classroom is a school-level administrator. This usually comes in the form of an assistant principal or principal. These positions allow potential candidates for superintendent positions to learn organizational management on a smaller scale than the district level. These positions are not strictly management-only positions. As an assistant principal or principal at the school level, interactions with students still occur.

Going from principal to superintendent very seldom happens. There are usually positions in between. Often, aspiring superintendents must transition from school-level administrative roles to district-level administrative roles. District-level administrative roles usually come in the form of a director or assistant superintendent. Directors or assistant superintendents are usually in charge of a smaller part of the district-level operations and report to the superintendent. Many assistant superintendents are in charge of curriculum, student services, or finances (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). In the past, men have followed a traditional pathway to the superintendent's office, which in general includes teacher/coach, assistant principal/principal (secondary schools), and then superintendent (Brunner & Yong-Lyun, 2009). The traditional pathway proves to be more difficult for women to follow and is sometimes seen as an obstacle for women (Sperandio, 2015; Whitney Gibson et al., 2009). Additionally, Sperandio (2015) stated that a position as a secondary principal was needed before either becoming an assistant superintendent or a superintendent. Secondary principalships and assistant principalships are largely filled by men. Before women even get to the point of applying for a superintendent's position, they are already behind their male counterparts on the path.

Twenge (2009) stated that almost all paths to the superintendency travel through a high school principalship and few women get those positions.

Another obstacle for women on the path to the superintendency comes from the school board. Most boards favor the traditional route. If the high school principalship does not appear on the resume, the candidate for the job is usually looked over.

Elementary school principals are not viewed the same as high school principals by most. The practice of dismissing elementary school experience is unfair and requires females who aspire to the superintendent's office to add another step to their path (Whitney Gibson et al., 2009).

Nontraditional Pathway

There are many pathways to the superintendency that are nontraditional. Some of these pathways do not even begin in the classroom. While these alternative paths exist, none provide a clear, direct, or timely pathway to the superintendent's office. Although these alternative pathways exist, most states still require a degree in education and a teaching license to be a superintendent of any school district in the state.

Traditional pathways to the superintendency created by men must be rethought by women who aspire to the position. While the aspirational motives and paths are different, men and women both want to be successful educational leaders (Sperandio, 2015). Schmidt (2011) stated there are more male high school principals than female and attributed the inequity of secondary principalships for women to the lack of women in the superintendent's office. There are fewer secondary principalships for women because there are fewer female superintendents. A cycle that keeps women out of the top educational leadership positions is perpetuated.

Because women lack experience with fiscal management, most generally choose

areas of curriculum and instruction to pursue advanced degrees (Sharp et al., 2004).

Obtaining an advanced degree is a logical step in rising to the top spots in educational leadership. Obtaining an advanced degree should provide a step on a viable path to the superintendency. Styles (2010) stated that a path that begins with obtaining an advanced degree contains unforeseen barriers for women. Women who are elementary principals and those who choose curriculum and instruction for advanced degrees are often hired for positions of leadership at the district level; however, these women are not likely to be encouraged to pursue the office of the superintendent because their pathway is not a traditional one (Whitney Gibson et al., 2009).

Additionally, Newton (2006) stated that women who follow a nontraditional path to leadership find themselves in a disadvantaged position for hiring. Job vacancy announcements require applicants to have administrative experience and overlook the skills derived from positions of leadership such as curriculum specialists. These criteria perpetuate the idea that men are better candidates, and women are overlooked to fill the position (Newton, 2006).

The nontraditional paths chosen by females included considerations of family and the pursuit of meaningful career experiences (Polinchook, 2014; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Additionally, Derrington and Sharratt (2009) proposed some women avoid the pursuit of the superintendency because of family responsibilities. Women have choices to make regarding their path and the rate at which they want to climb. The traditional path might not be an option, but options exist. Unfortunately, the positions of leadership held by women are conducive to family obligations but do very little to prove qualifications for higher positions of educational leadership (Hume, 2015).

Conclusion

Cultural and societal expectations brought about largely by the division of labor determine gender-appropriate behaviors and cause women and men to develop different skill sets (Dulin, 2007; Eagly, 1987). The societal expectations and skill sets developed permeate organizational structures like family and the workplace, and social roles are developed.

Successes are realized when societal expectations, reflective of our social roles, are met. Experiencing success reinforces social roles based on gender roles and maintains the status quo in the workplace. Maintaining the workplace status quo regarding gender roles sustains the male-to-female ratio in the superintendency. Men continue to outnumber women in the top educational leadership positions.

The superintendent is the chief executive officer of the school district and wears many hats. Since the role of superintendent was established, many changes have been made to it. The complexity of the position and its associated roles require skills that are difficult to find in one person. The superintendent fills the role of teacher-scholar, organizational manager, democratic statesman, applied social scientist, and effective communicator for the district.

Leadership styles differ among the leaders who implement them. The literature indicated transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire as the three primary styles. Transformation leadership focuses on the good of the whole over individual success and appeals to women who exhibit communal qualities. Transactional leadership offers both active and passive management strategies while relying heavily on contingent rewards or bonuses to drive the desired outcomes. Laissez-faire offers very little guidance and support for new employees and leaves no room for relationship building or cultivation.

Sharing the benefits of certain leadership characteristics as they relate to situations can provide aspiring female educational leaders with valuable information. Examining lived experiences of successful female superintendents will provide examples of successful implementation of key leadership practices that support growth in education.

Nationally and in this southern state, women are outnumbered by men in the office of superintendent. Despite a pool of well-qualified female candidates, women fill less than 25% of the superintendent positions nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The discrepancy emerged as a culmination of many factors and is perpetuated by these factors still. The path to the superintendency for aspiring young educational leaders is littered with obstacles. Fueled by the over-arching theme of gender bias, women face an inability to network because of the lack of female mentors and a lack of representation in the hiring process (McGee, 2010).

Underrepresentation by women in positions of educational leadership is a problem worth researching (Wallace, 2015). Barriers blocking those aspiring females have been discussed within the literature review. Navigating the obstacles is difficult, but there are those women who have done it successfully. Examining the lived experiences of female superintendents can provide aspiring female educational leaders with a navigation guide. Through illuminating characteristics of leadership employed by women, lessons can be learned and obstacles and biases can be overcome on the path to becoming a public school district superintendent.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This study utilized a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological method. Creswell and Creswell (2018) described phenomenological research as a design in which a phenomenon is described by participants who have lived experiences regarding the phenomenon. Additionally, Giorgi (2009) and Moustakas (1994, as cited in Creswell and Creswell, 2018) stated that phenomenology is rooted in philosophy and usually requires conducting interviews. Interviews contained open-ended questions allowing me to elicit views, experiences, and opinions from the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the open-ended questions and conversational interviews allowed me to gather information related to the lived experiences of the participants of this study.

This research study replicated a study previously conducted by Danielle Steeber (2019). An email granting me permission to use the study instrumentation and to replicate the study can be found in Appendix A. The original study was done in Texas, and the researcher recommended further research should be done in other states (Steeber, 2019). While there are significant differences between the southern state where I conducted my research and Texas where the original study was done, an effort was made to keep the methodology congruent with the original study. The size of the states provided the most significant differences. The state of Texas is much larger than this southern state in both population and land area. Discrepancy in the size of the states caused differences within the study. The most significant difference in methodology came from the pool of participants. The original study focused on districts identified as 5A (1,060-2,099 students) and 6A (over 2,100 students) in Texas (Steeber, 2019). These are typically larger than most districts in Texas and provide better pay to the superintendent (D.

Steeber, personal communication, August 1, 2021). Since the southern state of this research study is a smaller state with only 80 total superintendents, and only 17 of those females, I did not limit the size of the school district from which the participants were gathered as the original study did. Any female superintendent within this southern state was considered a possible participant in this study.

The study examined lived experiences of the female superintendent participants. The lived experiences on which the study focused were the self-perceived leadership characteristics and the reasons behind their choice of career path. Additionally, advice regarding navigation of barriers and obstacles within the paths of the participants was gathered. Empowering aspiring female educational leaders with the knowledge behind the lived experiences of sitting female superintendents was my focus. Ideally, using the information gathered from the study, aspiring female educational leaders can better prepare themselves as candidates for the superintendency.

Research Setting

The state in which the research was conducted is in the southern United States. The area from the coast to the piedmont in the upstate covers a little over 32,000 square miles. In the southern state where the study occurred, school districts are arranged by county. Each county has at least one public school district, and there are 46 counties in the state. There are 80 public school districts across the state. Districts are not classified by enrollment numbers in this southern state. All public school districts fall under the direction of the State Department of Education. Each of these districts has a superintendent, but only 20 are female, and one of those females is currently serving as interim superintendent. Underrepresentation by women in the superintendency within this southern state is reflective of current and historical national statistics.

Research Questions

The following questions were formulated as the primary research questions:

1. What are the self-perceived leadership characteristics exhibited by the selected female superintendents within this southern state?
2. What are the career pathway characteristics present among the selected female superintendents within this southern state?

Interview questions were developed to delve into the lived experiences of female superintendents concerning self-perceived leadership characteristics and career path characteristics in a research study conducted in Texas (Steeber, 2019). Qualitative data obtained using these questions were used to inform the two overarching research questions for this research study. Additionally, advice regarding pathway navigation was gathered to provide skills, strategies, and essential characteristics necessary for aspiring female educational leaders.

Research Design and Rationale

After a review of the literature, it became apparent that research done over the past few decades focused on barriers faced by women as they traverse the path to the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Brunner & Yong-Lyun, 2009; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Lack of female mentors and the characteristics of the career path chosen by female educational leaders are also presented in the literature (Arriaga et al., 2020). Through qualitative phenomenological methods, the research study illuminated the self-perceived leadership characteristics and the lived experiences related to the chosen career path of female superintendents in this southern state. Through conversational interviews, participants in the study discussed leadership characteristics that have contributed to their success. The phenomenological qualitative study was designed to create interview

conversations in which the female superintendents discussed what characteristics they possess and which they perceived allowed them to achieve their success as a superintendent. A qualitative study is one that is based on the experiences of individuals and is exploratory in nature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through a qualitative approach, I extracted the essence of the lived experiences of female superintendents in this southern state through examination and analysis of interview data.

The rationale for replicating the study done in Texas (Steeber, 2019) comes from a lack of research related to the lived experiences of female superintendents. The findings from the study provide aspiring female educational leaders with information regarding successful navigation of the path to the superintendency. Assisting aspiring female educational leaders as they navigate the path to the superintendency could impact the underrepresentation of females in the office.

Instrumentation

Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated phenomenology is a type of inquiry in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals concerning a phenomenon as described by the participants. While there are other methods available for qualitative research, this study used open-ended interview questions that were intended to elicit opinions from the participants. Marshall and Rossman (2016) recommended the use of in-depth interviews when the researcher was gathering data concerning lived experiences.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) discussed interview protocol that included an opening question designed to break the ice and relieve any anxiety on the part of the participants. The established interview questions were reviewed by an expert panel in the original study (Steeber, 2019) and were used for my study as well. As suggested by Creswell and Creswell, the content questions or research questions should be phrased in a

friendly manner and focus on integral parts of the phenomenon. In the initial study, 19 open-ended questions were established to guide the interviews (Steeber, 2019). I utilized the same questions along with probing questions designed for clarification when necessary. The 19 open-ended questions were aligned with this research study's research questions to inform the collection of data relating to the lived experiences of female superintendents in this southern state. These questions can be found in Appendix B.

Interview Questions

Mutually agreeable times for the interviews were determined once participants were secured. The core research questions were addressed by the 19 open-ended questions. Table 1 reflects the alignment of the interview questions with the research questions. Expected themes based on the literature are also included.

Table 1

Research Questions Aligned With Interview Questions and Expected Themes

Research question	Aligned interview questions	Expected themes
What are the self-perceived leadership characteristics exhibited by the selected female superintendents within this southern state?	4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9	Transformational leadership characteristics Situational leadership characteristics Family Obligations Competitiveness
What are the career pathway characteristics present among the selected female superintendents within this southern state?	10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	First superintendency Nontraditional career pathway Perceived and real obstacles

Questions 1, 2, and 3 were introductory questions, and Questions 18 and 19 were

used as closing questions. These two questions do not relate specifically to either of the two primary research questions but are designed to allow participants an opportunity to draw from their own experiences to fill in areas that might have been missed during the interview. These questions also allowed the participants to offer advice in the form of necessary skills, strategies, and essential characteristics for navigating the pathway to the superintendency. Expected themes related to the literature are listed in Table 1.

In the original study, the researcher convened an expert panel to provide feedback about the clarity and understandability of the questions she designed (Steeber, 2019). I used the questions as written based on revisions made prior to gathering data in the original study.

Role of the Researcher

To gather information about the lived experiences of female superintendents, I conducted face-to-face interviews with participants at a mutually agreeable time. When COVID-19 pandemic protocols prevented face-to-face interviews, I used Zoom, a video platform, to facilitate the process. Zoom was also utilized when travel was not possible for the mutually agreed upon interview times. All participants chose to be interviewed via Zoom. I recruited participants via email. A copy of the email I sent can be found in Appendix C. Email addresses were gathered through the superintendent's association website. To eliminate any potential bias on my part, these interviews were recorded, and the recording and accompanying transcript were provided to the participants for member-checking. I assured participants of confidentiality and kept the recordings and transcripts saved on my password-protected computer with no identifying titles or names. I facilitated the interviews, collected interview data, and analyzed the data gathered from the participants along with field notes written during the interviews. Prior to analyzing

the data, I organized the data before I began the coding process. Once the data were coded, I identified expected themes from the data and related these themes to the literature. Using the theoretical framework provided by social role theory, I coded the data for expected themes, which informed the established research questions. I also allowed for emergent themes or codes to be considered, but none were found during the analysis.

Additionally, I analyzed the data to determine the advice offered through lived experiences of the participants. These data provided a set of skills, strategies, and essential characteristics the participants deemed helpful for navigating the pathway to the superintendency. Skills, strategies, and essential characteristics offered by each participant were gathered and recorded. I then compared the advice from all five participants and created a graphic representing the common skills, strategies, and essential characteristics from all participants.

Research Methodology

Participants

All female public school superintendents in this southern state were invited via email (see Appendix C) to participate in the study. Follow-up calls were made when participants did not respond to the email within a week. Participants were informed that all information was to be kept confidential, their participation was voluntary, and withdrawal from the study at any time was acceptable through informed consent forms. I kept a log of all communication between me and the study participants. The log was included in data collection and can be found in Appendix D.

Procedures

Once participants were recruited, I scheduled interviews with each participant at a

mutually agreeable date and time. I obtained signed permission to record interviews (see Appendix E). In the event permission to record was denied, I planned to read back transcripts after each question during the interview. I took the qualitative data obtained through transcription of the recorded interviews and organized the data into chart form on foam boards. Once the data were organized, I coded the data using expected themes, which informed the research questions. Additionally, I planned to code the data for surprising themes, but no surprising themes emerged.

Data Analysis Plan

A phenomenological qualitative approach is where patterns and relationships are examined for meaning and significance to the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I used this approach as I transcribed interview data that had been coded for themes and were reflective of lived experiences of the participants as I began analysis. I employed Tesch's Eight Steps in Coding Process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to ensure proper coding of the data took place. I read all transcribed data carefully as a whole. I performed a second read, allowing time to write notes in the margins regarding my thoughts and underlying meaning. Using expected themes, I assigned the bracketed chunks to categories using different colored highlighters to represent the themes. This allowed me to see if any additional surprising codes or themes emerged from the data. Subsequently, I used the expected themes to interrelate ideas that emerged from the literature. The analyzed data, along with the existing literature, were synthesized within the theoretical framework of social role theory to inform the core research questions within the study. The final analysis provided aspiring female educational leaders with a navigational guide containing the desirable characteristics necessary to traverse the path to the superintendency.

Management of Data

Data collected through the research study were kept confidential. The recorded interviews and transcripts were saved in a digital format on a password-protected computer. Any paper documentation created was filed in a locked filing cabinet. All participants understood their rights through informed consent, and each participant was allowed to review the recorded interview and transcript prior to coding of the data.

Threats to Validity

Internal

This southern state is significantly smaller than Texas where the original study occurred. The original study provided parameters beyond being female and a superintendent to qualify a participant for participation in the study (Steeber, 2019). The replicated study I completed does not allow factors beyond female and superintendent to factor into the selection criteria for participants. If any other parameters had been enacted, the sample size would not have been large enough to generalize the findings.

External

This southern state is a small state comparatively. Broad generalizations gathered from the participants in the state may or may not translate to other states. Female superintendents in Texas were participants in the original study. I replicated the study for female superintendents in this southern state. Not every aspect of the study could be replicated in this southern state because of issues related to the size and number of eligible participants. These factors could have impacted the validity of the findings.

Conclusion

Gender differences should not impact a person's ascension to the top spot in public school districts. Title IX and the civil rights law of 1972 prohibited school districts

from discriminatory practices and programs that were based on gender (Arriaga et al., 2020). These 20th century mandates are not reflected in the public school superintendency. The study's five participants have successfully navigated their way to the top spot as superintendents. Traversing the path successfully is not an easy task for a woman. The participants were female superintendents for public school districts in this southern state. I illuminated, through research, the characteristics possessed by the participants that provided them the opportunity to acquire their roles as superintendents.

The next chapter contains the results from the interview data. The individual interview questions were analyzed regarding predetermined themes. Information gathered from the analysis of each participant's interview was disaggregated by predetermined theme. From these data, I prepared tables that illustrate the relationship between the predetermined themes and data gathered from the interviews. In keeping with the theoretical framework of social role theory, the data gathered informed the core research questions. Additionally, suggested skills, strategies, and essential characteristics for successful leadership practices gathered from the participants' lived experiences were categorized and examined. Chapter 5 contains conclusions drawn based on the findings presented in Chapter 4. A navigational guide for aspiring female educational leaders was created from the skills, strategies, and essential characteristics gathered from the data in Chapter 4. Also included in Chapter 5 are recommendations for further research studies as well as possible implications of these results.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In this study, I investigated self-perceived leadership characteristics and career paths chosen by five female superintendents in a southern state. The results were consistent with the literature relating to perceptions of females as leaders. Using the interview protocol established by Steeber (2019), I interviewed five women who are currently serving as superintendents within the state. Through examination of lived experiences of these five women, critical information relevant for aspiring female leaders was revealed. The qualitative data were analyzed and coded according to predetermined themes supported in the literature. Additionally, information regarding skills, strategies, and essential characteristics necessary for the development of aspiring female educational leaders was gathered from the interview data. This information was categorically arranged, charted, and discussed to provide aspiring female educational leaders with a navigational guide for the pathway to the superintendency and useful information when the office is reached.

Background

I interviewed each participant individually and virtually using Zoom. Each interview was recorded and manually transcribed using the video recording made while interviewing. As suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018), when completed, each fully transcribed interview was sent to each participant for member-checking to ensure accuracy and increased validity. Two of the participants made a few corrections relating to grammar due to the conversational aspect of the interviews, but none of the corrections changed the content of the interview. In Table 2, I illustrate the seven predetermined themes along with the relationship between each theme and the overarching research

questions on which the study was based. Table 2 also indicates which participants made statements that correlated with each theme.

Table 2

Research Questions and Themes as Supported by Participants

Research questions	Themes	Supporting participants
1. What are the self-perceived leadership characteristics exhibited by the selected female superintendents within this southern state?	Transformational leadership characteristics	A, B, C, D, and E
	Situational leadership characteristics	A
	Family obligations	A, B, D, and E
	Competitiveness	B, C, and D
2. What are the career pathway characteristics present among the selected female superintendents within this southern state?	First superintendency	B, C, D, and E
	Nontraditional career pathway	A, C, D, and E
	Perceived and real obstacles and barriers	A, B, C, D, and E

Note. Participants (N=5) were assigned letters as pseudonyms to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 2 shows all five participants exhibited traits and characteristics associated with transformational leadership. Only one participant mentioned situational leadership specifically, but the other four participants alluded to situational aspects relating to their leadership style. Four of the five participants mentioned family obligations, and three of the five participants discussed some level of competitiveness. Career pathway characteristics data provided information regarding the three predetermined themes of first superintendency, nontraditional career pathways, and perceived and real obstacles and barriers. Four of the five participants mentioned information relevant to the first

superintendency theme. Four of the five participants related information about their nontraditional career pathway, and all the participants offered information regarding real and perceived obstacles and barriers.

In the sections to follow, I provide qualitative data for each research question, which include the predetermined themes. Each theme is analyzed as it relates to each question along with data obtained through each interview.

Participants

Participation in the research was voluntary. Initially, emails were sent to every female superintendent in the state. From that initial email, three participants agreed to participate in the research study. The exhaustion associated with coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic could have been a mitigating factor related to a lack of participation. I believed I needed additional participants to produce data that would accurately reflect the feelings of female superintendents within this southern state. Through the support of my mentor, I reached out to those who had not replied using her affiliation with the American Association of School Administrators. From that email, two more participants agreed to be interviewed. Based on current statistics, these five females constitute 30% of the female superintendents statewide. Ideally, I would have liked to have had 100% participation; however, the 30% participation rate matched similar studies found in the literature.

The participants varied in age and years of experience in education. Table 3 indicates the years of experience for each participant.

Table 3*Years of Experience in Education by Participants*

Participant	Years of experience
A	41
B	34
C	21
D	38
E	26

Note. Participants (N=5) were assigned letters as pseudonyms to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

The years of experience ranged from 21 to 41 years. Unsurprisingly, the youngest of the five participants had the fewest number of years in public education. Despite the fact that they could have retired with 30 years of experience, three of the five participants worked past retirement.

Results

The following section identifies each of the themes as related to the research questions. Every participant offered information regarding each theme identified in the original study. Specific interview data relating to the literature and predetermined themes can be found in the results.

Research Question 1

The first research question was, “What are the self-perceived leadership characteristics exhibited by the selected female superintendents within this southern state?” The predetermined themes identified within the question relate to transformational leadership, situational leadership, family obligations, and competitiveness. I focused attention on the perceived leadership characteristics of the participants and included questions related to the overall successful leadership characteristics of any

superintendent. I used this research question to relate existing literature, leadership theory, and data obtained from the participants regarding their personal lived experiences.

Transformational Leadership. Every participant mentioned transformational leadership as their primary style of leadership. One focus of a successful transformational leader is building relationships and building capacity in others by recognizing emotions, strengths, and weaknesses in those served (Berkovich & Eyal, 2017; Cliffe, 2011).

Participant A was reluctant to label her leadership style as totally transformational. She stated, “With every issue, you have to be a leader, and every issue takes a different style or approach.” In an example of transformational leadership, Participant A described a specific situation in which she was tasked with consolidating two districts. She recounted the difficulties associated with this consolidation and the importance of relationship building prior to implementing any change. Participant A stated, “I didn’t go in there and say we’re doing this or that. I had to develop relationships with both districts. Those people had to trust me first.” Participant A further discussed the importance of relationship building as essential in any position of leadership. Referring to the consolidation of two districts example she gave, she stated, “I met with the current administration in each district to gather information, build relationships, and generate ideas regarding the merger. After that, we all sat down and determined ways to merge the ideas together.” Collaboration and relationship building reflect the transformational nature of her leadership style. Participant A also discussed transformational leadership by saying, “Transformational or servant leadership to me is one where you are not the boss, unless you have to be.” Servant leadership and transformational leadership are not the same, but the collaborative approach to leadership rings true in both. Participant A further explained, “You must be prepared for both [being the boss or a collaborative leader]. I

prefer collaboration over the alternative, but it can't always be the case."

Participant B remarked, "My leadership style revolves around the team." Her transformational leadership approach was evidenced when she stated, "Through collaboration and the team approach, I can analyze things from different perspectives and come to a decision efficiently." She also stated, "Collaborating for the focus of the district was integral in my developing as a true transformational leader." This point was further developed when she remarked, "I try to equip and empower others for success."

Participant C shared the importance of transformational leadership when developing as a change agent for her district. She stated, "I'm very passionate about growing leadership in others and about building capacity in others." She remarked, "Transformational leadership is very much aligned to my style. I like to use the word change agent." Participant C mentioned in her zeal to be an agent for change, she must include those on her team in the planning and processing of any initiative. She stated, "I think as the leader, sometimes you can't see the big picture, you know, where you want to go. But leadership is not about you. It's about taking others with you on the journey."

Participant D took a no-nonsense approach to leadership which is reflective of her commitment to transformational leadership. She stated, "I consider myself a servant leader. Basically, I equip people with what they need and get out of their way." Her commitment to putting the right people in the right position to focus her attention on the vision of the district was evident throughout her responses. Specifically, she stated, "You're only as good as your weakest link. So, you need the right people in the right seats on the bus." Her focus on relationship building was remarkable. She stated, "I feel like it's all about creating a family. It's not about becoming friends with everybody, but it is about showing them you care." She felt that creating a climate and culture that

appreciates transformational leadership characteristics was integral and something she tries “to model for everyone.”

Participant E also iterated, “Empowering others is essential in this role.” She discussed the importance of having structures in place that cover all facets of operations in her district. She stated, “Having these structures in place are essential – then the work kind of takes care of itself.” She mentioned her desire not to be a micromanager. To build a collaborative team within her district, she stated, “You must recruit people that complement your weaknesses.” Having the ability to admit weakness is essential in transformational leadership.

Situational Leadership. Situational leadership requires a leader to be cognizant of each situation and lead as the situation warrants. While all the participants alluded to this leadership style in their interviews, only one participant chose to call it situational leadership.

Participant A mentioned that not all situations require collaboration. Additionally, she was the only participant who was reticent to place a specific label on her style of leadership. She stated, “The way I behave in any situation that requires my leadership, just depends on the situation.” Ideally, she stated, “I like to be collaborative, but there are times when you just don’t have enough time or whatever and you just have to make an executive decision.” She offered examples to clarify her perspective. In the first example, she discussed addressing an underperforming employee. She explained, “You must give a directive. Here is what you are doing wrong, we will help you fix it, but the expectation is you get it fixed.” Situations such as this one do not require collaboration. Her ability to read a situation has come from experience. She made it clear that being situational does not relate to one’s authenticity as a leader. She stated, “I am not saying change yourself. I

am saying change the style to do what is best and necessary for the event or issue.”

Family Obligations. The social role theory framework tends to place women in nurturing roles in the home and in society (Eagly, 1987). Often, women choose family over opportunity in society. Four of the five participants mentioned family obligations and societal roles in their interviews. The responsibilities of family often put limitations on the mobility of women. Many women wait until their children are older before pursuing leadership positions (Wyland, 2016). Striking the perfect work-life balance is often a concern for women and often more difficult.

Participant A stated, “Society still does not see us in high level jobs; we’re mothers and homemakers first and foremost.” Overcoming these traditional societal roles often adds an additional layer of difficulty for women who want to fulfill positions of leadership. Participant A mentioned things have changed some but work still needs to be done.

Participant B echoed similar thoughts in her interview. She stated, “It goes back to traditional roles in our society, longstanding traditional roles.” She alluded to “stereotypes” of women as mothers first, which, for some, precludes them from roles in leadership.

Participant D stated, “Women’s role in society, being an important part of the family, the homemaker, with those responsibilities. They just don’t think that they can rise to positions of leadership because of those obligations.” She further explained it was a balancing act, which causes some not to pursue opportunities.

Participant E stated she has seven children. Those very different seven children were a source of motivation for her. She stated, “I know it takes a variety of environments to teach them.” Her family-first ideals motivated her to become a leader.

Competitiveness. Competitiveness and ambition are often mentioned together, but these two terms are not the same. Ambition deals with one's ability to seek success individually, while competitiveness is usually associated with comparing one's successes to others. Regardless of the definition, generally higher levels of ambition are associated with higher levels of success for women as they compete for positions of leadership (Maranto et al., 2019). Bearing the nuance between competitiveness and ambition in mind, I determined all the participants expressed an ambitious nature, but only Participants B, C, and D espoused a competitive nature.

Nothing in my interview with Participant A made her seem overtly competitive, but she did offer information regarding being ambitious. Regarding her personal goals in education, she stated, "My professional goal has always been to move up the ladder." She stated, "I saw the position of superintendent as the pinnacle of my career in education." When Participant A first graduated from college, she took a job as a marketing analyst for a clothing company. She credits the move from the business world into education for her "unique perspective."

Participant B stated, "I am motivated by my desire to provide these students with as many good opportunities as those in richer districts." Speaking about the high-poverty rate within the district of Participant B, she found within herself a need to provide opportunities that are usually only offered in districts with a larger budget. This level of competitiveness has moved her district from "somewhere in the 20s or 30s to seventh in the state. The highest ranking ever for us."

The goal for Participant C to "provide this world class educational opportunity for the kids" is paramount within her district. Her desire to "be able to see the impacts that are made, because of my leadership" further supports her competitive nature. Her advice

to “be humble but stay hungry and passionate” resonates with most transformational leaders who are motivated by their competitive nature.

Participant D, when discussing what motivates her, stated, “I’ve always been so competitive with myself and others.” This statement proves a high level of ambition and competitiveness, which has been her source of motivation from early in her life until now. In true transformational leadership form, she stated, “I am just wanting to be the best I can be, for myself and others.”

Research Question 2

The second research question was, “What are the career pathway characteristics present among the selected female superintendents within this southern state?” The predetermined themes within this research question related to first superintendency, nontraditional career pathways, and real and perceived obstacles. I focused attention on the years spent as a superintendent, whether this was their first superintendency, and the trajectory of their career path from the beginning until now. Other questions focused on the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants regarding perceived and real obstacles encountered on their path to the superintendency. General questions regarding advice to aspiring female leaders ended each interview and offered information to inform how these successful female superintendents personally overcame obstacles, whether real or perceived.

First Superintendency. Having a revolving door on any position of leadership can damage the effectiveness of any initiative implemented while the leader is there. Specifically, frequent turnover in the superintendency can be detrimental to any district. Longevity in the position of superintendent is viewed as an asset because the position is integral to the success of all stakeholders within the district (Grissom & Anderson, 2012).

Table 4 illustrates the total number of years each participant has served in public education and related years as a superintendent both past and present.

Table 4

Career Demographics for Participants

Participant	Experience in education (in years)	Experience as superintendent (in years)	Years at current position
A	41	6.5	2
B	34	6	6
C	21	2	2
D	38	22	22
E	26	3	3

Note. Participants (N=5) were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

Only one of the five participants has held multiple superintendent positions. Four of the five were serving in their first superintendency.

Participant A has served as superintendent for two different districts within the state. She has served in her current district for 2 years. Previously, she served in another district for 4.5 years. She took the first position as an interim, which then led to an additional 4 years in that position prior to her current position.

Participant B has served 33 of her 34 years in education in the very same district where she currently serves as superintendent. She has been the superintendent for 6 years. She jokingly commented she has done every job in the district at some point in the last 34 years. She is also a product of the district schools in which she serves now. Her current seat as the superintendent is both her first and only time to hold this office.

This is the first superintendency for Participant C, and she has served in this position for 4 years. She did not work previously within this district in any other capacity.

Her 21 years in public education have provided opportunities for her to work in different capacities in several other districts.

Participant D has served all 38 years in the district where she currently serves as superintendent. This is her first and only superintendency. She has served this district for 22 years in her current position as superintendent.

Participant E did not start her 26-year career in the district where she currently serves as superintendent, but she served within the district prior to being named superintendent. This is her first superintendency. She has served as superintendent for 3 years.

Nontraditional Career Pathway. The position of superintendent can be attained in many ways. From the five participants in my research, varied pathways were evident. Typically, school boards, search committees, and even school district law firms pull applicants from a pool and look for experience as a high school principal, which is considered by many as the traditional pathway to the superintendent's office (Maranto et al., 2019). While all five of the participants had administrative experience prior to becoming superintendent, their paths were very diverse and were not traditional. None of the participants was ever a high school principal, and Participant B was the only participant to mention a high school-level administrative position. She served as an assistant principal at the high school level. Areas of prior experience can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5*Areas of Prior Experience*

Participant	<u>Area</u>		
	Elementary	Middle school	High school
A	X	X	
B			X
C	X	X	
D	X		
E	X	X	

Note. Participants (N=5) were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

Participant A held many different positions in public education. Her career began in the classroom, but while she was working on her MBA and PhD, she taught at the college level and became a middle school assistant principal. Eventually, she took a middle school principal position. After this school-level administrative role, she moved to the district office level as director of teacher evaluation. Eventually, she was named assistant superintendent of human resources. She served for several years as a deputy superintendent in the State Department of Education before taking an interim superintendent position that was supposed to last 6 months. The interim superintendency lasted for 4.5 years; 4 years longer than she originally signed on to do. She has been in her current position as superintendent for 2 years.

Participant B started in the classroom as a high school science teacher. Her classroom teaching experience was followed by a period as a guidance counselor. Participant B mentioned that while she was a classroom teacher and a guidance counselor, she also served as a coach. She then became assistant principal at the high school level, which led to her move to the district office as coordinator of professional

development, which included induction and mentoring programs for new teachers. She spent time as the district testing coordinator before she became the district's personnel director. After this, she was promoted to assistant superintendent and currently serves as superintendent of the district.

Participant C began her career as an elementary teacher. After her classroom teaching experience, she became a reading interventionist and a math interventionist. She then became a "middle and high school teacher at a residential treatment facility." She spent some time as a math instructional coach before becoming an assistant principal, and eventually principal, at the middle school level. Her district office experience began when she took a position as director of student services. After the director position, she became superintendent of the district where she currently serves.

Participant D began as an elementary school educator before becoming a federal programs coordinator. She spent about a year and a half in the coordinator position before returning to the elementary school where she had been previously. She returned to become the principal of the school where her teaching career began. She did not mention any district office-level position post her principalship, and she now serves as superintendent of that district.

After starting out as a classroom teacher, Participant E completed her master's degree and took a position as a district-level instructional facilitator. Her next step was serving as an assistant principal, which was followed by a move back to the district office as director of human resources and director of secondary instruction. She changed districts to take a building-level principal position. After some time in the role of principal, she became director of elementary education for the district, and now she serves as their superintendent.

Perceived and Real Obstacles. Eagly (1987) stated the division of labor created social roles in society, which allowed for the development of different skill sets for men and women in organizational structures like the workplace. Societal expectations create obstacles and barriers for women who aspire to leadership positions like the superintendency. All participants shared some of their lived experiences regarding barriers they faced. In addition to sharing the obstacle, each participant offered key points regarding overcoming that obstacle and others.

Participant A shared, “Some of the worst situations [for me] involved jealous females.” She further shared, “Some of these women sit on your school boards.” For this reason, she cautioned any aspiring female educational leaders, “If you are uncomfortable with conflict, this can be a difficult road to travel.” Additionally, she found it difficult to be an effective leader when “men and older staff members” refused to buy in to initiatives she tried to implement. This gender bias slows down the process, making women appear less effective as leaders. She stated, “It just takes a lot of time to chisel away at their initial perception of a female leader.” When asked about how aspiring female superintendents can overcome or avoid these obstacles, she stated, “Avoiding them is not an option unless society changes drastically.” She stated,

Perseverance and staying true to yourself and your commitment to the students in the district you serve will go a long way to overcome any obstacles you encounter. Being authentic as you build relationships while working on goals is the path of least resistance.

Participant A also shared her thoughts concerning the extra time involved for women as they move toward the superintendency. She stated, “Females are still playing catch up because society doesn’t see us in high level jobs.” This societal barrier, coupled with the

extra time women need to develop credibility as a leader, continues to keep women from obtaining the top spot in education. Participant A stated, “Because women want and need to hit every rung on the ladder, it just takes them so much longer than men.” The ladder represents rising to the superintendent’s office sequentially without skipping steps. She stated, “Women who serve as superintendents have to follow a more sequential path in order to have credibility as a leader compared to their male counterparts who often skip rungs.” Her advice regarding overcoming this barrier was, “Work hard to build credibility by not missing any rungs on the ladder. Especially as females, we need a strong base which increases our level of credibility. This is my strongest advice.” Additionally, she cautioned aspiring female educational leaders to hit all the rungs on the ladder to “build relationships in a way that establishes you as a leader.” As a leader, she stated, “You must be able to relate to every facet within the district.” She cautioned, “If you miss rungs, you might not be able to do that.” Further support for the idea of hitting all the rungs on the ladder came from Participant C. She stated, “You have to take this role step by step. Whereas it might happen a little bit quicker for men, I feel like people are looking more closely at your pathway as a woman.”

Participant B also discussed some obstacles and how to overcome them, but she said her credibility and commitment to the job were never questioned. She stated, “I think the fact that I was from here and worked for years here gave the board members a reason to respect me.” When discussing the school board, she stated, “We have an all-male school board. There have not been many females in leadership roles [here].” While the school board situation did not constitute an obstacle for her, she agreed it could be a problem for some. Additionally, not having a doctorate was perceived as an obstacle or barrier. She stated, “Some districts say doctorate required instead of preferred now,”

when searching for candidates to interview. Her suggestion for avoiding or overcoming this barrier was that aspiring female educational leaders can “go ahead and get their doctorate.” She encouraged aspiring educational leaders to “know your board.” Her advice for overcoming or navigating barriers included, “Never stop working on yourself.” Additionally, aspiring female leaders should “look for ways to better yourself and work hard.” She expressed the importance of taking advantage of every opportunity to learn through district professional development or from other people who have reached similar goals.

Participant C stated, “I was thinking about this question, and I don’t know if this is a barrier or not [and] it doesn’t really have anything to do with being a woman, but I am a little bit on the younger side.” In most organizational structures, most people associate age with experience. Being young is not necessarily a barrier to becoming a superintendent. Participant C felt she mitigated the age issue by “being very strategic about the decisions I have made in my career path.” While she felt as though she had not encountered any barriers or obstacles personally, she stated, “You have to take this role step by step.” Participant C agreed with Participant A regarding the need to be strategic when choosing a pathway to the superintendency. These choices can lead to increased credibility for female educational leaders. Participant C stated, “Whereas it might happen a little bit quicker for men, I feel like people are really looking more closely at your pathway as a woman.” Participant C’s advice to aspiring female superintendents related to using one’s personal strengths to make informed decisions regarding every move one takes as one moves up in leadership. She stated, “Know your strengths and continue to grow in those areas. As you are thinking about your next move, find a district that has needs that match your strengths.” Additionally, she recommended aspiring female leaders

should have a wide variety of experiences on their resume, attempt to get experience at the district office level before beginning to apply for any superintendent positions, make themselves visible through networking, and acquire a trusted female mentor who will give honest feedback and help build capacity as a leader.

Participant D was the first female superintendent in her district. She stated, “I had to prove my legitimacy and abilities.” At that time in her career, she stated, “That’s just what women had to face.” She was certain these issues were a result of jealousy and stated, “That’s more of a problem for women than it is for men.” Essentially, to overcome this obstacle, she stated, “The female has to have the ability to rise above it.” She recommended “developing a strong constitution.” It is essential, she stated, “to be confident in your abilities, in your choices, in your decisions and surround yourself with good people.” Additionally, she stated, “Position yourself so that you can pave the path to your goals.”

Participant E did not feel being burdened by obstacles or barriers was a big problem in the recent past for her, but she recounted an instance early in her career when she was passed over for an assistant principal position. The position was given to a male candidate who had a resume that lacked the experience and skills like hers. She stated, “That was probably the only time I’ve put in for something and I think that I was unfairly overlooked.” When I asked Participant E about how aspiring female leaders should navigate and overcome these barriers, she chose to approach the question a bit differently than it was intended. She chose to illuminate the differences in compensation between male and female superintendents. Participant E shared the professional organizations to which she belongs had many female members. She agreed men still outnumbered women in education’s top spot, but her perceived obstacle related more to equal compensation

than representation. She stated,

When the salary studies that must be published yearly come out, that is where you see the differences. We're not compensated at near the level of our male counterparts, and there's no rhyme or reason to it. It's not district size.

The inequities regarding salary were clearly the issue Participant E saw as a problem for aspiring female leaders. Participant E felt like this was a mindset unique to women.

Knowing our worth based on our strengths and what we can offer to the position should empower us to effectively negotiate our salary with confidence like our male colleagues.

When women are offered positions of leadership, she stated, "We often are like, oh, thank you for the opportunity as opposed to you've made an excellent choice. Now, let's negotiate salary." Advocating for oneself is essential to overcome many barriers and certainly relates to inequities in salary.

Skills and Strategies: Advice for Future Female Educational Leaders

As the leader of the school district, each superintendent is tasked with many things. Leading with integrity while performing all the tasks is often complicated and difficult to do for anyone. For women, additional difficulties arise. As female leaders, not only are our attempts to become the superintendent full of barriers and obstacles, but a different set of barriers and obstacles greet us once we procure the position. During each of the interviews, I asked the participants to offer advice for aspiring female leaders. From the advice gathered, I intended to provide insight and a navigational tool for those women who are contemplating a pathway to the superintendency.

Advice Broken Down by Participant

Participant A. Participant A offered advice to aspiring female educational leaders that related to the pathway to the superintendency and leadership performance

once the office is reached. Regarding the pathway, Participant A stated, “Do not worry about being slow and deliberate in reaching your goal.” She cautioned aspiring female leaders about a lack of perceived credibility if reaching the superintendency happens too quickly. Participant A encouraged aspiring female leaders to “take the necessary steps to get there by learning as much as you can in every position you hold prior to this office [superintendent].” She reiterated the importance of entering the office of superintendent with credibility, which comes from experience. Participant A stated,

Bottom line, especially for females, is spend the time getting there. Move faster if necessary but don’t omit any steps and develop as a leader by taking advantage of every opportunity to learn and serve on the way up!

She encouraged aspiring female leaders to “know the job and know yourself – be comfortable in your own skin – and network to build authentic relationships.”

Participant A offered much advice to aspiring female leaders once the office of superintendent is reached. Table 6 reflects the specific advice given by Participant A to aspiring female educational leaders once the position of superintendent has been obtained.

Table 6*Advice From Participant A Once the Superintendency is Reached*

Key points of advice from Participant A
Stand on principles
Follow the law
Follow board policy
Follow what is best for the children
Be compassionate
Build and cultivate real relationships
Be part of the community
Have patience
Understand the politics
Know every facet of the job
Keep yourself grounded
Be kind

Note. This advice came from Participant A only.

The points found in Table 6 reflect essential points of advice gathered from Participant A during our interview. She stated, “They are going to come after you, but you have to stand on principle.” She was passionate about using three parameters to guide all decision-making as superintendent. She stated,

If your decisions are guided by three things, the way people feel about you is irrelevant. The three things are- you are going to follow the law, you are going to follow the policy, and you are going to do everything based on what is good for the children.

She focused much of her advice on dealing with others within the district’s group of stakeholders. Emphatically, she stated, “You have to have compassion for people.” In addition to the importance of relationship building, she included the importance of continually cultivating these relationships. One way to cultivate existing relationships with stakeholders is to be a part of the community. She stated, “You must be seen and heard in the community.” She added, “People want to see you at the grocery store and

sports games.” She encouraged all aspiring female leaders to have patience. One example she used was,

Patience is an asset – especially with the school board. Spend time with school board members to find out what their agendas are. Don’t go overboard with this though as it sends the wrong message – but be patient and learn about them.”

Lastly, she stated the importance of understanding the politics surrounding the position:

So, don’t kid yourself that you’re the leader of the school district- you are, but you are also the leader of very strong personalities who might think they’re the superintendent. You need to assert yourself in a way that says this is my lane and this is yours.

Advice concerning understanding every facet of the job, being mindful of situations, and keeping yourself grounded in the purpose of serving students was summed up when she stated, “You have to be kind.”

Participant B. Participant B offered many insights into navigating the pathway to the superintendency and leading effectively once the superintendency is realized. When she was asked what aspiring female educational leaders can do to navigate the pathway, she stated, “They can definitely go ahead and get their doctorate.” Participant B was the only participant in the study without her doctorate. She mentioned many districts now list doctorate required rather than doctorate preferred when superintendent positions are posted. She also stated the importance of “taking advantage of all professional development opportunities.” Participant B stated, “You should never stop working on yourself.” She stated as she looked back on her pathway that there were many professional learning opportunities that she took advantage of just for the sake of learning. She stated, “There are so many things I got the opportunity to do – that I didn’t

get paid for, that led to this chair.” She closed with, “Just look for ways to better yourself and work hard.”

Participant B relayed characteristics aspiring female educational leaders must possess both along the pathway to the superintendency and once the position is reached. Table 7 lists the characteristics Participant B felt were necessary to be a successful superintendent.

Table 7

Advice From Participant B Once the Superintendency is Reached

Key points of advice from Participant B
Be part of the team (no job is too small)
Maintain balance (boss vs. team)
Communicate with all stakeholders
Build capacity in your team
Collaboration
Listen to stakeholders
Employ common sense
Set high attainable goals
Always keep learning
Work hard

Note. This advice came from Participant B only.

Table 7 lists the key components of advice from Participant B. She emphasized the superintendent must be part of the team. She called this “the Chick-Fil-A mentality.” She stated, “All jobs are important, and no job is too small.” Being part of the team while understanding “the buck stops with me” is the balancing act of a successful superintendent. When speaking of this balancing act, she stated, “If decisions are made and they are good decisions, then it was a decision made by the team. If it’s a poor or bad decision, then that’s my decision.” She further stated, “A successful superintendent must be observant. You’ve got to look at everything going on around you.” These observation

skills should be coupled with communication and team-building skills. She stated, “A successful superintendent must be a good communicator with all facets of the community – custodians, school board, parents, teachers.” Participant B stated the importance of collaboration. She stated, “It’s all about collaboration and maintaining an open-door policy and being willing to listen to all stakeholders.” She also discussed the need to employ common sense. She stated, “Every situation is different and needs to be approached differently – that’s where the common sense comes into play most often.” Participant B emphasized the importance of goal setting at every level of leadership. She stated,

My professional goals were always to grow as a leader, serve our staff, so that they were prepared to provide excellent opportunities for learning for our students. I always wanted to learn as much as I could about every facet of the educational process.

Her overall parting advice for aspiring female educational leaders was, “Keep learning and work hard.”

Participant C. Participant C offered advice for aspiring female educational leaders from a bit of a different perspective. She was the only participant who identified her age as a factor along her pathway to the superintendency. She stated, “I don’t really know if I see it as a barrier as much as people just didn’t take the time to see I really do have a lot of experiences that have prepared me for this role.” Participant C offered advice regarding the pathway to the superintendency, which reflected her own pathway. She relayed the importance of being self-aware. Participant C stated, “Know what your strengths are and continue to grow those areas.” She also stressed the importance of learning from every position you hold in leadership as you traverse the path to the

superintendency. While maintaining a goal-driven mindset, she stated, “For me, it has never been so much about the position as it has been about leadership and learning – the feeling like I am where I am supposed to be at the time.” She also stressed the need for district-level experience prior to becoming a superintendent. She stated, “I definitely recommend district office experience.” She recalled asking her former superintendent for advice at one time prior to becoming superintendent. She stated, “His advice to me was there are so many different pathways, but you do need some kind of district office experience first.” She further stated, “Networking, making sure you are meeting other superintendents and assistant superintendents” is key to traversing the path to the superintendency. She mentioned networking through professional organizations and presenting at leadership conferences as essential components of her success. She stated, “I think part of the reason I have the job I have today is because some people who were part of the interview team had actually seen me present before.”

Participant C offered advice for aspiring female educational leaders, which she felt would ensure success once the superintendency was reached. Table 8 lists key points of advice shared by Participant C.

Table 8

Advice From Participant C Once the Superintendency is Reached

Key points of advice from Participant C
Be transparent
Be hands-on
Collaborative
Build leadership capacity in others
Congruency of skills to position

Note. This advice came from Participant C only.

Table 8 reflects the five key points of advice from Participant C. She stated that a

successful superintendent must be “transparent and hands-on.” She reiterated the advice of Participants A and B regarding collaboration and building leadership capacity in others as key elements of success. She also stated once you have decided the superintendency is the goal, “you have to go after it.” She stressed the importance of congruency of skills and the position. She stated, “Once I realized that becoming superintendent was what I wanted to do, I was committed to finding the right fit for me.” Her advice for aspiring female educational leaders was encouraging them to find the right fit; seeking a position that best utilizes their individual strengths and provides opportunities for growth as a leader.

Participant D. Participant D encouraged aspiring female leaders to “participate in all leadership opportunities and activities that you can.” She recounted the importance of learning from every position of leadership to “make yourself invaluable in that position.” She cautioned aspiring female educational leaders to develop an unwavering level of confidence. She stated, “You don’t have to depend on what other people think if you know what you’re doing is right.” She further cautioned against trying to prove yourself to others. She stated, “You can’t prove your legitimacy as a leader – as a female or otherwise.” She followed up by saying, “Do the right thing, make ethical choices, and allow your abilities as a leader to speak for themselves.”

Table 9 reflects the primary advice given by Participant D to aspiring female educational leaders once the office of superintendent is reached.

Table 9*Advice From Participant D Once the Superintendency is Reached*

Key points of advice from Participant D
Be a visionary
Be relatable
Have integrity
Build and cultivate relationships

Note. This advice came from Participant D only.

Participant D discussed four points of essential advice for aspiring female educational leaders. Participant D stated a successful superintendent must be “a visionary, relatable, and have integrity.” A primary focus for a successful superintendent must be building relationships. Participant D stated, “It’s all about relationships, it’s all about the people, it’s all about the kids; you must focus on all those relationships. And if you don’t, you’re not going to have a successful career in anything- but definitely not education.”

Participant E. Participant E offered the skill of self-advocacy as advice to aspiring female educational leaders. She encouraged future leaders to “ask to be a part of things that you may not normally be included.” Prior to becoming superintendent, she had an opportunity to be included in cabinet meetings and board work sessions. This opportunity afforded her valuable experience. She stated, “It allowed me to participate or observe, and then you begin to see yourself doing the role and other people begin to notice your presence.” She stated, “Put yourself or inject yourself into what you want to do.”

Participant E offered key advice for new female superintendents. This advice is outlined in Table 10.

Table 10*Advice From Participant E Once the Superintendency is Reached*

Key points of advice from Participant E
Don't lose sight of where you came from
Cultivate connectedness with all stakeholders
Create and articulate a clear vision

Note. This advice came from Participant E only.

Participant E only offered the three points of advice found in Table 10. Once the superintendency is reached, Participant E stated, “Never lose sight of what it was like when you were in the classroom.” She stressed the importance of “remaining connected to the folks you work with.” The connectedness with all stakeholders is integral to creating a clear vision. She stated, “Articulate a vision in such a way that people believe it can become a reality.” Most importantly, she stated, “Never stop studying and never stop learning.”

Conclusion

Each participant willingly offered advice to aspiring female leaders regarding the pathway to the superintendency and strategies for success once one has reached the office. Table 11 reflects pathway and navigational advice for aspiring female educational leaders broken down by participant.

Table 11*Pathway Advice Broken Down by Participant*

Pathway advice	Participant
Be goal-oriented (ambitious, self-advocate, decisive, and deliberate)	A, B, C, D, and E
Lifelong learners	A, B, C, D, and E
Relationship building (patience, empathy, authenticity, and kindness)	A, B, C, D, and E
Transformational leadership practices (communication, visionary, and collaboration)	A, B, C, D, and E
Obtain advanced degrees	B and E

Note. Participants (N=5) were assigned pseudonyms to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

Learning from every position held on your way to the superintendency was mentioned by all five participants. All five participants also advised aspiring female educational leaders to be goal-oriented, build relationships, and utilize transformational leadership characteristics. Only two of the participants specifically spoke of obtaining advanced degrees but exposing yourself to as many learning experiences as possible echoed throughout each interview.

Summary

This chapter presented the data gathered through conversational interviews of five female superintendents in this southern state. The data were aligned to the overarching research questions and categorized by theme. Data supported the predetermined themes, and no other themes emerged during analysis. Additionally, data related to skills and strategies necessary for aspiring female educational leaders to navigate their own path to

the superintendency were also included.

The next chapter offers discussion regarding each theme. I also discuss correlations drawn between the themes and current literature. Chapter 5 also offers analysis of skills and strategies recommended by the participants for aspiring female educational leaders to maximize their potential for success. Recommendations for practice of related skills and strategies for aspiring female educational leaders are also included. Lastly, recommendations for further research are listed.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview

In this chapter, I discuss the findings, implications, and further research recommendations based on the interview data I gathered during this research study. I used these themes and the interview data to answer the two overarching research questions by relating the interview data and their analysis with existing literature and social role theory. Each theme was analyzed with respect to its relationship to the research question using social role theory as a guide. Additionally, the participants discussed specific skills and strategies necessary to traverse the pathway to the superintendency and to lead effectively once the position is reached. The practical application of these skills, strategies, and leadership characteristics, and the supporting literature can also be found in this chapter. The results found in this section are intended to provide aspiring female educational leaders with a navigational guide containing the desirable characteristics necessary to traverse the path to the superintendency.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked was, “What are the self-perceived leadership characteristics exhibited by the selected female superintendents within this southern state?” I used the question as a guide to determine which leadership characteristics participants felt contributed to their successes as female superintendents. Using the four predetermined themes of transformational leadership, situational leadership, family obligations, and competitiveness, I analyzed each interview. I used the results from the lived experiences of the five female superintendents I interviewed to determine how each related to the literature. Using the tenets of the social role theory as a guide, I answered the research question using the theme related to the data I gathered.

Transformational Leadership

Owens and Valesky (2015) suggested transformational leadership was necessary for school reform and required commitment from participants, involvement, and relationships for the impacts to be fully realized. All five participants in this study reported successfully employing transformational leadership within the districts they serve. The participants believed transformational leadership was at the core of their leadership style, and although transformational leadership is a process requiring relationship building and a shared vision with all stakeholders, each participant believed in the approach. For these participants, it was more than a leadership tactic; transformational leadership was part of their personality. Their belief in building capacity in others was evident throughout each interview and essential to their personal success and that of the district they serve.

Situational Leadership

Being able to read a situation that requires a response from leadership is learned. All participants alluded to the implementation of situational leadership, but only one mentioned it by name. Situational leadership requires a level of intuitiveness. Intuitiveness comes from understanding who you serve. Being able to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of the stakeholders allows the leader to determine whether those involved are ready to handle the situation (Marczynski & Gates, 2013). Consistently throughout each interview, participants alluded to using this leadership strategy to advance their vision for the district while building capacity in those who served under them.

Family Obligations

Many women wait until their children are older to pursue positions of higher

leadership, and often women do not rise to these positions because of societal norms associated with their roles within the family (Eagly, 1987). Four of the five participants in this study referenced family obligations in their interviews. Largely, the role within the family of these participants further supported their endeavors within the district they serve. Stakeholders within the district see the family-first ideals exhibited by the participants. These ideals resonate within the societal norms related to the social role theory (Eagly, 1987). Many see this behavior as endearing and authentic, which increases the level of impact the participants can have within the district. These behaviors give credence to the transformational style of leadership the participants already exhibit.

Competitiveness

All participants in this study reflected a level of intrinsically motivated competitiveness. Three of the five gave competitiveness credit for putting them in the superintendency. I differentiated between ambition and competitiveness when probing further during the interviews. Several of the participants appreciated the nuance between the two terms. Knowing where to serve seemed to impact the competitiveness of several of the candidates. A sense of self and an understanding of strengths clearly determined the level of competitiveness exhibited by these participants. Generally, the participants expressed a desire to be their very best daily. This motivation was related to their desire to improve the district and build capacity in those they serve.

Research Question 1 Summary

Largely, the self-perceived leadership characteristics gathered from the five participants in this study reflect a commitment to being transformational leaders. A strong sense of self, coupled with a healthy intrinsic level of competitiveness or ambition, reinforces the goal-oriented behavior associated with transformational leadership. The

participants reported a level of situational intuitiveness is important in any role of leadership. This does not exactly reflect transformational leadership, but intuitiveness requires a leader to know their team well. Knowing your team requires relationship building and cultivating, which are reflective of transformational leadership. The family-first ideals expressed by the participants reflect a nurturing nature. The nurturing nature is indicative of building capacity in others, which reflects transformational leadership practices as well.

Research Question 2

The second research question asked was, “What are the career pathway characteristics present among the selected female superintendents within this southern state?” I used the question as a guide to determine which career path each participant chose and which characteristics were common among the participants. Using the three predetermined themes of first superintendency, nontraditional career pathway, and perceived and real obstacles, I analyzed each interview. Data obtained through these interviews were analyzed using the predetermined themes. Additionally, I related these themes to current literature using the social role theory as a guide. The completed analysis answered the overarching research questions.

First Superintendency

All but one of the participants were currently serving in their first role as superintendent. It bears mentioning one of the participants has served 22 years in the same district as superintendent. Each participant felt their job as a change agent would require longevity in the position to accomplish the goals associated with the vision each had put in place. Only one participant planned on leaving her district, and her departure was due to retirement. This participant was also the same participant who stayed in a

previous district for 4.5 years when the original plan as interim for 6 months turned into a permanent position.

Nontraditional Career Pathway

Differences in the pathway to the superintendency can be found throughout the literature (Sperandio, 2015). The traditional route takes most through the ranks, which include a secondary principal position prior to an appointment within the district office. Four of the five participants in this study chose a nontraditional pathway. These pathways are equally effective to prepare them for the role of superintendent, but the participants agreed it takes longer to reach the position for some. One of the participants reported it was essential for women to know every job on their way up the ladder. This exhaustive climb adds a level of credibility to their leadership in the face of those who say she is not prepared for the job. This credibility comes with the price of losing valuable time.

Perceived and Real Obstacles

The lived experiences of the five participants in this study offered five very different views on obstacles found in their paths. All five participants agreed that avoiding obstacles was not an option, and one's response to these obstacles reflected one's true abilities as a leader. One participant chose jealous females, some of whom sit on school boards, as a primary obstacle. She offered being able to relate to all facets within the district to overcome this obstacle. Another participant encouraged aspiring female leaders to know their school boards. This strategy was easy for her to accomplish because she had only served in one district during her career. Age, being considered too young, was considered by one participant as an obstacle during her pursuit of the superintendency. She encouraged aspiring young female leaders to find positions where age was not a predetermining factor in the search for a superintendent. Lastly, while one

participant stated her obstacle list was short, she encouraged a push for financial equity among superintendents in our state. Her advice included that while being grateful for the position, one must not sell themselves short in salary negotiations. Women deserve the same salary considerations as their male counterparts.

Research Question 2 Summary

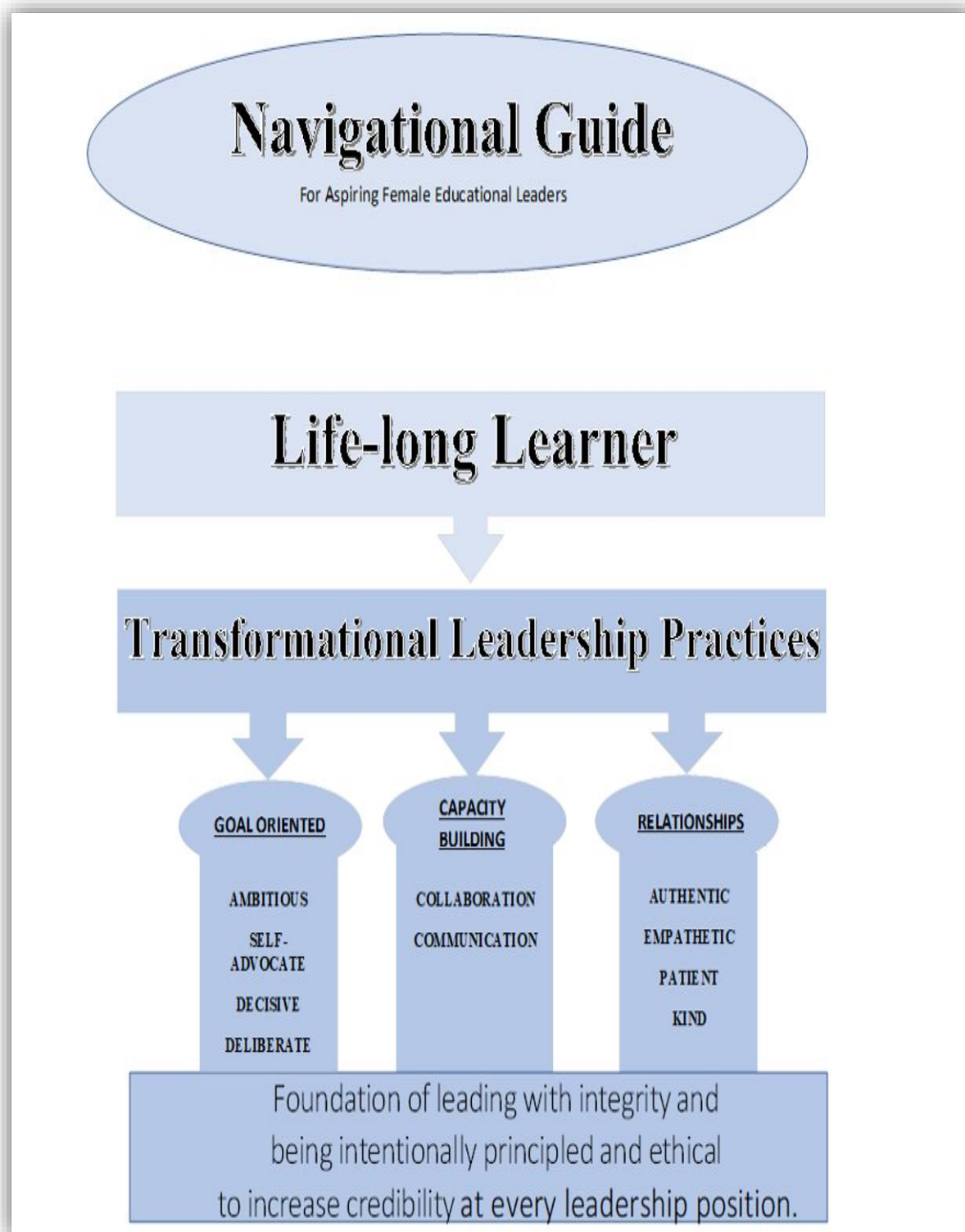
The career pathway for aspiring female educational leaders should include many varied opportunities for leadership. Four of these participants chose nontraditional pathways, which provided many learning opportunities that reinforce credibility in leadership, but all participants agreed the nontraditional pathway takes a bit longer to traverse. The participants offered potential obstacles and barriers but offered advice to navigate these effectively.

Navigational Guide for Aspiring Female Educational Leaders

The successful female superintendents who participated in this study offered valuable advice to aspiring female educational leaders. This advice in the form of skills, strategies, and essential characteristics came from the lived experiences of the participants. The advice was placed in a flow chart. These skills, strategies, and essential characteristics are needed to navigate the pathway to the superintendency and to be successful once the office of superintendent is reached.

The participants of this study encouraged aspiring female educational leaders to work on improving their leadership skills constantly. Aspiring female educational leaders are encouraged to take every opportunity for professional development offered at every level of leadership. A foundation of leading with integrity must be in place to build sound leadership practices. Decisions made should always reflect time spent examining every aspect of the decision and how the impacts will affect every stakeholder. Aspiring female

educational leaders must be principled and make ethical decisions, which increases credibility as a leader. While this list of skills, strategies, and essential characteristics does not encompass everything one must do to be successful, this list does provide a sound base of necessary characteristics to make the pathway more manageable. The skills, strategies, and essential characteristics offered as advice by the participants of this study are found in the navigational guide created in the figure.

Figure*Navigational Guide*

The figure includes advice from the participants of this study regarding sound leadership practices that are relevant at every stage of leadership.

Aspiring female educational leaders should understand many obstacles and barriers still exist along the pathway of leadership. It is important for these female leaders to be equipped with characteristics and skills that provide for a smoother pathway and success. Through the examination of lived experiences of the five female superintendents in this state, several key characteristics surfaced. Overwhelmingly, the participants expressed that being lifelong learners was essential for success. Aspiring female educational leaders were encouraged to take advantage of every learning opportunity available. These learning opportunities provide valuable skills that can assist in navigation of the pathway.

Being goal-oriented as one ascends the leadership ladder was mentioned by every participant. They described being goal-oriented differently, but the advice still reflects the characteristics of successful leadership. Under the heading of being goal-oriented, I included being ambitious, being a self-advocate, being decisive, and being deliberate. According to the participants in this study, practicing ambitiousness and self-advocacy while being decisive and deliberate regarding career pathway choices is key to maximizing your educational leadership potential. A strong desire to succeed should permeate every choice or action made by aspiring female educational leaders. One participant referred specifically to these skills as being decisive and deliberate when planning future steps in the pathway toward the goal. The social role theory attributes ambition as a male behavior (Eagly, 1987). According to the social role theory, being ambitious as a male leader is deemed acceptable but is often met with resistance when observed in female leaders. The participants of this study encouraged aspiring female

educational leaders to adopt a spirit of ambitiousness regardless and offered additional advice to navigate around those who might push back against female ambitiousness. The participants advised aspiring female educational leaders to remain principled and lead with integrity when confronted with situations where social roles and gender stereotypes cause barriers in the path.

Further, the participants stated that self-advocacy is also an essential skill for aspiring female educational leaders. Self-advocacy requires a level of self-awareness essential in leadership. Educational leaders were encouraged to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Once an understanding of these strengths and weaknesses is established, better decisions regarding career moves and choices can be made. When this level of self-awareness is reached, aspiring female educational leaders become better equipped to self-advocate. Aspiring female educational leaders should be aware of the relationship that exists between assertiveness and self-advocacy. Assertiveness is often unappreciated as a characteristic of females and can be met with resistance based on gender stereotypes. Overcoming these perceptions requires aspiring female educational leaders to be cognizant of these stereotypes and continue to lead with integrity while building and cultivating relationships at every leadership position along the pathway.

The importance of building and cultivating relationships was mentioned by all five participants. Relationship building and collaboration support reaching established goals and team building. Bringing about meaningful change in a district through a shared vision requires collaboration and building and cultivating relationships. The participants listed patience, empathy, authenticity, and kindness as key factors in building and cultivating relationships.

Additionally, the five participants suggested aspiring female educational leaders

should employ the methods found in transformational leadership. Specifically, the participants mentioned the benefits associated with building leadership capacity within the team. Aspiring female educational leaders should understand that superintendent responsibilities include creating a shared vision among the stakeholders in the school district. There are many factors that potentially impact the realization of this vision, but the participants of this study agreed building leadership capacity within the team was most effective. It is not enough to simply inform the team of the vision. True transformational leaders raise awareness concerning the value of the vision. To accomplish the innovation or goals set through the vision, the participants of this study stated one must encourage the team to move beyond their own interests to focus on the organization. Motivating others to move beyond their own interests to realize a common organizational vision comes from building and cultivating relationships. Cultivating relationships leads to a better understanding of the team. Knowing your team is key to the success of aspiring female educational leaders. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the team as a whole and individually is paramount to the success of all stakeholders. Accomplishing goals, realizing the vision, and building capacity in others are possible if true transformational leadership practices drive the process. Building relationships, cultivating relationships, communicating, and collaborating within the team build leadership capacity in team members. All participants in this study agreed building leaders in the team is paramount for achieving success and reaching goals within the organization and individually.

Recommendations for Practice

The participants of this study generously provided advice to aspiring female educational leaders. Several skills, strategies, and leadership characteristics emerged from

the analysis of each interview. Upon further review of the data, some of these skills, strategies, and leadership characteristics emerged as nonnegotiable keys to success for aspiring female educational leaders. In this section, I discuss my understanding of the nonnegotiable skills, strategies, and leadership characteristics. I also elaborate on how and when I think these skills, strategies, and characteristics should be implemented by aspiring female educational leaders to secure their success and why each is important.

Goal-Oriented

Mayberry (2017) stated that if one wishes to accomplish anything meaningful, one must first set goals. I think being goal-oriented must be the driving force behind any successful leader. Hatch (2018) described a goal as “an end to which effort is directed” (p. 379). All participants in this study mentioned having goals as an integral part of their own success and offered being goal-oriented as advice for aspiring female educational leaders. Aspiring female educational leaders must have a desired end in mind and put forth effort toward that end. I feel being goal-oriented must be the foundation, the primary focus, and the first step for women who are pursuing educational leadership roles. Without a clear focus, which develops from setting goals, none of the other skills, strategies, or leadership characteristics can develop.

The participants of this study used the words deliberate and decisive when discussing being goal-oriented. Decisiveness enables a leader to execute plans and is key to reaching goals (Sigma Assessment Systems Inc., 2018). The decisiveness and commitment to being goal-oriented by the participants of this study further support the idea that being goal-oriented is foundational and key for aspiring female educational leaders.

Another key factor present in successful leadership that reflects being goal-

oriented stems from a healthy level of ambition. Ambition is a strong desire to accomplish the goals one sets. Ambition and being goal-oriented are equally important in laying the foundation for a successful leader. Setting goals and trying to reach them is fueled by ambition, and ambition must be present to set and reach goals.

Lifelong Learner

Another key component of a successful leader involves a continuous commitment to learning. Once foundational goals are established, aspiring female educational leaders must get to work on attaining those goals. Hall and Hord (2020) stated ongoing professional and personal development are essential for any innovation. I believe learning about and improving one's leadership skills qualifies as an innovation. The participants of this study offered being a lifelong learner as a key component of their success.

For the aspiring female educational leader, taking advantage of every opportunity to learn should be a priority. Whether the learning is relevant at the time it is offered should not be a concern. Participant B credited her ability to sit in the superintendent's chair to her willingness to take advantage of learning opportunities that others would not. If the goal is to be a leader focused on the goals set forth in a vision created by all stakeholders, concerns-based learning and development must occur (Hall & Hord, 2020).

One way to develop leadership skills and strategies is to obtain advanced degrees. Only one of the participants in this study did not have a doctorate. Research suggests a reciprocal relationship between education and effective leadership behaviors (Green et al., 2011). In any organization, stakeholders must view their leader as competent. Advanced degrees often positively impact the perception of the leadership ability by stakeholders within the organization (Green et al., 2011). For this reason, I would encourage aspiring female educational leaders to incorporate advanced degree programs

into their goals. As one pursues the office of superintendent, especially as a female, it is important to maintain a high level of credibility among those stakeholders within the organization. Having advanced degrees positively impacts credibility.

Transformational Leadership Practices

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) asserted transformational leadership practices were the preferred leadership practices for several reasons. Transformational leadership practices are often associated with achieving goals within an organization. All the participants indicated being goal-oriented was key to successful leadership within any organization, but especially education. Being goal-oriented is a critical component of transformational leadership. Unsurprisingly, the participants of this study indicated transformational leadership practices to be their style of choice and suggested aspiring female educational leaders would benefit from these practices too.

The superintendent and their ability to lead impact all stakeholders within the district. A desire to do what is best for students must be the core focus, regardless of which leadership practices one chooses to implement.

It bears mentioning that one cannot wait until the office of superintendent is secured before transformational leadership practices are employed. The participants of this study offered examples of transformational leadership practices from every aspect of their careers. For this reason, aspiring female educational leaders would be well advised to incorporate transformational leadership practices into every position along the pathway to the superintendency. Without fail, each participant expressed the importance of being genuine and authentic to build trust and credibility in every facet of the pathway to the superintendency. Building and cultivating relationships at each juncture provides a network of people who are willing to work hard and accomplish goals together as a team.

I believe leading people and building capacity for leadership in people within the organization by cultivating and building relationships through open communication and collaboration should be the focus of aspiring female educational leaders. It is important that aspiring female educational leaders demonstrate consistency, empathy, and patience to reflect authentic transformational leadership practices throughout their careers.

Eagly et al. (2003) stated that based on the tenets of the social role theory, transformational leadership characteristics were perceived to be more feminine. The job of nurturer in society more easily translates into transformational characteristics. The perception of weakness associated with females as transformational leaders continues to produce obstacles and barriers for some women. This dilemma continues to prevent qualified female educational leaders from reaching the office of the superintendent, despite research that indicates transformational leadership practices increase organizational commitment and productivity (Farley, 2018). Neither I nor the participants of this study could offer a quick fix for the lack of female representation in the superintendent's office. Through the lived experiences of the participants and analysis of the information gathered, we offered advice to guide aspiring female educational leaders along the path to remedy the current situation. Being goal-oriented, a lifelong learner, and incorporating transformational leadership practices throughout one's career will perhaps manifest the change needed.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

Creating equity in the superintendency for aspiring women educational leaders drove this research. Providing insight into leadership characteristics and career paths chosen by successful female superintendents in this southern state offered a navigational tool to those aspiring female leaders who needed additional direction. Allowing the lived

experiences of these successful female superintendents to assist future leaders to navigate obstacles and barriers provided needed support in their quest to the top spot in education. This study provided an additional tool for those female leaders in education who aspire to the superintendency. The path to the superintendency is difficult to traverse for anyone; it is especially difficult for women. The discrepancy of female representation in this office needs to be addressed in practical ways that offer solutions to the inequalities that exist between men and women. This study provided that insight.

Data obtained in this study revealed transformational leadership as a key component of success. The collaborative approach worked well, and building relationships among the stakeholders assisted these participants in their successful leadership within each district. The ability of these women to recognize the need to use a situational approach offered an additional layer of leadership ability and significantly impacted their success. Family obligations were not interpreted as a negative factor to their leadership ability. In fact, the sense of family and belonging translated into success within their district as it reflected their transformational style. Each participant's intrinsic motivation or competitiveness was determined to be an asset and their attitude of being the best they could be daily made positive impacts within their districts. Although each participant's path was different, each participant believed their path prepared them for the task at hand. So, while the nontraditional pathway may take longer, the value in learning from each position held was evidenced in their leadership. Lastly, the perceived and real obstacles each participant faced provided them with valuable experiences. Their willingness to share these experiences and how each obstacle was navigated provided insight needed to impact the paths of future female superintendents in this southern state.

This study, and others like it, could offer ways to eliminate the gap found between

the number of men and women in the superintendency. The phenomenological approach to this study and examination of lived experiences of successful female superintendents offered to fill a gap in the existing literature. Future research recommendations included

- duplication of this study in other states or nationally
- a comparison of male and female superintendent leadership styles
- a problem-focused study relating to navigating obstacles for women in education compared to other areas of leadership
- a study comparing the perceptions of district stakeholders with the perceptions of leadership espoused by their current superintendent
- a study relating these themes and the significance each has with minority males and females in the superintendency

Summary

The number of qualified female educators who become a superintendent is not reflective of the female-to-male ratio of educators in the classroom. This study sought to illuminate the source of the discrepancies found in these ratios by examining the lived experiences of successful female superintendents in this southern state. Additionally, the study provided a navigational guide for aspiring female educational leaders through advice offered considering these lived experiences.

Through qualitative examination of conversational interviews of five successful female superintendents in this southern state, I gathered data based on predetermined themes that reflected a study done previously in Texas (Steeber, 2019). The lived experiences of these five participants offered information regarding barriers like gender bias, the inability to procure qualified female mentors, the hiring process, and the career path chosen. Other inequities regarding salaries surfaced from the lived experiences of

these five participants, which initially were not even factored into the design of the study.

Much emphasis was placed on leadership characteristics and the importance of working on improving one's skills constantly throughout the interviews. Each participant offered advice to aspiring female educational leaders based on the wealth of their own lived experiences. Within the stories told by these participants, aspiring female educational leaders can find a path that fits their own vision of success.

As superintendents, the women who participated in this study serve as the liaison between stakeholders in the school district they serve. This liaison is one of many jobs that must be executed flawlessly to manage the district's needs while executing initiatives as the district works toward the common goal or vision. The superintendent uses a unique skill set to direct all stakeholders toward the common goal. Each superintendent performs all these tasks and more while being the spokesperson for the district and listening to all stakeholders, from parents to community members (Grissom and Anderson, 2012). explained that providing the best environment for all stakeholders hinges on successfully executing management functions within the district.

Through lived experiences, these participants offered insight into these daily functions along with advice relating to obstacles faced along the way. These lived experiences provided a set of skills, strategies, and characteristics needed for aspiring female educational leaders to utilize when planning their chosen career path. Additionally, these successful female educational leaders offered advice to ensure success once the office of superintendent is realized.

These lived experiences offered expert advice to address the discrepancies that still exist between the male-to-female ratio of classroom educators and the male-to-female ratio of those who occupy the superintendent's office. I synthesized these lived

experiences and created a guide to better prepare aspiring female educational leaders for what lies ahead. Each aspiring female educational leader must choose their own path, but commonalities among the lived experiences of the participants and the advice offered by each can provide a proven foundation. This study provided research to support the practices these five participants discussed regarding both the pathway to the superintendency and how to be successful in leadership along the way. The lived experiences of these participants offered aspiring female educational leaders information to choose their paths wisely and armed them with knowledge and wisdom that can only come from experience.

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Appendix A
Permissions Email

Res: X | Pro: X | The: X | My: X | EJS: X | Wo: X | ho: X | Sou: X | A. N: X | Ho: X | Co: X | GW: X | you: X

mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?tab=rm&ogbl#search/dmsteeber%40gmail.com/KtbxLzFrNqWWNvhTVksBGqpfCjKqLpqsB

Gmail dmsteeber@gmail.com

Compose

Inbox 5,636

Starred

Snoozed

Important

Sent

Drafts 14

Meet

New meeting

Join a meeting

Hangouts

stacy +

No recent chats
[Start a new one](#)

your dissertation 1 of 1

stacy fuentes <stacyf19@gmail.com> to dmsteeber Sat, Jul 31, 3:30 PM

Good Afternoon
I enjoyed reading your dissertation. I, too, am interested in female leadership in education. I am a doctoral candidate at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, NC, but I live and work in South Carolina. I would love to replicate your study in South Carolina. I am touching base to make sure you are agreeable to this. You mentioned in chapter 5 further study needs to be done in other states and I agree with you. The discrepancy in female leadership at the superintendent level is something we all should be concerned about. My advisor suggested I reach out and touch base before we proceed any further. I am sure I will need to do further documentation, but I wanted to reach out this weekend to express my desire to replicate this study. Any suggestions, literature, or direction for me to proceed would be greatly appreciated. I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thanks in advance for your time.

Sincerely,
Stacy V Fuentes

Deana Steeber <dmsteeber@gmail.com> to me Sat, Jul 31, 3:58 PM

Hello Stacy,
Yes, you can certainly replicate the study. If I can be of help in any way, please don't hesitate to reach out. Good luck with your dissertation!
Deana Steeber
903-814-6498

Type here to search

67°F Sunny 6:13 PM 10/17/2021

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. How many years of experience do you have in education?
2. Research shows a disproportion between male and female superintendents. Why do you believe this disproportion exists?
3. Describe the qualities of a successful superintendent.
4. What motivates you to achieve?
5. Describe your leadership style.
6. Describe the strengths and weaknesses of your leadership style.
7. According to Owens and Valesky (2015), transformational leadership is a key component in school reform. Transformational leadership is defined often as servant leadership where your success is measured by empowering others success. Does transformational leadership fit in with your leadership style? How?
8. Tell me about the leadership characteristics that you possess that you feel have contributed to your success.
9. How have the professional decisions that you have made shaped your district under your leadership?
10. What positions did you hold prior to becoming a superintendent?
11. In these positions, what were your professional goals prior to becoming a superintendent?
12. How many years have you served as a superintendent? How many past superintendent positions have you held? How many years have you served in your current position?
13. How were you hired for your current position? (Further probing if needed; e.g., search firm, school board, internal/external, seek the position out yourself)
14. What barriers did you face along the pathway to the superintendency?
15. How can aspiring woman superintendents overcome or avoid these barriers, whether actual or perceived?
16. What steps have you taken, either formal or informal, to increase your networking and visibility such as community organizations or professional organizations?
17. As an acting female superintendent, what recommended steps should a female leader consider in building a pathway to the superintendency?
18. After becoming a superintendent, what professional accomplishments make you the proudest?
19. What advice would you give to an aspiring female superintendent?

Appendix C

Participation Invitations Email

Invitation to participate in a study titled:**“A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of Female Superintendents in a Southern State: Perceptions of Leadership and Career Path Chosen”**

Dear Possible Participant,

I am completing my dissertation at Gardner-Webb University as an Ed.D. candidate in Curriculum and Instruction. My area of focus is female leadership in education, specifically the disproportionately small representation of women in the superintendent's office in our southern state. I will be conducting interviews with female public school superintendents across the state. I will be asking questions about your experiences as you ascended to the position of superintendent. Your participation will benefit those women who come behind you. Through sharing your lived experiences, your participation will offer valuable information to aspiring female educational leaders.

The interview consists of 19 questions. I understand time is valuable, and I am willing to work around your schedule to complete the interview. I can interview in person or via Zoom depending on your preference.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to my research and findings could lead to greater understanding of the path to becoming a superintendent for females in our state.

If you are willing to participate, please email me at stacyf19@gmail.com at your earliest convenience. I will then follow up with you concerning a convenient time to meet with you.

Sincerely,

Stacy Fuentes

Appendix D
Communication Log

Communication Log of Participants			
Name of Contact	Date	Method	Reason
A	5/11/22	Email	Request Participation
B	5/11/22	Email	Request Participation
C	5/11/22	Email	Request Participation
D	5/11/22	Email	Request Participation
E	5/11/22	Email	Request Participation
A	5/15/22	Email	Set Up Interview
B	5/18/22	Email	Set Up Interview
C	6/01/22	Email	Set Up Interview
D	7/15/22	Email	Set Up Interview
E	7/15/22	Email	Set Up Interview
A	5/26/22	ZOOM	Interview
B	5/31/22	ZOOM	Interview
C	6/9/22	ZOOM	Interview
D	7/30/22	ZOOM	Interview
E	8/26/22	ZOOM	Interview
A	9/15/22	Mail	Member Checking
B	9/15/22	Mail	Member Checking
C	9/15/22	Mail	Member Checking
D	9/15/22	Mail	Member Checking
E	9/15/22	Mail	Member Checking

Appendix E
Consent Form

Gardner-Webb University IRB
Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of Female Superintendents in a Southern State: Perceptions of Leadership and Career Path Chosen

Researcher: Stacy V. Fuentes, Ed.D. candidate Gardner-Webb University

Purpose

The purpose of the research study is to provide aspiring female educational leaders information about the path to the superintendency. By providing aspiring female leaders with models of success through lived experiences, the study will provide a navigational guide to the top spot in the district.

Procedure

What you will do in the study:

Participants will be interviewed in-person or via ZOOM. An audio recording will be made of all interviews. If a question causes you any discomfort you may stop the interview process at any time. Additionally, if you choose not to be recorded, a question-by-question transcript of the interview will be provided to you.

Time Required

It is anticipated that the interview will require about 60 to 75 minutes of your time.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified state.

Confidentiality

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. You will be assigned a pseudonym for the findings in my final dissertation. All recorded and transcribed data will be saved on a password protected computer. Any paper notes or other identifying information will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. After three years, all data will be destroyed.

Anonymous Data

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data. Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to deduce your identity; however,

there will be no attempt to do so, and your data will be reported in a way that will not identify you.

Risks

There are no anticipated risks in this study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. The study may help us to understand how aspiring female educational leaders can navigate their way to the superintendency. Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

Payment

You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

Right to Withdraw From the Study

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your audio (or video) tape will be destroyed.

How to Withdraw From the Study

If you want to withdraw from the study, tell the researcher your intent of withdrawing before withdrawing. There is no penalty for withdrawing. If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact Stacy V. Fuentes at XXXXX.

If you have questions about the study, contact:

Researcher's name: Stacy V. Fuentes

Student Role: EdD Candidate

School/Department: Gardner-Webb University

Researcher telephone number: XXXXXX

Researcher email address: sfuentes@gardner-webb.edu

Faculty Advisor name: Dr. Jennifer Putnam

Faculty Research Advisor: Dr. Kelly Propst

School/Department: Gardner-Webb University

Faculty Research Advisor telephone number: XXXXXX

Faculty Research Advisor email address: kpropst1@gardner-webb.edu

If the research design of the study necessitates that its full scope is not explained prior to participation, it will be explained to you after completion of the study. If you have concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, or if you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact the IRB Institutional Administrator listed below.

Dr. Sydney K. Brown
IRB Institutional Administrator
Gardner-Webb University
Telephone: 704-406-3019
Email: skbrown@gardner-webb.edu

Voluntary Consent by Participant

I have read the information in this consent form and fully understand the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask any questions concerning this study and they have been answered for me. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant Printed Name

Date: _____

Participant Signature

Date: _____

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.