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# Women Superintendents' Mentoring Experiences and Attainment of the Superintendency

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Abstract

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MS, University of Texas-Pan American, 2012

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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## Abstract

The underrepresentation of women in the school superintendency in the United States may be attributed to a lack of role models, mentoring, and educational networking. The problem that this study addressed is the lack of insight into how mentoring influences women's attainment of the superintendency. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the mentoring experiences women superintendents identified as important in their lives and work. The conceptual framework of this study was based on Higgins and Kram's developmental network. The research questions in the study explored how women superintendents describe mentorship experiences in their careers and describe the influences of these experiences in their attainment of the superintendency. Six superintendents, women who were not interim or retired, from K-12 public schools in a southern state participated in this study. Data were collected using semistructured interviews, questionnaire responses, and archival data from local education agencies. Open coding and second cycle coding informed thematic analysis. Four key themes emerged: women's career paths to the superintendency, meaningful mentorship is essential for women, the importance of networking, and important factors for attainment of and best practices for maintaining the position. Participants indicated their mentorship experiences were influential in their attainment of the superintendency. Mentoring relationships experienced were mostly informal and self-sought. Factors that influence women's attainment of the superintendency include gender disparity, challenges and barriers, career path, mentorship, networking, and other key factors like support systems and personal attributes. This study informs universities, regional education service centers, and superintendent certification preparation programs of the importance of networking and mentoring for women. Positive social change implications include more gender balance across the cadre of superintendents and more role models for the future.

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# Dedication

All glory and praise are for my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who saw me through. I wholeheartedly dedicate this study to my amazing children. Josiah, Jediah, and Azariah, you are my everything, and I am so proud of you. My strong, beautiful children, I pray that you always try your best in everything that you do. Be fierce, but stay humble, loving, and kind. Work hard to make your dreams come true. I did this for you, my pillars, my life, my loves. For my beautiful granddaughter Ariah, you are so incredibly loved. Believe in yourself, Birdie, and know that Mima will always be here for you. *Para mi mami virtuosa,* Araceli, *y mi talentoso papi,* Joaquín, *este título es para ustedes. Gracias por los sacrificios que hicieron para sacarnos adelante. No hubiera logrado esto sin sus oraciones y sin sus enseñanzas que me moldearon a ser una persona fuerte, fiel, y firme - o en palabras de mi Papi, una chingona.* To my sweet *segunda mama,* Tia Vero, whom I would not have made it through graduate school without. *Gracias por tu amor y tu gran corazón, Tía hermosa.* To my siblings, Joone, Crystal, Joel, and Jonathan, I hope that I have made you and my beautiful nieces and nephews proud. *¡Los amo!* To my gorgeous illiterate maternal grandmother**,** *ten por seguro que nunca más sufrirá nuestra familia como sufriste tú,* Telito. *Gracias por ser una mujer fuerte, trabajadora, y guapa.* To my best friend, Julio, who has always been there for me, *sabes que quiero un chingo y dos costales.* To those who held me accountable by inquiring about my writing status, thank you. I have finally finishEdD! To my family, friends, former, current, and future students and colleagues, and to all women who may have considered doctoral school or perhaps never have because you're already spinning too many plates, THIS IS FOR YOU. If I could do it, you could do it, too.

# Acknowledgments

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# Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Women are underrepresented in top-level positions in America, and the field of education is no exception. In the public school system, the superintendency is the highest executive level position. The path to the superintendency often starts as a classroom teacher and despite women holding 75.9% of teaching positions, under 20% of superintendents are women (Sampson et al., 2015). Research specific to the superintendency finds that the position has been defined and institutionalized as men's work (Muñoz, Mills, et al., 2014; Nash & Grogan, 2022; Reis & Grady, 2019; Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Wallace, 2014). Gender expectation is the most common barrier for women who seek top executive positions such as the superintendency (Reis & Grady, 2019).

In this chapter, I present background information on topics of the superintendency specifically the gender disparity, mentorship, and the attainment of the superintendency, which describes the history and nature of the research problem; delineates the problem and purpose for this study; and frames the two research questions that guided the study which focused on women superintendents' experiences and perceptions of mentorship and the attainment of the superintendency. I include in this chapter the conceptual framework that grounded this study, which was Higgins and Kram's (2001) developmental network perspective. I also define key terms in the study; detail the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study; and conclude with a synopsis of the main points in the chapter.

## Background

Historically, women in education are disproportionately represented at the highest positions of educational leadership (Bynum, 2015). The complexities of gender, as related to

leadership, make moving into leadership positions within a patriarchal culture challenging for women (Reis & Grady, 2019). The number of women superintendents is substantially disproportionate to the number of women who are qualified for the role (Rodriguez, 2019). The underrepresentation of women is particularly evident in the superintendency (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). Mentoring should be part of the pre-service preparation of women educators who are aspiring educational administration (Ehrich, 1994; Maranto et al., 2018). Mentoring is often used interchangeably not only with advising and supervising but, among others, with coaching, leading, teaching, and socializing (Marx et al., 2021).

Mentoring has been viewed as a vital strategy for women in higher education, while a lack of mentoring is construed as a barrier (Lepkowski, 2009). This barrier is known as the "glass ceiling," to describe the obstacles facing women leaders who wish to move towards senior management (Maranto et al., 2018). Mentorship is a key strategy for building leadership capacity and career advancement (Peterson, 2019). Creating mentoring networks where potential leaders have exposure to a variety of mentors is critical to managerial career success in today's organizations (Hayes & Burkett, 2020).

The number of women employed in the school superintendent role remains scarce, even though research supports the idea that leadership based on women's way of knowing can facilitate equity and more inclusive school environments (Rodriguez, 2019). Seventy-two percent of public-school teachers are women, yet the proportion of women at the superintendent level is much lower (Glass, 2017; Hill, 2016). The percentage of women holding the school superintendent position increased from 13% in 2000 (Sampson & Gresham, 2017) to 15% in 2008 (Melendez de Santa Ana, 2008) and increased to 24.1% from 2011 to 2014 (Sampson &

Gresham, 2017; Sampson et al., 2015). In the United States today, only 14.5% of superintendents are women (Glass, 2017). Despite the slight increase in the percentage of women superintendents, the issue of underrepresentation in the position remains (Wallace, 2014). This disparity in advancement may be due to gender differences in the development of mentoring relationships, which may be crucial for women seeking advancement in organizations. Women are underrepresented at the highest positions of educational leadership due to the lack of formal and informal mentoring (Bynum, 2015). Furthermore, mentoring by women for women is absent at the superintendency level due to the lack of superintendencies held by women (Muñoz, Pankake, et al., 2014).

Despite the huge economic and educational gains women have made, there is a persistent gap in women's attainment of top-level positions globally in comparison with men that cuts across industries and professions. This dearth of women representation in top leadership roles is indicative of the work that still needs to be done to address the biases, barriers, and unmet needs that make it harder for women to advance (Bruggeman & Chan, 2016).

## Problem Statement

The problem that this study addressed is the lack of insight into how mentoring influences women's attainment of the superintendency. The superintendency is one of the most men-dominated executive positions in any profession in the United States (Montz & Wanat, 2008). As reported in the literature, the reasons for this vary. Gender bias and traditional gender role beliefs can keep women from attaining the superintendency (Elprana et al., 2015). One explanation for the disparity in representation is gender differences in the development of mentoring relationships. In other words, men develop mentoring relationships more than women.

Yet, mentorship proves beneficial to women who aspire to top leadership positions (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014).

The gap in the literature was that it is not clear how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency. Mentorship has been viewed as a vital strategy for women in educational leadership roles while a lack of mentoring is construed as a barrier (Lepkowski, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2010). Mentorship is an important component of building support systems for professionals in administration and leadership and has long been suggested to increase women representation in leadership roles (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Parker, 2015; Wise & Cavazos, 2017). Women superintendents have a less-developed mentoring system and often lack mentors and professional networks (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014).

There have been limited practice and limited research detailing how women attribute mentorship as a factor for attaining the superintendency. Only .002% of all 2014-2016 U.S. dissertations (43 of 175,198) were dedicated to the study of women superintendents (Sampson & Gresham, 2017). It is critical to the success of the nation's schools that all educators be allowed to work in the capacity they for which they are most qualified, regardless of gender (Muñoz et al., 2014). Educators at higher educational institutions and educational certification programs need to better understand how mentorship helps women navigate through the realm of top educational leadership positions (Dunn et al., 2014). This study aimed to contribute new knowledge in the field by looking at women's perspectives of how or to what extent mentorship influenced their attainment of the superintendency.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work. Research about practice is not clear on how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency. This study aimed to provide a further understanding of the perceived influence of mentorship for women superintendents. The findings provided may bring attention to the evaluation or creation of mentoring programs for women who aspire the superintendency position. This study has the potential to influence avenues available to support women who aspire the superintendency position and to influence the number of women who become superintendents.

## Research Questions

The research questions in this study supported the development of a deeper understanding of whether the participants' attainment of the superintendency was influenced by mentorship as explained by Higgins and Kram (2001). The following questions were used to guide the researcher in the proposed study:

*RQ1*. How do women superintendents describe mentorship experiences in their careers?

*RQ2*. How do women superintendents describe the influences of these experiences in their attainment of superintendency?

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was grounded on Higgins and Kram's (2001) developmental network perspective, which states that an individual's overall social network should include a subset of mentors (developmental relationship ties) who take an active interest

in the individual and provide developmental assistance that advances his or her career (Garland & Alestalo, 2014). The four central concepts to Higgins and Kram's developmental network perspective are (a) the developmental network itself, (b) the developmental relationships that make up an individual's developmental network, (c) the diversity of the developmental network, and (d) the strength of the developmental relationships that make up the developmental network. The framework was consistent with core concepts in social network theory and research by Brass (1995) and Ibarra and Andrews (1993). Higgins and Kram found that individuals seeking career advancement should learn to cultivate diverse and strong developmental relationships. They defined developmental network diversity as "the range of social systems from which individuals draw mentoring support like community, employment, school" (Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 267). Developmental relationship strength refers to the level of emotional affect, reciprocity, and frequency of communication (Higgins & Kram, 2001). The study was informed by the framework of the developmental network perspective theory. The framework grounded the study as the purpose was to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work.

## Nature of the Study

The design for this qualitative study was a descriptive case study. According to Yin (2018), case studies allow the researcher to focus in-depth on a case and retain a holistic and real-world perspective. I designed this study to understand how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency by analyzing the experiences of women superintendents who work in school districts in a southern state in the United States. Qualitative researchers interpret information in real-time and adjust their data collection activities accordingly. To increase the

feasibility of the study, I employed purposeful sampling in which six participants were selected for interviewing to understand the mentoring experiences of women superintendents and their attainment of the superintendency. Semistructured interviews were conducted to collect the data. In addition to interviews, archival data from local education agencies and two data sets from interview responses, online resources, and analytic memos were reviewed. Thematic analysis of data was conducted. Participants were protected, and confidentiality was ensured.

## Definitions

The following terms and phrases were defined as used in this study:

*Developmental network:* A developmental network is the group of people who take an active interest in and action to advance focal individuals' careers and personal growth (Chanland & Murphy, 2018).

*Mentoring:* Mentoring is typically described as an interpersonal relationship in which a more experienced or skilled person, a mentor, intentionally guides, supports, and counsels a less experienced/skilled person, a mentee (Dickson et al., 2014).

*Superintendent:* The superintendent is the person holding the top executive-level position in a school district who initiates, implements, and promotes the district's vision towards achieving academic success for all its students, evaluates student achievement, takes a crucial part in selecting principals, and serves as a liaison between the school board and school community (Muñoz, Mills, et al., 2014).

## Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs in the proposed research that are necessary to conduct the research but cannot be proven. In this study, participants were interviewed, and it was assumed

that the women superintendent participants who agreed to participate in this case study provided honest and factual opinions regarding their perceptions of mentorship and their attainment of the superintendency. Another assumption was that the documents reviewed would reveal details that might confirm or conflict with the interview data.

## Scope and Delimitations

The scope of a study explains the extent of content covered in the study to reach logical conclusions and give conclusive and satisfactory answers to the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). The scope of this study encompassed women educators who held a valid superintendent certification and served as superintendents in K-12 school districts at the time of the study. Delimitations are boundaries within the researcher's control (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). Men superintendents were not eligible as participants in this study. Interim and retired superintendents were not considered in this study. An established boundary was that participants had to be current superintendents in a southern state. Due to the geographical limitations of the study, the results cannot be generalized or reflective of women superintendents' perspectives across the nation.

## Limitations

The limitations of the study included its small sample size considering the great number of practicing and retired superintendents in the country. Time and access to email and availability to take phone calls were also considered limitations that may have influenced the number of willing participants. This study could have also been limited by the willingness and openness of the participants to share their experiences with the researcher. The study's lack of explicit focus on personal challenges or socio-cultural barriers that women face in their career

climb was also noted as a limitation. In comparison to this qualitative case study, longitudinal research would provide a more in-depth analysis of the effect of mentorship on the attainment of the superintendency and its career path. Provision of mentorship resources for aspiring women superintendents was not made in this study.

## Significance

Mentorship is a reflective practice that requires engagement, time, and ongoing dialogue (Bynum, 2015). The shortage of mentoring has been cited as one of the reasons for women's lack of advancement in leadership positions; furthermore, the lack of mentors for women aspiring to the superintendency is due to the dearth of sponsors for women (Bynum, 2015; Muñoz, Pankake, et al., 2014). There is evidence that mentorship can enhance women's career opportunities. Mentorship is seen and practiced in most occupational fields and plays an important role in developing confidence, leadership, and networking skills (Sherman et al., 2008), thus enhancing women's career opportunities.

There has been a growing interest in implementing efforts to close the gender gap in decision-making positions, particularly in top-level positions in education during the last decades (Peterson, 2019). This study aimed to provide a better understanding of how mentorship helps women navigate through the realm of top educational leadership positions (Dunn et al., 2014). This study's findings were intended to contribute to the timely topics of education, educational administration, and women's studies and to bring about positive social change for educational institutions focusing on the superintendency such as universities, regional education service centers, and other superintendent certification preparation programs. This study has the potential of bringing about positive social change. The findings can help women who aspire to become

superintendents acquire and succeed in the leadership role. More importantly, this research will help clarify how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency and may contribute to achieving gender parity in leadership which can have a powerful impact on our future.

## Summary

Current statistics show disproportionality between the number of superintendents who are women in comparison to men. This study was designed to explore women superintendents' perspectives of mentorship and the attainment of the superintendency. Chapter 1 of the study explained that little information is known about how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency. Since research is not clear on how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency, the purpose of the study was to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work.

I present in Chapter 2 a review of the literature that is relevant to this study. Literature search strategies and the key statements and definitions inherent in the conceptual framework, Higgins and Kram's (2001) developmental network perspective, are detailed. A synthesis of the key variables and concepts such as mentorship, superintendency, leadership, gender disparity, and attainment are provided in this chapter. Major themes in the literature are concisely summarized along with a description of how this study fills a gap in the literature.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

Leaders of educational institutions at all levels need to become proactive in encouraging mentoring relationships for new administrators, namely for women who aspire to top administrative positions in education such as the superintendency (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011). There is an increasing awareness of and interest in the problem of the gender gap that exists within the superintendency, but the problem that this study addressed is the lack of insight into how mentoring influences women's attainment of the superintendency.

According to a prospective student survey conducted by the Graduate Management Council (2015), in comparison to men, women are more focused on acquiring knowledge, skills, and abilities and developing their leadership and managerial skills, effecting change, setting direction, and enhancing their value in the workplace (Bruggeman & Chan, 2016). So why is there a great discrepancy in the gender distribution of the superintendency? Despite the problem under study, women today are given the opportunity for advancement as never before (Parker, 2015). Mentorship is a key strategy for building leadership capacity and career advancement (Peterson, 2019). Creating mentoring networks where potential leaders have exposure to a variety of mentors is critical to managerial career success in today's organizations (Hayes & Burkett, 2020).

I present within this chapter an extensive review of the current literature drawn from acceptable, peer-reviewed journals, and sound academic journals. This review of literature presents information from important research studies that have been published about women's education and leadership, women in the superintendency, and mentorship. The literature review is organized thematically to present the requisite topics for understanding the study. The themes

are organized and designed to draw from broad concepts to specific studies upon which this study was based. The literature search strategy including library databases and search engines used is listed. The terms used are explained to describe the iterative search process. In addition to key statements and definitions inherent in the framework, primary writings by key theorists, philosophers, or seminal researchers are synthesized in this chapter. I conclude this chapter with a summary of the major sections of the chapter and a brief preview of what the subsequent chapter contains.

## Literature Search Strategy

An iterative literature search strategy was employed in this study. Trusted online academic research databases and search engines such as ProQuest, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Education Research Complete, EBSCOhost, and ERIC were used to search for peer-reviewed articles pertaining to my study. The following is a noncomprehensive list of key search terms and combinations of terms included during the literature search: *gender, female, women, gender gap, superintendent, superintendency, superintendent certification, educational administration, educational leadership, k-12, districts, school districts, public schools, factors, leaders, leadership, leadership development, advancement, mentor, mentee, mentorship, mentoring, network, networking, equity, careers, success, career advancement, gendered, power, glass ceiling, achievement gap, top-level positions, coaching, barriers, formal, informal, preparation programs, certification programs, perspectives,* and *perceptions.* The iterative search conducted yielded thousands of articles of which nearly 100 were selected based on the relevance to this study and considering the date of publication. The purpose of this study is to understand the

experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was developed using Higgins and Kram's (2001) developmental network perspective, which states that an individual's overall social network should include a subset of mentors (developmental relationship ties) who take an active interest in the individual and provide developmental assistance that advances his or her career (Garland & Alestalo, 2014). These mentors and other developers that comprise a diverse leader's developmental network can provide an array of career support and holding behaviors that can offset and mitigate the challenges that often prevent them from reaching top leadership positions (Chanland & Murphy, 2018).

The four central concepts to Higgins and Kram's (2001) developmental network perspective are (a) the developmental network itself, (b) the developmental relationships that make up an individual's developmental network, (c) the diversity of the developmental network, and (d) the strength of the developmental relationships that make up the developmental network. The framework is consistent with core concepts in social network theory and research by Brass (1995) and Ibarra and Andrews (1993). Higgins and Kram found that individuals seeking career advancement should learn to cultivate diverse and strong developmental relationships, and that developmental network diversity "is the range of social systems from which individuals draw mentoring support like community, employment, school" (Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 267). Developmental relationship strength refers to the level of emotional affect, reciprocity, and frequency of communication (Higgins & Kram, 2001).

Support from mentors and other developers that comprise individuals' developmental networks has been associated with many positive outcomes for protégés or mentees, including heightened compensation and promotion, professional learning, performance, and work satisfaction. The examination of strength in developmental networks draws on classic mentoring and network research (Kram, 1983), and states that stronger and more emotionally intense developmental relationships provide a variety of career benefits (Dobrow et al., 2012). Conversely, the research found that a dearth of mentoring prevents women from securing seats on top-level positions and multiple corporate boards. Given the challenges and constraints faced by diverse women leaders, the developmental network needed to propel them into the upper echelons is designed to mitigate or overcome both structural and perceptual barriers that their white men counterparts do not experience (Chanland & Murphy, 2018).

The lack of insight into how mentoring influences women's attainment of the superintendency was informed by this framework of the developmental network perspective theory. The framework grounded the study as the purpose was to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work. This framework guided this study's data collection as women superintendents responded to interview questions that touched on concepts of developmental network diversity and strength.

## Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

### Women in Education & Leadership

Women in leadership are well under study, with approximately 5% of current Web of Science articles addressing both leadership and gender-related issues (Gipson et al., 2017). Research reveals, however, that White men are still more likely to be visible in top-tier

leadership positions than are women or members of any ethnic minority (Morrison, 2018). Therefore, access to leadership opportunities is paramount for women (Sperandio, 2015). The disproportionate underrepresentation of women leaders can be seen across the fabric of American education; however, women leaders bring unique insight and skill sets to leadership positions - having women in top leadership positions brings increased diversity and growth mindsets to organizations.

Leadership is "an assigned promotion on the proverbial ladder" that requires risk-taking and confidence that any opportunity to lead will capitalize over time and end in a recognized leadership position (Reis & Grady, 2019, pp. 54). Women leaders bring promising opportunities for change and advancement. Given the diverse tapestry of the U.S. educational system and the unique needs of the student body, women leaders are a necessity if students are to receive the best possible educational experiences (Tarbutton, 2019).

Substantial research has highlighted the effectiveness of leadership efficacy in predicting leadership and organizational outcomes, especially for women leaders who are often underrepresented in positions of leadership (Brescoll, 2016). Women are better educated than ever before, but few women reach top positions in education even though they have rapidly increased in the ranks of academia (Chin, 2011). Women comprise the majority (57%) of undergraduate college enrollment (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Furthermore, women have made substantial progress in the attainment of graduate-level degrees as well, the majority in education and health (Connell et al., 2015). Women comprise the largest percentage of both the teaching profession and educational leadership preparation programs but have held less than a third of high school principal positions (Kruse & Krumm, 2016). Women are just as likely as men to

have advanced degrees; they account for nearly half of all JD and MD degrees conferred in the United States, and women earned 60% of all master's degrees in 2013-2014 (Bruggeman & Chan, 2016). In the United States, women are twice as likely to have earned a doctorate in education, yet men are five times more likely to hold the job of superintendent of schools (Wallace, 2014).

The career pathway to becoming a top-level executive requires the accrual of academic and leadership experience (Reis & Grady, 2019). Historically, however, women and education are disproportionately represented at the highest positions of educational leadership. The field of educational leadership has been historically White men-dominated, although it is gradually becoming more diverse (Janesick, 2018). A vast majority (84%) of the teaching professionals are women (Bynum, 2015), but only 24% of superintendents across the nation are women, while men account for 86% (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). While this statistic is encouraging, it in no way means that the inequity in the gender of superintendents has been solved. Women have a long way to go to achieve parity, an equal number of men and women in this leadership role (Dowell & Larwin, 2013).

Researchers urge for efforts to be made to bring the number of women working in leadership positions into closer proportion with the number of women in education (Wallace, 2014). It is also of course a social justice issue, since in open competitive educational systems women are typically the high educational achievers, although they are under-represented in formal leadership positions globally as issues related to gender and leadership are not peculiar to a particular country (O'Connor, 2018). The underrepresentation of women in senior leadership

positions is not limited to the United States. Gender inequality when it comes to leader selection is well documented worldwide (Gipson et al., 2017).

When it comes to being selected for high-level leadership positions, men have a distinct advantage (Gipson et al., 2017). Strong leadership skills are desirable qualities of top-level hires (Blakewood & Ohlson, 2020). Effective leaders must have an explicit sense of purpose, use strategies to mobilize people to solve problems, maintain accountability by measured and debatable indicators of success, and undergo an assessment of their success in engaging employees' intrinsic commitment (Janesick, 2018; Nash, 2018). Although women generally occupy subordinate positions, many more women carry the mantle of leadership as they possess talents and capabilities that enable them to perform leadership functions and duties effectively (Segkulu & Gyimah, 2016). Women demonstrate a strong sense of conviction and self-worth and generally have a more democratic, participative, and collaborative style of leading and are primarily concerned with empowering others and creating consensus (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Women are more visible than men in almost every area of education; however, they are underrepresented in top-tier leadership positions.

There is no shortage of women educators; however, there is a shortage of women leaders. Scholars have highlighted this discrepancy, shedding light on a century-old problem (Tarbutton, 2019). A meta-analytic study of followership and leadership found that women leaders rate higher on loyalty and genuineness and affective speech than men, who rate higher on expectations of wealth, status, and risk-taking than women (Tibbs et al., 2016). This is elucidated by a study of central office administrators conducted in a southern state: 81.9% of men respondents applied for the position of superintendent at least once in comparison to only 45% of

the women participants (Muñoz, Mills, et al., 2014). Women need leadership experience. Women must seek out leadership experiences and act as leaders even when leadership is not formally assigned (Reis & Grady, 2019).

Reflection research, which entailed weekly journaling and monthly meetings, found that men-centric leadership models and norms have served to limit women's aspiration regarding leadership, as well as access to leadership roles the under-representation of women and academic administration suggests that masculine practices and leadership norms function to exclude women (Dunn et al., 2014). Despite such challenges, women leaders as those studied by Cheung and Halpern (2010), describe leadership as meaningful work that they love and climb one rung at a time as they rise to meet new challenges. Achieving an executive career is difficult for any gender, but perceptions can often affect the goals of women who are seeking these positions.

Women may suffer from bias stemming from gendered expectations or the masculinity of leadership, both when advancing to leadership positions and when performing in leadership roles. Even when women have the skills and abilities necessary to effectively lead in an organization, they may still have difficulty convincing others of their leadership potential. Thus, it is more difficult for women to become leaders and achieve success in leadership roles (Szymanska & Rubin, 2018). Scholarly research suggests reasons why women are less visible than men in top-tier leadership positions which comprise both internal and external barriers. Three common barriers identified in the research include women's personal choice as well as career positioning and the glass ceiling effect, defined by the Department of Labor as those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organizations into the managerial level (Tarbutton, 2019).

Dominant behaviors that people associate with leadership are frequently deemed less attractive in women. For women to succeed in executive positions, they must develop managerial styles that are not masculine or feminine but are acceptable to men colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates. This is a daunting challenge that is not faced by their counterparts who are men (Dowell & Larwin, 2013). Gendered behavior places women in a double bind. Women leaders who demonstrate behavior that is less feminine and thus more aligned with masculine-oriented and agentic leadership break from gender-role expectations. This, in turn, may make women less likable and, hence, less likely to be hired for leadership positions (Weiner & Burton, 2016). However, many women have broken through the barriers and faced these challenges head-on to obtain top positions, an advancement that is attributed to the power of mentorship (Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Given the existing gender discrepancy in leadership, more research needs to be done on the impact of leaders' commitment to ending gender inequality (O'Connor, 2018). There must be a focus on building women's leadership programs and an emphasis on the importance of honoring women's leadership styles, building collaborations and networks, and leading for equity and systems change (Peterson, 2019).

**Superintendency & School District Size and Location**

Today's public school superintendents are charged with countless responsibilities, and the size and location of a school district play a role in how critical incidents are addressed. Superintendents are required to employ a multifaceted skill set: understanding school law, the complicated elements of school finance, human resource practices, technology, strategic planning, business operations, and other managerial skills (Wright, 2017). School safety,

insufficient financial resources, and increased accountability regarding student achievement are just a few examples of issues that these professionals encounter.

There are various factors affecting the ever-increasing complexities of the roles and responsibilities of school superintendents. These include the educational attainment of adults in the community including parents and guardians; socio-economic factors of the community and families served; the diversity of culture, language, and traditions of community members; the overall economic conditions of the community including local property value; the overall level of engagement and support for the schools; and others (Machell & Evans, 2019). Superintendents face historical challenges as well as those problems unique to our current time. Today's schools face serious internal problems as well as external safety threats, including acts of physical violence, serious accidents resulting in catastrophic injury, and poor decisions made by both staff and students. School shootings, drug and alcohol abuse, inappropriate relationships between staff and students, and countless other problems occur. Events rarely occurring just 20 years ago are some of today's common realities, not to mention new challenges, such as the pressures of social media. In addition to societal challenges, local pressures, and safety concerns, an onslaught of federal intrusion has fostered an environment of over-testing and competition, and these problems show no signs of going away. The increased accountability for school performance also weighs heavily on administrators, faculty, staff, and especially the superintendent. (Wright, 2017).

Schools across the country are extremely diverse and contain unique or defining characteristics which are affected by the community, the superintendent, the administrators, the teachers, and the students. The size of a school district, or its urbanicity, also presents unique

challenges for superintendents and school leaders. The Education Commission of the States defines urbanicity as the concentration of population in the local geography of a school district. The three most relevant urbanicities are urban, territory that is both inside a principal city and inside an urbanized area of 50,000 or more people; suburban - territory that is outside a principal city, but inside an urbanized area of 50,000 or more people; and rural - territory that is both outside an urbanized area of 50,000 or more people and outside a cluster of towns and cities with 2,500 to 50,000 people each (Mann et al., 2017).

Superintendents and educational leaders in urban contexts often lead large populations of differently-abled students, support teachers who lack the cultural knowledge necessary to teach urban youth and operate despite low parental and community involvement. These leaders are charged with providing an equitable education to students with limited economic and social resources in low-performing, unpredictable, unstable urban school settings (Peters-Hawkins et al., 2018). Rural schools face many of the same challenges as inner city schools – poverty, overcrowding, limited resources – as well as additional obstacles unique to rural areas. These challenges are oftentimes obscured because, on average, rural schools are smaller and more isolated than urban and suburban schools.

On a national scale, rural areas are significant; nearly 30% of all U.S. public schools are rural, serving nearly one-fifth of all public school students (Mann et al., 2017). Women superintendents are predominantly Caucasian (90.2 %), between the ages of 51 through 60 (50%) and are married (72%) with one to three children (76.3%) in a southern state (Sampson & Davenport, 2012). The largest percentages of women superintendents were found in major urban districts (22%) and central suburban districts (26%) (Sampson et al., 2015). State certification

agencies report that a majority of those who are currently certified or licensed to serve as superintendents of schools are women. Yet, both at the school and district levels, entry into the administrative ranks is men dominated (Dowell & Larwin, 2013).

**Women in the Superintendency**

The superintendent position is very demanding and is often described as a very lonely position that is driven by power, prestige, and politics. The superintendent initiates, implements, and promotes the district vision toward achieving academic success for all its students, evaluates student achievement, takes a crucial part in selecting principals, and serves as a liaison between the school board and the school community (Sherman et al., 2008). The topic of women superintendents emerged approximately 20 years ago, exposing gender biases that were prevalent in the search for and hiring of superintendents. These biases have created a variety of barriers for women seeking the superintendent position (Rodriguez, 2019).

Women with aspirations to leadership positions as secondary principals or superintendents in the U.S. are aware of the contextual problems they face regarding entrenched gender stereotypes around leadership, and traditional career paths to obtaining it (Sperandio, 2015). Women who are successful in the superintendency have learned to cope with power, conflict, and authority (Sampson & Davenport, 2012). A study of 63 women superintendents in 6 southeastern states outlined factors that influenced women to become superintendents - the top three (of 8) factors are: commitment to education (75.81%), opportunity to have an impact on student achievement (66.13%), and desired an opportunity to serve the community (56.45%) (Wallace, 2014). Women superintendents are perceived to have a purpose that is centered on serving and influencing their community (Marina & Fonteneau, 2012).

While the research may not be consistent for all women, the number of women superintendents is remarkably low compared to the number of women in educational positions. While the number of women superintendents has increased, the representation of women at this top position does not match the number of women in teaching positions and administrator preparation programs. State certification agencies have reported that a majority of those who are currently certified or licensed to serve as superintendents of schools are women. Both at the school and district levels, entry into the administrative ranks is men dominated (Dowell & Larwin, 2013).

Most women who are superintendents serve as executive leaders in small school districts. In a 2008 study of 31 superintendents in a Midwestern state, 22.5% ($n$ = 7) led the smallest districts with fewer than 300 students, 61.2% ($n$ = 19) led districts with fewer than 1,000 students, and 16% ($n$ = 5) of women superintendents led districts in the second largest enrollment category of 2000-2999 (Montz & Wanat, 2008). Aspiring superintendents often question whether school boards hire from within or if they prefer to hire from outside their district. According to Grogan & Brunner's national study of the superintendency, 45% of women are hired from within the district. Superintendents have traditionally been recruited from within the education profession, which is predominately women. However, the percentage of women administrators and superintendents remains relatively low (Dowell & Larwin, 2013).

Sherman et al. asserted that it is important to have knowledge and understanding of the factors that contribute to satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the superintendency (2008). Women superintendents focus on their strengths as leaders. Factors such as motivation (want-to factors), abilities (can-do factors), and opportunity (permission-and-support) factors aim to raise women's

self-awareness of their leader identity, develop academic leadership, and increase confidence and teach proactive strategies to seek support in advancing in leadership positions (Knipfer et al., 2016). Kelsey et al. found that there are three key components to women in the superintendency: networking with other people, staying current in the field, and leading by servant leadership (2014).

**Path to the Superintendency**

While women remain underrepresented in the upper levels of educational leadership in the United States, it is paramount for those women who aspire to positions as high school principals and district superintendents to be knowledgeable about the career paths pioneered by successful women leaders (Sperandio, 2015). The career path of a superintendent most often includes holding a high school principal position. However, very few women administrators hold the position of high school principal. While the numbers have increased over the past few decades, a dismal picture is still present. Generally, women spend more time in the classroom teaching before becoming an administrator. About 75% of the total teaching force is women. They are not equally represented at the high school administrative level. Some believe that this is due to gender bias and women are perceived as less able to manage the demands of a high school principal position (Dowell & Larwin, 2013). Women competing with men for leadership roles such as the superintendency are disadvantaged by such perceptions (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Career paths traditionally forged by men must be rethought for women aspiring to educational leadership in the U.S. as high school principals and as district-level superintendents (positions that are still dominated by men (Sperandio, 2015).

For women, a central office position is a direct career pathway to the superintendency (Sampson et al., 2015). A greater proportion of women advance to the superintendency from central office positions, whereas men are more likely to transition to their initial superintendency positions from high school principal (Sperandio, 2015). Brunner and Kim's (2010) model of typical career paths of women and men in administration shows that, for men, the career path begins with secondary teaching (80.2%) to athletic coach (63.0%) to assistant secondary principal (38%) to secondary principal to superintendent, while women's pathway starts with elementary (58.2%) or secondary (65.3%) teaching, to club advisor (38%) to elementary principal (48.3%) to director or coordinator (57.4%) to assistant or associate superintendent (56.0%) to superintendent (pp. 288-89).

District-level positions are becoming a key point in women's career paths where they gain knowledge about effective instruction and student learning at all levels, an understanding of organizational structures of elementary and secondary schools, and access to the superintendent and other key positions in district-level leadership. Time spent working in these positions also appears to allay fears and insecurity that women may have that they do not have the requisite knowledge or skills to succeed in top positions (Sperandio, 2015). Research supports that the career path for most women superintendents is teaching, assistant principal or principal, and central office - 40% coming from an assistant superintendent position (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). This path to the superintendency was quite different for men superintendents, of whom 53% came directly from the principalship (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014, p. 30). As other researchers assert, these data show that building-level experience was extensive (Montz & Wanat, 2008).

Although it is not an explicit requirement for most superintendency positions, it seems as though holding a doctorate's degree is beneficial to women. The same study found that larger percentages of women superintendents (57.6%) hold their doctoral degrees in comparison to men (43.4%) (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Women with doctoral degrees are more qualified than other candidates who do not have a terminal degree. Furthermore, the more prestigious the university from which the degree was earned, the quicker the advancement to the superintendency (Melendez de Santa Ana, 2008).

The career path to the superintendency has not changed much in the past years. The high school principal position still appears to be the most direct route. While more women are obtaining this position, they are still underrepresented as compared to the number of women teachers at the secondary level (Dowell & Larwin, 2013). Pathways to top-tier leadership positions must be broadened to include nontraditional avenues, thereby offering alternative paths to the superintendency and presidency. Family-friendly policies that recognize and appreciate the struggles associated with familial responsibilities should be adopted and implemented within organizations with fidelity (Tarbutton, 2019).

**Challenges to the Attainment of the Superintendency**

One study makes the daring claim that the superintendency is the most men-dominated executive position in any profession in the United States (Montz & Wanat, 2008). There is an underrepresentation of women in the superintendency (Chin, 2011; Kelsey et al., 2014). A first step to understanding this gender discrepancy is to identify the challenges that women face as they seek the attainment of the superintendency. A study of aspiring women superintendents in a southern state noted that many of the aspirants were reminded of how resilient they needed to be

to achieve their goal of attaining the position (Muñoz, Pankake, et al., 2014). A daunting challenge for women is not only to exceed performance expectations but also to find the appropriate non-threatening way to perform – a challenge their men counterparts do not face. Thus, there are serious constraints placed on women, as opposed to men, regarding displaying assertive and confident behavior (Herbst, 2020).

Underrepresentation, discrimination, lack of transparency in recruitment, promotion, and retention, disciplinary differences, mobility and location, gender pay gap, and issues of choice are well-known barriers that impede women from moving into leadership. Improving higher education leadership capacity is one response to overcoming these barriers to women moving into leadership roles (White & Burkinshaw, 2019). The knowledge research provides empowers women to continue to pioneer approaches to overcome stereotypes and change traditional understandings of who should lead as well as the qualifications needed to do so (Sperandio, 2015). Resilience is needed as research consistently identifies gender bias, lack of career planning and career path, traditional gender role beliefs, lack of mentors and networks, limited mobility, family responsibilities, and the recruitment and selection processes as barriers to women's attainment of the superintendency (Connell et al., 2015; Ramaswami et al., 2010).

One reason for the lower representation of women in the superintendency may be that women are not as career oriented as men as other duties and tasks take precedence over a career such as family responsibilities (Parker, 2015). In the field of science, research finds that the gender gap in top-level positions can be explained by fertility decisions and further asserts that women are less likely to move up the academic job ladder if they have children, which contrasts with men whose likelihood of advancing in academic science careers increase after marriage

and/or children (Dominici et al., 2009). Responsibilities surrounding personal relationships are identified as one of the top reasons women are less visible in corner office leadership positions (Tarbutton, 2019). Maranto et al. (2018) explained that women leaders might have been more inclined to stay in teacher roles due to the favorable, family-friendly policies and increased time off surrounding such positions. Women's personal choices appeared to be heavily influenced by organizational theory and practice.

Women leaders with children are more geographically constrained than men or women with no children (Lepkowski, 2009). Family and lack of mobility also affect a woman's ability and availability to network. Networking has emerged in the literature as one of the major needs in attracting and retaining quality school leaders; furthermore, a lack of professional networking for women limits opportunities for them to work and meet with coworkers and mentors who can provide honest reflection and guidance (Raskin et al., 2010). The importance of a professional network cannot be overstated (Melendez de Santa Ana, 2008). Women often have difficulty balancing the work demands of a superintendent, a wife, and a mother. Parenting issues appear to play a particularly crucial role in whether a woman seeks superintendency (Dowell & Larwin, 2013). However, there are seven reasons why women still fall behind in top district posts: (1) women are not in career positions that normally lead to advancement; (2) women are not preparing for the superintendency; (3) women are not as experienced nor as interested in fiscal management as men; (4) personal relationships hold women back; (5) school boards are not willing to hire women superintendents; (6) women enter the field of education for different reasons today; and (7) women enter administration at an older age (Dowell & Larwin, 2013; Glass, 2017). To complicate the issue, men are promoted at an increased rate compared to

women. Men advance from entry-level leadership positions to advanced leadership positions at an accelerated rate compared to women. Barriers such as these are thought to have an impact on women's leadership opportunities (Maranto et al., 2018).

Gender bias and traditional gender role beliefs can also keep women from attaining the superintendency, for example, the belief that men are better leaders because they often have managerial positions; or highly qualified women who support their partner's career rather than pursuing one of their own (Elprana et al., 2015). Additionally, women are not compensated as well as their men counterparts. Data from the Institute for Women's Policy Research indicated that, as recently as 2017, an 18% pay gap still existed between men's and women's weekly earnings for full-time employees in the United States (Blakewood & Ohlson, 2020). Further research needs to be conducted to determine exactly where the gender pay gap begins and how to improve the access to the administrative pipeline for women (Dowell & Larwin, 2013).

However, there is growing evidence in the United States that women are establishing ways of overcoming or circumventing these barriers. These are the establishing of non-traditional paths to become secondary/high school principals and superintendents, a growing understanding of the use of advocates and mentors, and an appreciation of the advantages and disadvantages of insider/outsider options when seeking positions (Sperandio, 2015). Narrow thinking patterns continue to influence women's circumstances. Subtle biases in how school boards and search firms recruit candidates, and negative stereotypes about women's abilities to lead large institutions are still pervasive (Tarbutton, 2019). To advance women's careers toward the trajectory of school district superintendents or university presidents, a focused effort needs to be made to intentionally promote and interview women leaders on pace with men. Hiring

committees and school boards need to implement practices for advancing both men and women at a similar rate (Maranto et al., 2018).

**Mentorship**

A review of research on both K–12 educational systems and higher education institutions revealed a skewed gender distribution of top leadership positions (Maranto et al., 2018). Women's outcomes concerning leadership advancement might be attributed to limited opportunities for effective mentoring of women for leadership roles (Salkeld, 2016). Research on mentoring has focused primarily on the importance of mentoring women due to the difficulties that women historically have experienced in gaining access to this position and negotiating through men-dominated established professional networks. The rationale behind the need for mentoring to support women is explained by referring to relationships between minorities and majorities in organizations, the role of networks, and power dynamics (Marx et al., 2021).

The essence of a mentoring relationship is that the mentor is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, and/or experience and is willing to share these to positively influence the protégé's career experiences (Janssen et al., 2018). Numerous researchers have advocated women who aspire to top-level leadership roles in education should seek out mentors and build networks of people who can testify to their leadership capacity (Sperandio, 2015). Having a mentor and the amount of mentoring received are related to greater pay and more promotions (Welsh & Diehn, 2018).

Based on the numbers, women should be in more leadership roles and have a more powerful presence in the workforce today. If women are not empowered to be a part of the leadership in an organization, then that organization is missing workers who could help it

flourish. Women in leadership should not be expected to single-handedly change the culture and values of their workplace. A more effective strategy to increase influence and capitalize on the opportunities they deserve is to find allies and mentors within their organizations. Women leaders should be empowered through mentoring partnerships (Turner-Moffatt, 2019).

Mentorship has been viewed as a vital strategy for women in higher education, while a lack of mentoring is construed as a barrier (Lepkowski, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2010). Mentorship is a reflective practice that requires engagement, time, and ongoing dialogue (Bynum, 2015). It is an important component of building support systems for personnel in administration and leadership (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). Mentorship is seen and practiced in all occupational fields. Mentorship plays an important role in developing confidence, leadership, and networking skills (Sherman et al., 2008). Women are being allowed to not only continue to develop their skills and grow their network but also to have an example of the possibilities that are out there for them (Turner-Moffatt, 2019).

Mentoring has been described as a developmental process with growth occurring in phases (Kram, 1983). Kram (1983), for instance, developed a model involving four phases: initiation of the relationship, cultivation of career and psychosocial functions, separation (structurally and psychologically), and redefinition, as the mentee enters the career field, and the relationship settles into a collegial friendship. Noting the unique dimensions of mentee/mentor dyads, Kram (1983) explained, "each phase is characterized by particular affective experiences, developmental functions, and interaction patterns that are shaped by individuals' needs and surrounding organizational circumstances" (p. 621). Mentoring interactions can vary greatly, with their complexions and activities depending on various personal, relational, and situational

factors (Hackmann & Malin, 2018). Essential elements of a successful mentoring relationship - mutuality, trust, and empathy- were hypothesized to produce positive developmental outcomes. In trusting and connected relationships, youth feel safe to express their feelings and receive feedback from their mentors, contributing to improvements in their development (Williamson et al., 2019).

A mentor can be described as one who teaches, coaches, advises, trains, directs, protects, sponsors, guides, and leads another individual or individuals (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). The relationships that develop between a mentor and mentee are aimed at improved role understanding, successful role transition, and completion of goals and objectives (Barrett et al., 2017). An empirical study (Higgins & Kram, 2001) explored the role of the mentoring relationship and found that the strength, length, and closeness of the mentoring relationship influence the effectiveness of mentoring (Williamson et al., 2019). Incidentally, a 2019 study on leadership from 24 women university presidents sampled from 157 universities denied having a single leadership mentor. Instead, each woman experienced a series of interactions with different individuals who offered support or encouragement at critical career points (Reis & Grady). Mentors can help in many ways, but most mentors are credited with assisting in personal growth or by facilitating and guiding career or educational advancement (Muñoz, Pankake, et al., 2014; Ramaswami et al., 2010).

Career development primarily focuses on the professional growth of protégés or mentees. Mentors provide advice and guidance to their protégés by sponsoring them for growth opportunities, coaching, protecting them from adverse events, and providing challenging work assignments that increase the visibility and exposure of the protégés. Such guidance should result

in mentee progress in the organization (Ahsan et al., 2018). It is important to empower and encourage women as they often face unique challenges in the workplace without the necessary tools to overcome them. Participation in mentoring relationships and programs are brilliant ways for women to acquire these tools. Mentors, whether they are men or women, should guide their mentees through struggles by sharing their knowledge and personal experiences (Turner-Moffatt, 2019).

There is evidence that mentorship can enhance women's career opportunities. In a national study of 89,810 public school principals, 51% of the respondents indicated that they received leadership coaching, and over 85% of those receiving leadership coaching responded that they were better principals as a result of receiving coaching (Wise & Cavazos, 2017). In like, mentorship has long been suggested to increase women representation in leadership roles (Parker, 2015). In comparison to men, unfortunately, women superintendents have a less developed mentoring system and lack mentors and professional networks (Glass, 2017; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). The shortage of mentoring has been cited as one of the reasons for women's lack of advancement in leadership; and the lack of mentors and role models for women aspiring the superintendency is the dearth of sponsors for women (Bynum, 2015; Muñoz, Pankake, et al., 2014). Another reason the superintendency contains disparities among women than men may be due to the existence of the glass ceiling and the lack of mentoring opportunities for women (Raskin et al., 2010; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014).

It is important to recognize the invaluable role of mentorship in preparation of becoming effective administrators as it enables them to succeed and climb in their administrative careers (Dunn et al., 2014). The formation of a collaborative mentoring network can be beneficial to a

protégé as they have more mentors from whom they can get support, flexibility, and diversity (Bynum, 2015). Two unique challenges in the workplace that mentors can help them overcome are lack of confidence and poor self-advocacy. Women often underestimate both their abilities and their performance, and confidence can be established through meaningful mentorship. Women are happy to advocate for others, but they are often uncomfortable advocating for themselves. Through mentoring, women can become better advocates for themselves by taking part in exercises such as role-playing. Mentoring benefits often inspire women to become mentors to others (Turner-Moffatt, 2019).

Change is possible when barriers are removed, and a positive perpetual cycle emerges for mentoring relationships. An emphasis on mentoring is fundamental in changing workplace biases and stereotypes regarding women in chief officer roles, such as in the superintendency (Salkeld, 2016). While gender discrimination as a barrier to women accessing the superintendency continues to be a focus of research, recent studies have considered the motivation of women aspiring to the position (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Women leaders in an organization may have greater motivation to provide effective mentoring to other women to reduce barriers to advancement that they may have experienced earlier in their careers (Weinberg & Lankau, 2011). Greater access to mentorship for women may build up their self-efficacy (Cheung & Halpern, 2010). Some researchers argue that it is not necessarily the access to mentoring relationships that makes a difference, but rather the type of mentorship received (O'Brien et al., 2010).

### *Informal & Formal Mentoring*

There is a need to build strong mentoring programs and professional development for women to provide opportunities for growth and capacity-building. The mentoring and professional development components should last over several years as mentees serve with opportunities to learn from experienced education leaders (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). Mentorship can be distinguished into two specific types or forms: informal and formal mentoring. In formal programs, the mentee's needs are analyzed and based on those, the mentee is matched with a mentor; the development of the mentorship is guided and supported with training and networking opportunities (Marx et al., 2021).

The extent of mentoring provided in formal relationships may be less than what occurs in informal mentoring relationships (Weinberg & Lankau, 2011). In a study that explored women's journey to the superintendency, the majority (95%) of the superintendents ($n$ = 18) indicated that they had an informal mentor, as their mentor was not provided through a formal mentoring program (Connell et al., 2015, p. 46). Although formal mentoring programs are available in higher education, research typically has addressed informal relationships because they generally are considered more effective (Hackmann & Malin, 2018). Informal mentoring is a relationship that develops spontaneously or informally without any assistance, free-flowing, and where there is a comfort level between mentor and mentee, or protégé (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011). Informal mentoring relationships are an approach that can offer more benefits than formal mentoring relationships (Bynum, 2015). Informal mentoring can also be done by family mentors who are just as valuable as a formal mentor's words of encouragement, advice, and counseling

(Bynum, 2015). Mentorship is often the mechanism whereby continued encouragement is provided (Barrett et al., 2017).

However, researchers argue that a formal mentoring program is preferred in which an established mentor-protege relationship has been assigned (Bynum, 2015). Leaders need ongoing, formal learning opportunities that are intentionally planned, and the professional development of leaders should not be left to informal or happenstance occurrences (Barnett et al., 2017). Regarding access to mentoring, it has been suggested that women face greater barriers than men when attempting to develop a mentoring relationship (O'Brien et al., 2010). Because of the power of existing networks, men are more likely to benefit from informal opportunities, while women and minorities, in absence of formal programs, might not have any opportunity at all (Marx et al., 2021).

School districts and universities can strengthen partnerships by sharing the responsibility of developing mentoring programs that will encourage experienced administrators, including retired administrators, to advocate for inexperienced women leaders (Duevel et al., 2015). Formal mentoring programs include provisions of mentoring support, the mentor's organizational commitment to mentoring support with an understanding of the importance of overall time spent together, gender composition's impact on the mentoring relationship, and ratings of mentor effectiveness (Weinberg & Lankau, 2011).

Retention, accountability, networking, and confidence are important benefits of mentorship. Some women may feel their abilities are undervalued by an organization and may leave a job as a result. Mentorship gives women an avenue to articulate career ambitions and set goals to achieve them. Mentors hold mentees accountable and on track to achieve career goals.

Mentorship helps women make connections in a new professional network. Mentoring gives women access to new skills and competencies that help them to build the confidence necessary to be effective and successful leaders (Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Mentoring relationships develop when there is shared interest, ongoing communication, and investment made by both parties (Barrett et al., 2017). Mentoring relationships can greatly shape women's growth and potential in school leadership by boosting confidence and developing a sense of connection and identity as a leader (Bynum & Young, 2015). Factors that are important to maintaining successful mentoring relationships

### *Peer & Same-Sex Mentoring*

Women need a strong voice in men-dominated fields to promote their careers as well as to help other young women with similar career aspirations. Women mentors bring a wealth of insight to entry-level management protégés regarding the necessary characteristics and behaviors to succeed in a chief-level position (Salkeld, 2016). A peer mentor can assist the protégé with more significant and current issues related to the workplace without fear of judgment or disappointment than a traditional mentor (Bynum, 2015). Similarly, women superintendents desire other women superintendents for mentoring due to specific challenges their gender faces (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014, p. 38). This preference may also be attributed to the personality characteristics particular to women. Because the feminine gender role encourages women to be compassionate and nurturing, women tend to have greater comfort with intimacy, which would suggest that they have greater comfort with same-sex mentoring (O'Brien et al., 2010; Weinberg & Lankau, 2011).

Women superintendents who have had positive mentoring experiences mentioned the importance of having a women mentor and an established support system (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). Women who are in leadership positions that recognize and identify practices that acted as roadblocks for them need to actively seek ways to help other women overcome them (Sherman et al., 2008). Additionally, women leaders should not need to mimic men's behavior to get fair consideration for career advancement, rather it is important to empower and encourage women as they face unique challenges in the workplace without the necessary tools to overcome them (Turner-Moffatt, 2019).

Same-gender mentoring relationships with women are characterized by authenticity, empathy, engagement, empowerment, companionship, collaboration, connectedness, mutuality, and trust. Establishing a trusting relationship and negotiating understanding and meaningful interactions are highlighted as salient processes in the mentoring relationship. Women mentoring relationships, which last at least a year have shown promising outcomes (Larsson et al., 2016).

### *Lack of Women Mentors*

While more women are being hired as superintendents, highly qualified women still do not secure positions as readily as men administrators (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Montz & Wanat, 2008). That could be the reason there is a shortage of women who can serve as mentors to women superintendents. A significant gender imbalance in science persists, and mentoring has been recognized as an important instrument for fostering academic women's careers and addressing such imbalance (Marx et al., 2021). All the women superintendents ($n$ = 18) in Connell et al.'s study received assistance in securing their first superintendent position from men rather than women (2015). The more that is known about effective mentoring relationships for

women administrators, the more likely it is that women aspiring to administrative positions can develop productive mentoring experiences (Dunbar & Kinnersley, 2011, p 18).

Finding a mentor can be difficult. Researchers continue to seek to understand the benefits and challenges of mentorship relationships. Knowledge about the benefits of mentoring is clear; however, how best to implement such systems remains questionable (Clayton et al., 2013). Women in leadership roles can be strengthened through the power of mentorship. Women should look for allies everywhere in the organization. Often, coworkers share the same goal. Working together can be mutually beneficial. Although there are many benefits to same-sex mentoring, women in leadership should seek both men and women as allies. Equalizing gender imbalances requires the participation of all people. Connecting with coworkers at all levels of the company is important. This may lead to additional networking and mentorship opportunities. Women should take advantage of mentorship programs as they may open doors to new job opportunities (Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Mentoring relationships have the potential for women leaders to make successful transitions into the role of superintendent and career advancement (Bynum & Young, 2015).

## Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, I identified the conceptual framework and reviewed literature that grounds and represents the background and context for this qualitative case study on women superintendents' perceptions of mentorship and attainment of the superintendency. The literature review highlighted key elements of women in education, leadership, and in the superintendency, the superintendency, path and challenges to the superintendency, and mentoring.

There is an underrepresentation of women in the superintendency which may be attributed to a lack of role models, mentoring, and educational and networking programs needed to develop women into this top-level position. The problem that this study addressed is the lack of insight into how mentoring influences women's attainment of the superintendency. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work. This study explored women superintendents' mentorship experiences and their perspectives on how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency. This study aimed to understand and explain the importance of mentorship for women seeking the superintendency and to describe the specific types of mentorship relationships that impact the attainment of the superintendency and its career path.

Given the existing gender discrepancy in leadership, more research needs to be done on the impact of leaders' commitment to ending gender inequality (O'Connor, 2018). There must be a focus on building women's leadership programs and an emphasis on the importance of honoring women's leadership styles, building collaborations and networks, and leading for equity and systems change (Peterson, 2019). Change is possible when barriers are removed, and a positive perpetual cycle emerges for mentoring relationships. An emphasis on mentoring is fundamental in changing workplace biases and stereotypes regarding women in chief officer roles, such as in the superintendency (Salkeld, 2016).

The next chapter will include the research design and rationale for selecting the design. The role of the researcher is explained and personal relationships with participants, biases, and other ethical issues were described. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology, participant

selection, instrumentation, procedures for data collection, and data analysis plan. Efforts taken to establish trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were included as well. I conclude the chapter with a detailing of ethical procedures followed regarding participant protection and treatment of data and a summary of the entire chapter.

# Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how women superintendents describe mentorship influences in their attainment of the superintendency. Included in this section are the research design and rationale for selecting the design. The role of the researcher is explained, and biases and other ethical issues are described. I present in this chapter the methodology, participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for data collection, and data analysis plan. Efforts taken to establish trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are included as well. I conclude this chapter with a detailing of ethical procedures followed regarding participant protection and treatment of data and a summary of the entire chapter.

## Research Design and Rationale

The following questions guide guided the researcher in the proposed study:

*RQ1*. How do women superintendents describe mentorship experiences in their careers?

*RQ2*. How do women superintendents describe the influences of these experiences in their attainment of superintendency?

This bounded, descriptive case study addressed a gap in knowledge about superintendents' experiences with mentorship relationships and their attainment of the superintendency. A descriptive study is a common qualitative design that usually requires drawing on methods of document review and in-depth interviews to understand the experiences, perspectives, and worldviews of people in a particular set of circumstances (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Yin, 2014). The qualitative data collected was informed by interviews, a questionnaire, archival data from two data sets, and information from regional educational service centers.

Although case studies are not exclusive to qualitative research methods, a quantitative research method was not considered because it would not provide the naturalistic, descriptive, and analytic components that qualitative research allows (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative research methods permit an understanding of individuals, groups, and phenomena in their natural settings in ways that are contextualized and reflect the meaning that people make out of their own experiences (Yin, 2018). A quantitative research design would not have allowed me to construct meaning from the data collected from the responses to the open-ended questions asked in the semistructured interviews from the relatively small sample of participants that were purposefully selected (Burkholder et al., 2016).

The five most common qualitative research designs include grounded theory studies, ethnographic studies, phenomenological studies, action research studies, and case studies. An ethnographic study was not considered because one of its main purposes is to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity. Grounded theory studies usually go beyond adding to the existing body of knowledge by developing new theories grounded on data through an emergent iterative process, and thus were not considered for this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). An action research study was not appropriate for this study as researchers study themselves, their cultural settings, and their experiences. A phenomenological study was considered, as it is a qualitative method that studies an individual's lived experiences of events but was rejected because the purpose of this study is to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work, not to describe their lived experiences.

Conceptually, a case study design was most appropriate for this study, as I was concerned with gaining meaning and understanding from participants' perspectives of their lived experiences. Methodologically, this design was best for this flexible, emergent research as data were collected in the participants' natural setting and were analyzed thematically based on the researcher's interpretations of the meanings brought forth by the participants of the studied phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Yin, 2018).

## Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is a central consideration in qualitative research as the researcher's positionality and social location must be considered in every stage of the research process, especially since the researcher serves as an instrument of data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Fall 2022 will start my 16th year as an educator. I have served as a high school administrator for the last 8 years and will seek the superintendency in the near future. This, my role as a researcher, is best described as binary - both etic, an outsider with an objective view, and as an emic, an insider (because I have completed a superintendency certification, not in combination with an academic degree and hold a valid superintendent certificate). Ravitch and Carl (2016) described my role as binary because of the polarized notions of insider and outsider and practitioner and scholar.

Reflexively considering positionality and social location, my perceptions of gender disparity, mentorship, leadership, education, and superintendency have been shaped by my experiences and my aspirations. Despite having an illiterate grandmother and parents whose combined formal education is sixth grade, I learned the value of education, faith, and hard work at an incredibly young age. I illegally came to this country afloat the Rio Grande in a black

plastic trash bag and have experienced and witnessed unfairness and discrimination in my childhood and adolescent years as well as in adulthood. Despite many hardships including teenage pregnancy, divorce, and all the difficulties that came with having single-handedly raised three incredible children, I was the first (and to date, the only one) in my family to graduate from college and have a professional career. Having come from nothing, it is my personal goal to obtain the highest degree attainable in my career and to serve my community as a superintendent, the top leadership position in the field of education. I am a young, Hispanic woman who has held several leadership positions in my career, in my academic education, and in my community. I taught high school English for seven and a half years and introductory college sociology for two and a half years before becoming a high school administrator. Although I worked in public service and early child development during my first collegiate years, my professional experience has been on three 6A campuses serving over 2,000 students and more than 200 staff members each. As a teacher, I founded and managed a large women student empowerment organization for 4 years where each year over 175 students were empowered through character development sessions and opportunities for mentoring experiences with women community leaders and executives. I currently oversee the English Language Arts & Reading and English as Second Language departments where I work directly with more than 70 teachers and work closely with several district cabinet members. I have been involved with all campus-level administrative activities and decision-making for the last 8 years. Every year, I serve as a proud, informal mentor to many teachers and students and have had the distinct privilege of being a mentee in a state superintendent and administrator organization. This state organization offered me and other mentees incredible networking opportunities and leadership experiences provided by the board

and its members who serve as mentors. I believe that all these experiences have enhanced my awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to the topics in this study which may have served as factors of bias, unintentional influence, or prejudice, as data are collected, analyzed, and reported (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Qualitative researchers should make deliberate methodological choices to acknowledge, account for, and approach researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Steps were taken to mitigate and manage bias and maintain objectivity in this study. Data obtained were carefully reviewed, considered, and analyzed with a clear and unbiased mind. Repeated evaluations of the impressions and responses were conducted to ensure that pre-existing assumptions were kept at bay.

## Methodology

I used a qualitative methodology in this study. Qualitative research provides a more realistic feel of the world that cannot be experienced in the numerical data and statistical analysis used in quantitative research, and it provides flexible ways of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data and information. Qualitative methods are appropriate for obtaining an in-depth understanding of phenomena and are generally recommended for how and why questions such as those under study in this research. Because this study investigated a particular group and was bounded by time and location, a case study was used. A case study design is appropriate for researchers studying a common case and for the analysis of ‘‘how or why questions’’ (Yin, 2018, p. 9). The research questions in this study were:

**Participant Selection**

This study employed purposeful or selective sampling, which is the most common sampling method employed in qualitative research and relies on the researcher's judgment about which potential participants will be most informative (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Purposeful sampling is used when the opinion of experts in a particular field is the topic of interest (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Since this study explored how women superintendents described mentorship influences in their attainment of superintendency, purposeful sampling was the best method for participant selection. Purposeful sampling is a nonprobability sampling method selected based on specific characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. Individuals were purposefully chosen to participate in this research study for specific reasons that stemmed from the core constructs and contexts of the research questions.

This study had an established criterion on which participant selection was based. The general sampling frame of this study consisted of women superintendents who were serving a K-12 public school district in a southern state. In this study, a superintendent was the person holding the top executive-level position in a school district who initiates, implements, and promotes the district's vision towards achieving academic success of all its students, evaluates student achievement, takes a crucial part in selecting principals, and serves as a liaison between the school board and school community. Some of the participants were relatively new to the superintendency while some had many years of experience. Some participants only served as superintendents in one school district, and some worked in several school districts. However, it is important to note that only active superintendents currently serving in their roles were considered

for this study. Men, interim superintendents, and retired superintendents were not considered for this study.

To ensure that participants met the criterion, education service center and school district information was reviewed. This data established the general sampling frame for this study. The sampling frame included current or active women superintendents in a southern state that could participate in the study. The sample for this study depended on the characteristics of the setting: access, time, availability, and vulnerability of participants.

Participants were deliberately sampled. The sample size in this study was small but sufficient to provide the information needed for a full understanding of the phenomenon under study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Although there were 36 potential participants considered, only six women superintendents were interviewed in this study. Current or active women superintendents were identified using listings from local education service centers and school district websites and were invited to participate in the study via email. Upon receipt of consenting responses from individuals willing to participate, demographic data were requested via email and submitted via Google Forms. For their convenience, participants provided three available times for virtual, audio-recorded interviews, which were ultimately scheduled based on the availability of the participants. The results of this study are not generalizable to the general population; however, the focus was on gaining information that will aid the aspiring women superintendents to rise to this top educational leadership position.

**Instrumentation**

In this study, intended to explore the perceptions of women superintendents about how mentorship influences attainment of the superintendency, participants responded to a

questionnaire about demographic and background information, and one-to-one interviews were conducted by the researcher as the primary instruments for data collection. Often a useful precursor to interviews, qualitative questionnaires and surveys includes quantitative questions to establish elements such as age or nationality (Burkholder et al., 2016). The questionnaire used in this study inquired about their position, teaching, and administrative experience, educational degrees earned, type of superintendent certification program completed, and geographic description and size of the current school district. Qualitative interviews gain a focused insight into individuals' lived experiences; understand how participants make sense of and construct reality concerning the phenomenon, events, engagement, or experience in focus; and explore how individuals' experiences and perspectives relate to other study participants and perhaps prior research on similar topics; and they provide deep, rich, individualized, and contextualized data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Due to recent COVID-19 health mandates in communities across the nation, face-to-face interviews were not conducted in this study. This study conducted 30 to 60-minute virtual, audio-recorded interviews through virtual meeting sites such as Zoom or Google Meets. The semistructured interviews were guided by researcher-produced questions and follow-up questions that are central to the study's research questions (Burkholder et al., 2016). As opposed to unstructured interviews, semistructured interviews allow the researcher to focus more narrowly on the planned items that speak to the research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Archival data refers to information that already exists and was originally generated for reporting or research purposes; it is often kept because of legal requirements, for reference, or as an internal record. These existing documents are often an important source of context and history

that can help researchers understand the complexities of what is studied by providing a form of data triangulation to first-person accounts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Archival data reviewed in this study were education agency listings, information on school district websites, and two data sets to corroborate the findings interview data for triangulation which increases the credibility and accuracy of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The semistructured interviews included questions inspired by literature, the conceptual framework, and the research questions regarding the following subtopics: personal factors, influences, and career path; barriers, challenges, and support system; and advice and additional information (see Appendix). Starting with the research questions, I outlined the broad areas knowledge that were relevant to the study and considered the logical flow of the interview by organizing these areas into topics that should naturally come first. A total of ten direct, open-ended questions were asked. Seven interview questions were asked in the first topic: personal factors, influences, and career path. Two questions were asked in the second topic: barriers, challenges, and support system. One question was asked in the third topic: advice and additional information. Questions were designed in a manner that participants' responses were not restricted by the wording of the questions. I adjusted the wording of the questions for clarity and to motivate complete, honest, and thorough responses from the participants. I worked closely with my dissertation Chair to test each of the questions for effectiveness and to manage potential bias and made modifications as necessary. Probing was exercised as probing questions help regulate the length of answers and degree of detail, clarify unclear responses, fill in missing steps, and keep the conversation on a topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participants' responses were formed from their knowledge and experiences (Saldaña, 2016).

## Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Procedures for recruitment, participation, data collection, and analysis strategies were reported to provide a clear and accurate picture of the methods used in this study. Names of potential participants were gathered from the regional education agencies and school district website in which women superintendents are identified. Data were collected via questionnaire responses and semistructured interview responses.

### *Recruitment*

To ensure that sufficient data were collected to inform the research questions of this study, the recruitment of appropriate participants was important. First, I used listings provided by education agencies and school district websites to identify women superintendents who meet established criteria to be able to participate in the study. Participants had to be women superintendents of a K-12 school district in a southern state. Men superintendents, women interim superintendents, and women retired superintendents were not considered in this study.

### *Participation*

Following approval by the Institutional Review Board at Walden University, potential participants were emailed an invitation to participate in the study and received follow-up emails or calls. I provided informed consent forms to participants of the study in the body of the email included as a Google Form. No training was required for the participants.

### *Data Collection*

Archival data were used to find detailed information about the participants and to explore important information that I may not have considered which would help in identifying patterns or relationships that I may not have looked for. Using archival data helped increase the level of

effectiveness of the data collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Archival data from local and state education agencies as well as online resources such as state school districts' biographical information about their superintendent were reviewed for the purposeful sampling of participants and to provide more detail about each participant. Archival data were evaluated for details that stemmed from the core constructs and contexts of the research questions. Information gathered from archival data informed participant demographics, work experience, personal attributes, family status, education, school district urbanization, and specific characteristics with the objective of the study in mind.

Data were also collected from questionnaire responses and semistructured interviews, which are more flexible than structured interviews and allow the researcher to better understand the perspective of the interviewees. Once consent was granted, participants were emailed a questionnaire about demographics and background information. After the questionnaire was complete, semistructured interviews were scheduled via scheduled through Google Calendar. Time and dates were set based on the availability of the participant. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or Google Meet and were audio recorded for transcription purposes. Follow-up or probing questions were asked when additional clarification was needed.

The method of analysis for this study was thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a strategic choice as part of the research design that includes the primary questions, goals, conceptual framework, and literature review (Saldaña, 2016). Interviews were transcribed using Zoom's basic transcription, otter.ai online transcription service, and were manually cleaned several times before uploading data files to NVivo 12 Plus data analysis software. Data were open-coded and recoded manually and analyzed thematically using NVivo 12 Plus data analysis

software. Codes are significant phrases that make meaning and initiate a rigorous and evocative analysis and interpretation (Saldaña, 2016). Themes are summary statements, causal explanations, or conclusions that provide reasons for how a participant may feel, why something happened, or the meaning of something in the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes or patterns in the data that are important or interesting and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue. A good thematic analysis interprets and makes sense of qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Data were also collected through archival data including and not limited to service records information and enrollment or certification records that are publicly available through education agencies and online. Participant member checks were offered in this study. Participants were allowed to review their responses to establish the study's credibility. Participants were allowed to consider and respond to their comments on the data and to the researchers' interpretations of the data to help ensure the credibility and reliability of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and reporting (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Transcripts, analytic memos, and data from the interviews have been digitally stored and password protected. They were secured and password protected for limited access for up to five years after study completion and will then be destroyed

**Data Analysis Plan**

The data collected in the semistructured interviews were transcribed and summarized, open coded, re-coded or second cycle coded, and analyzed. I followed the data analysis plan outlined by Saldaña (2016). Each interview was transcribed and summarized. Re-emerging codes were compared, sorted, and summarized using NVivo 12 Plus data analysis software. Concepts

and themes were weighed and integrated. The final stage of the analysis was interpretation to determine what the data say and mean.

## Trustworthiness

Yin (2018) suggested that qualitative researchers should document the procedures of their case studies and document as many of the steps of the procedures as possible to increase trustworthiness. Trustworthiness, or validity, is a key component of qualitative research design which contains the following standards that should be assessed: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Achieving trustworthiness is an iterative process that involves methodical planning to ensure that quality is assessed and aligned with consideration of the research questions, purpose, and context of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I provided a detailed account of the focus of the study, the researcher's role and self-reflective bias, and the context from which data were gathered.

### Credibility

Credibility, or internal validity, is the researcher's ability to consider all the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This simply means that the researcher can draw meaningful inferences from instruments that measure what they intend to measure. In this study, credibility was established through reflexivity and triangulation. Generalizing, or the use of inductive logic to generalize these concepts to themes and relating the themes to the research questions, will not only establish credibility but also allowed me to discover social change implications of the data as prescribed for all students engaged in research at Walden University (Walden University, 2017). Member checks were offered to establish the study's credibility. Participants were allowed to consider and

respond to their comments on the data and to the researchers' interpretations of the data to help ensure the credibility and reliability of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and reporting (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

**Transferability**

Transferability, or external validity, is how qualitative studies can be applicable, or transferable, to broader contexts while still maintaining their context-specific richness. Transferability allows audiences of the research to transfer aspects of a study design and findings by taking into consideration different contextual factors (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, transferability was established with the provision of rich, thick, detailed descriptions of the data themselves as well as the context. Variations of participants, both new and experienced women superintendents, were incorporated to provide multiple perspectives.

**Dependability**

Dependability is the stability of the data over time which can be achieved by triangulation and sequencing of methods and by creating a well-articulated rationale for these choices (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Triangulation refers to using different data sources of information by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell, 2014). In this study, data were triangulated or collected through multiple sources including interviews, questionnaire responses, and archival data (Yin, 2018).

**Confirmability**

One goal of confirmability is to acknowledge and explore the ways that our biases and prejudices map onto our interpretations of data and to fully mediate those possible through structured reflexivity processes (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Reflexivity was employed to detail

researcher bias and to increase objectivity. While engaged in data collection and analysis, I was constantly mindful of my role as a researcher and any personal thoughts on the topic to mitigate those thoughts. I kept an open mind to allow myself the ability to change beliefs and fully adapt to what the data revealed.

## Ethical Procedures

Significant ethical issues were possible with this study as I am a woman who aspires to be a superintendent in the future. To effectively manage the potential ethical and bias issues that surfaced through this process, I maintained and reviewed my interview notes, kept analytic memos, and retained as much formality through the process as possible (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Walden University IRB approval was granted (12-23-21-0747160) and issued on December 23, 2021, with an expiration of December 22, 2022. Research was not conducted until final IRB approval by Walden University was granted. Treatment of human participants was done in accordance with the landmark Belmont Report (1974) where study participants were formally and thoroughly advised of their rights before, during, and after the study.

Specific ethical considerations arise for all research involving human subjects (Yin, 2018). Researcher training is a necessary step in conducting case study research. In preparation to design and conduct an ethical study, I successfully completed CITI Program's "Human Subjects Research" and "Doctoral Student Researchers" training courses on May 4, 2020. This study was conducted with special care and sensitivity.

The following was my executed plan to protect the participants in my study: I secured a partner organization agreement, obtained formal IRB approval, selected participants equitably, collected a signed informed consent form from each participant, protected participants from any

harm including avoiding the use of any deception in the study, protected the privacy and confidentiality of participants assigning pseudonyms and ensured that information provided cannot be linked to them, and provided the interview questions to each participant for review prior to the actual interview.

Informed consent was an important ethical consideration faced in this study and the requirement of any research study as a critical component of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) processes as set forth by the Belmont Report (1974). Informed consent was gathered by obtaining and maintaining signed consent forms as prescribed by the Walden University and school district IRB and outlined the major parameters of the study, the rights of the participants to review their interview data, as well as their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Though no power relationships were part of this study, participants needed to want to participate in the study freely or voluntarily due to their personal interest in the topic and the potential value in the findings of this study. To guard against a participant wishing not to participate or withdraw early from the study, I maintained a list of potential participants whom I could have approached with an invitation to participate. Another option I was prepared to make was to adjust my participant sampling strategy to snowball sampling and ask participants whom they would recommend for consideration based on their knowledge of the study.

A breach of confidentiality by the researcher threatens the integrity and ethical standards of the study, as well as the researcher (Burkholder et al., 2016). Because data were gathered from personal interviews and a review of archival data, confidentiality was anticipated to be the most significant ethical concern of the study with respect to the treatment of the data. Confidentiality was maintained by keeping all data and notes secured in a locked location within my home and

in password-protected files on my computer and on any ancillary storage devices such as external drives. Participants' names were substituted with pseudonyms to protect their identities and no identifying data were used in the archival data analysis or findings. Due to the relatively small sample population and location of the case study, it was crucial to protect the participants' identity and related data to ensure full participation, disclosure, and belief sharing. Transcripts and notes from the interviews were secured and locked or password-protected for limited access for up to five years after study completion and will then be destroyed.

## Summary

I included in this chapter the research design and rationale for selecting the design. The role of the researcher was explained and personal relationships with participants, biases, and other ethical issues were described. The methodology, participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for data collection, and data analysis plan were included in this chapter. Efforts taken to establish trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were detailed. I concluded this chapter with an account of ethical procedures that were followed regarding participant protection, treatment of data, and a summary of the entire chapter.

I present in the next chapter a brief review of the study's purpose and research questions followed by a description of the setting including participant demographics relevant to the study. Data collection and analysis processes are detailed. Included in Chapter 4 is a discussion of the findings in this study as well as evidence of trustworthiness, a summary of the chapter, and an outline of what will be covered in Chapter 5.

# Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work. The research literature was not clear on how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency. The findings provide a further understanding of the perceived influence of mentorship for women superintendents. The findings provided may bring attention to the evaluation or creation of mentoring programs for women who aspire the superintendency position. The following questions guided this study:

*RQ1*. How do women superintendents describe mentorship experiences in their careers?

*RQ2*. How do women superintendents describe the influences of these experiences in their attainment of superintendency?

I include in this chapter the findings of the study, which are described and detailed in the setting, discussion of data collection, data analysis procedures, results that were organized by theme, and the evidence of trustworthiness including the implementation of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I conclude Chapter 4 with a summary of the findings.

## Setting

Participation was open to women superintendents who actively served as a superintendent of a K-12 public school district in a southern U.S. state. Interim and retired superintendents were not considered in this study. Participant demographics and characteristics that were relevant to the study included the highest academic degree earned, the type of superintendent certification program they completed, the length of time it took to attain their first

superintendency from the time they completed their superintendent certification program, the time served in their current superintendency, the setting of the school district, and the years of experience in education.

**Participant Demographics**

Participant demographics and characteristics as well as the urbanization of the school district are important to a study as they may influence the experience of the participants at the time of the study. Tables 1 and 2 depict participant and school district demographics and characteristics that are relevant to the study. Table 1 illustrates the pseudonyms assigned to each participant, the highest degree earned by each participant, the type of superintendent certification program they completed and whether the certification was earned in combination with their academic degree, the elapsed time between earning their superintendent certification to their first attainment superintendency, and their total years of experience in the field of education. Table 2 depicts the duration of each participant's current superintendency as well as the geographic description or urbanization of the school district each participant served at the time of the study.

**Table 1**

*Participant Pseudonyms, Education, Superintendent Certification, and Experience*

| Participant *(Pseudonyms)* | Highest degree earned | Superintendent certification program type | Time elapsed from certification to attainment of 1st superintendency | Years in education |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Symphany | Ed.D. | University stand-alone | 8 years | 20 |
| Cataleya | Ed.D. | University w/ degree | 6 years | 43 |
| Cora | Ph.D. | University w/ degree | 23 years | 41 |
| Ari | M.Ed. | University stand-alone | 10 years | 26 |
| Consuelo | Ph.D. | University w/ degree | 2 years | 22 |
| Veronica | Ed.D. | University w/ degree | 3 years | 39 |

**Table 2**

*Duration of Current Superintendency & Location of School District*

| Participant *(Pseudonyms)* | Time in current superintendency *(in years)* | Geographic description of current school district |
|---|---|---|
| Symphany | 3 | Rural |
| Cataleya | 5 | Rural |
| Cora | 5 | Suburban |
| Ari | 3 | Rural |
| Consuelo | 7 | Rural |
| Veronica | 2 | Suburban |

A doctoral degree was the highest academic degree earned by 83% of the participants. A master's degree was the highest earned by 17% of the participants. Sixty-seven percent of the participants completed a superintendent certification program at a university in combination with a graduate degree. Thirty-three percent of the participants completed a stand-alone superintendent certification program at a university which was not earned in combination with an academic degree. The participants' average length of time it took to attain their first superintendency from the time they completed their superintendent certification program was eight years and seven months. Superintendents attainted their first superintendency within 2 to 23 years from their time of certification. The participants of the study had an average of 4 years as superintendents in the current school district. Participants ranged from 3 to 7 years in their current superintendency. Sixty-seven percent of the participants served in rural school districts, 33% of the participants served in suburban school districts, and zero percent of the participants served in urban school districts. The participants had an average of 31 years and 10 months of

experience in education. The superintendent with the least experience in education was serving her 20th year, and the one with the most was in her 43rd year as an educator.

***Symphany***

Symphany earned a doctoral degree and completed a stand-alone superintendent certification program at a university, which was not combined with her academic degree. Symphany attained the first superintendency position 8 years after the completion of the superintendent certification program. Symphany was the active superintendent of a rural K-12 school district in a southern state and served a 3rd year as superintendent. Symphany was an educator for 21 years and a proud mother and wife who attributed her success to the mentorship received and to strong family support.

***Cataleya***

Cataleya earned a doctoral degree and completed a superintendent certification program at a university, which was earned in combination with her academic degree. Cataleya attained the first superintendency position 6 years after the completion of the superintendent certification program. Cataleya was the active superintendent of a rural K-12 school district in a southern state and served a 5th year as superintendent. Cataleya was an educator for 44 years and a proud mother and wife who came from a family of educators and was driven by a strong work ethic and the value of education.

***Cora***

Cora earned a doctoral degree and completed a superintendent certification program at a university, which was earned in combination with her academic degree. Cora attained the first superintendency position 23 years after the completion of the superintendent certification

program. Cora was the active superintendent of a suburban K-12 school district in a southern state and served a 5th year as superintendent. Cora was an educator for 41 years and a proud mother and wife who kept her humble beginnings at heart and made a daily commitment to honor the paternal sacrifices made to ensure a good education and opportunities for a better future.

***Ari***

Ari earned a doctoral degree and completed a superintendent certification program at a university, which was earned in combination with her academic degree. Ari attained the first superintendency position 10 years after the completion of the superintendent certification program. Ari was the active superintendent of a rural K-12 school district in a southern state and served a 4th year as superintendent. Ari was an educator for 27 years and a proud mother and wife whose motivation was to always be a role model for students and colleagues.

***Consuelo***

Consuelo earned a doctoral degree and completed a superintendent certification program at a university, which was earned in combination with her academic degree. Consuelo attained the first superintendency position 2 years after the completion of the superintendent certification program. She was the active superintendent of a rural K-12 school district in a southern state and served a 7th year as superintendent. Symphany was an educator for 22 years and a proud mother and wife who credited the prestigious superintendency certification program, networking skills, and background in finance as strong suits.

***Veronica***

Veronica earned a doctoral degree and completed a superintendent certification program at a university, which was earned in combination with her academic degree. Veronica attained the first superintendency position three years after the completion of the superintendent certification program. She was the active superintendent of a suburban K-12 school district in a southern state and serves a 2nd year as superintendent. Veronica was an educator for 21 years and a proud mother and wife who was cognizant of the gender disparity in educational leadership but was driven by faith and a desire to help and positively influence students, teachers, and colleagues at a grander level.

## Data Collection

The data collection process that I described in Chapter 3 was followed. Archival data were used to find detailed information about the participants and to explore important information that I may not have considered, which helped in identifying patterns or relationships that I may not have looked for. Using archival data helped increase the level of effectiveness of the data collection process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Archival data from local and state education agencies as well as online resources such as state school districts' biographical information about their superintendent were reviewed to provide more detail about each participant. Archival data were evaluated for details that stemmed from the core constructs and contexts of the research questions. Information gathered from archival data informed participant demographics, work experience, personal attributes, family status, education, school district urbanization, and specific characteristics with the objective of the study in mind.

Upon receipt of IRB approval, I emailed the potential participants the invitation to voluntarily participate in the study and the consent form which included the following information: the purpose of the study, interview procedures, voluntary nature of the study, risks, and benefits of being in the study, privacy, and contact information if the participant had questions. Of the 36 women superintendents who received the invitation email, nine (25%) responded and submitted consent forms. However, only six (16%) consenting participants completed and submitted the pre-interview demographic and background information questionnaire and were scheduled for one-to-one interviews at the convenience and availability of each participant. Several follow-up emails were sent to potential participants who had not responded to the initial email and to those who gave consent but did not complete the pre-interview questionnaire. Several factors contribute to the low response rate including the safety features and filters of some school districts' email systems and the high volume of emails a superintendent may receive, but one of the most influential reasons is the timing of the research. In addition to their regular duties such as board meetings, administrative meetings, grievances, training and professional development, and campus visits, the spring semester is a remarkably busy time for educators. During the spring semester, superintendent schedules are overwhelmingly full of school and community events, state testing, formal evaluations and appraisals, and graduation. Table 3 illustrates the process to recruit participants for the student specifically noting each potential participant's response to the emailed invitation, whether consent was granted, or no response was given, whether the pre-interview demographic and background information questionnaire was submitted, and whether an interview was scheduled.

**Table 3**

*List of Potential Participants*

| Potential participant | Emailed invitation | Consent granted | Pre-interview questionnaire | Interview scheduled |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 2 | Y | NR | | |
| 3 | Y | Y | NR | |
| 4 | Y | NR | | |
| 5 | Y | NR | | |
| 6 | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 7 | Y | NR | | |
| 8 | Y | NR | | |
| 9 | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 10 | Y | NR | | |
| 11 | Y | NR | | |
| 12 | Y | NR | | |
| 13 | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 14 | Y | NR | | |
| 15 | Y | NR | | |
| 16 | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 17 | Y | NR | | |
| 18 | Y | NR | | |
| 19 | Y | Y | NR | |
| 20 | Y | NR | | |
| 21 | Y | NR | | |
| 22 | Y | NR | | |
| 23 | Y | NR | | |
| 24 | Y | NR | | |
| 25 | Y | NR | | |
| 26 | Y | Y | NR | |
| 27 | Y | NR | | |
| 28 | Y | NR | | |
| 29 | Y | NR | | |
| 30 | Y | NR | | |
| 31 | Y | NR | | |
| 32 | Y | NR | | |
| 33 | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 34 | Y | NR | | |
| 35 | Y | NR | | |
| 36 | Y | NR | | |

*Note.* NR indicates no response from the participant.

Due to recent COVID-19 health directives in communities across the nation as well as post-pandemic restrictions and concerns, face-to-face interviews were not conducted in this study. Semistructured interviews were held virtually via Zoom or Google Meet. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and all data were collected in a span of 3 months with numerous requests for rescheduling from some of the participants. Table 4 depicts the duration of each virtual interview and the length of the final transcription which underwent several rounds of cleaning.

**Table 4**

*Duration of Virtual Interviews & Length of Transcripts*

| Participant *(Pseudonyms)* | Duration | Transcript length *(# of pages)* |
|---|---|---|
| Symphany | 34 minutes | 6 |
| Cataleya | 54 minutes | 12 |
| Cora | 48 minutes | 10 |
| Ari | 41 minutes | 8 |
| Consuelo | 52 minutes | 10 |
| Veronica | 31 minutes | 6 |

The variability of interview conditions was minimal to nonexistent. All interviews were conducted in a private setting audible only to the researcher and each participant. The primary challenge was coordinating schedules as the spring semester is quite busy for educators. The audio of each interview was recorded via Zoom and using a digital voice recorder as a backup for transcription purposes. I kept analytic memos that helped me record my thoughts on the data, jot down keywords for coding, and reflect on the data and interpretations.

## Data Analysis

The audio files of the interviews were fully transcribed word for word using Otter.ai transcription services. Transcripts were cleaned manually removing asides, repeated points, and nuance words used in informal speech such as the word “like" and the phrase “you know.” I immersed myself in the data by reading and reviewing each transcript in detail multiple times. Doing this allowed me to gain a deep understanding of the themes and events covered in the text.

Once the transcripts were clean, my words were completely removed in preparation for the open coding process. In addition to the analytic memos written during the interviews, I used the NVivo 12 Plus data analysis software to help me sort and organize my data, which were analyzed to identify themes or patterns in the data that are important or interesting and use the themes to specifically address the research questions. I then began to assign meaning to the data by assigning codes to words or phrases that described what was going on in the data. Inductive coding was used to allow the data to determine the themes. This approach was an iterative process that involved lots of refinement and multiple rounds of analysis for more thorough and exploratory coding.

Open coding was the first level of coding used with the interview data as I searched for the repetition of words, phrases, and concepts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I read and re-read the participants’ responses and organized similar words and phrases to identify patterns, concepts for categorization, and distinct themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). After I read and re-read all interview transcripts line by line, I used an inductive approach to apply open codes to the participants’ words to identify possible categories. The first cycle of coding revealed codes such as *advice, be a mentor to others, benefits of mentorship, honoring family, integrity & non-*

*negotiables, influences, lessons learned, mentor-mentee relationship, sacrifices, and taking initiative.* The data in Table 5 illustrate the open codes used which were born from the repeated words, phrases, and concepts of the participants during the semistructured interviews, which guided me in understanding what women superintendents' mentoring experiences and perceptions and attainment of the superintendency are and what they identify as important in their lives and work.

Once the open coding process was complete, I reviewed the codes for patterns that emerged which formulated the broader categories. Some of the categories that emerged were *challenges and personal factors that affect the career path to the superintendency, qualities of a superintendent and advice for those seeking the position, types and roles of mentorship, and support needed and reaching out to others*. The last step in the cyclical process was to analyze these data again to develop temporary themes. Themes emerged as I continued the cyclical process of analyzing the codes and categories that were developed. I noticed several themes emerged, but I used the cyclical process to identify a recurrence in themes that seemed important to my understanding of the participants' mentoring experiences and perceptions and attainment of the superintendency and what they identify as important in their lives and work. Table 5 illustrates the process from coding to the patterns that emerged and the categories that were formulated. I read the transcripts again carefully to ensure the participant excerpts closely aligned with the open codes, categories, and themes found in the data. The themes found revealed data points linked to the tenets of Higgins and Kram's (2001) developmental network, which is the conceptual framework of this study, and address the two research questions that guide this study.

**Table 5**

*Codes, Patterns, Categories, and Themes*

| Codes | Patterns | Categories | Themes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Career Path | Career Path | Challenges and Personal Factors that Affect the Career Path to the Superintendency | Women's Career Path to the Superintendency |
| Challenges | Challenges | | |
| Not being Seen | Challenges | | |
| Relocation or Commute | Challenges | | |
| Sacrifices | Challenges | | |
| School District Bureaucracy | Challenges | | |
| Support System Family | Family | | |
| Gender | Gender | | |
| Male-Dominated | Gender | | |
| Children or Students | Influences | | |
| Family | Influences | | |
| Honoring Family | Influences | | |
| Influences | Influences | | |
| Choice | Leadership/Skills | | |
| Integrity & Non-negotiables | Leadership/Skills | | |
| Leadership | Leadership/Skills | | |
| Plan or Planning | Leadership/Skills | | |
| Financial Literacy and Skills | Personal Attributes | | |
| Goals | Personal Attributes | | |
| Personal Attributes | Personal Attributes | | |
| Advice | Advice | Qualities of a Superintendent and Advice for those Seeking the Position | Key Factors for Attainment and Best Practices for Upholding |
| Be a Mentor to Others | Advice | | |
| Find a Mentor | Advice | | |
| Lessons Learned | Lessons Learned | | |
| Communication | Personal Attributes | | |
| Confidence | Personal Attributes | | |
| Faith | Personal Attributes | | |
| Support System | Personal Attributes | | |
| Taking Initiative | Personal Attributes | | |

**Table 5** (continued).

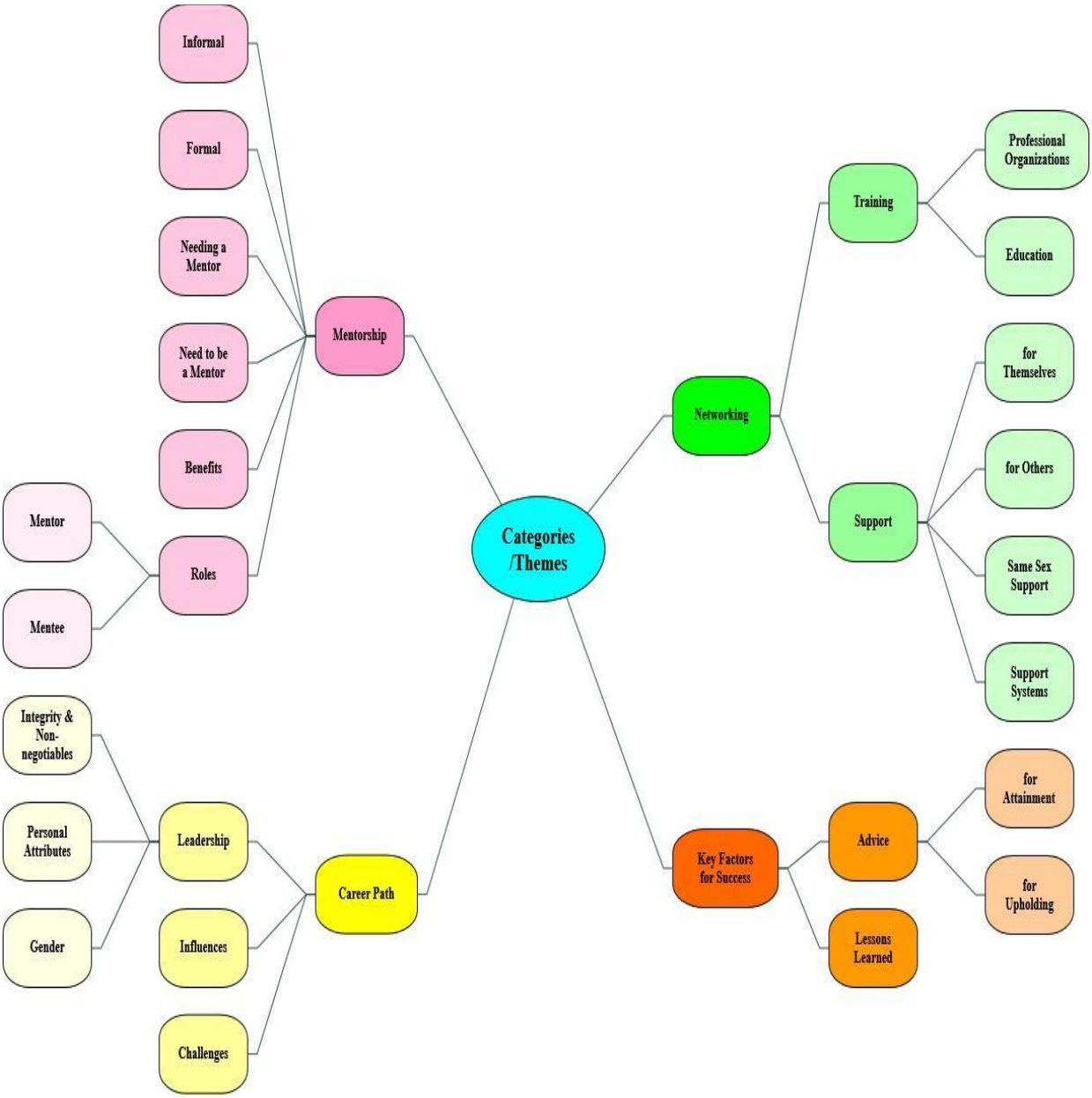
| Codes | Patterns | Categories | Themes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Benefits of Mentorship | Benefits | Types and Roles of Mentorship | Meaningful Mentorship is Imperative for Women |
| Mentor Mentorship Definition | Definition | | |
| Mentor-Mentee Relationship | Relationship | | |
| Relationship | Relationship | | |
| Coach | Role | | |
| Role of Mentee | Role | | |
| Role of Mentor | Role | | |
| Roles | Role | | |
| Formal Mentorship | Type of Mentorship | | |
| Informal Mentorship | Type of Mentorship | | |
| Doctoral Program | Education/Training | Support Needed and Reaching Out to Others | Importance of Networking |
| Same-gender Support | Gender | | |
| Networking | Networking | | |
| Loneliness | Support | | |
| Support System Colleagues | Support | | |
| Support System Supervisors | Support | | |
| Professional Organizations | Training/Support | | |
| Promoting/Recruiting | Training/Support | | |

Thematic analysis of data was conducted, and all participants' identities were protected. Confidentiality was ensured by assigning pseudonyms to each participant, school district, and any other identifiable data. Each of the clean transcription files was manually coded and re-coded or second-cycle coded independently as outlined by Saldaña (2016), but the third and fourth rounds of manual coding were done collectively so patterns could be identified as they emerged in relation to the literature and the conceptual framework. Using the inductive approach in data analysis allows the research findings to emerge from the data without imposed restraints.

Patterns that emerged were formulated into categories and the categories were mapped into themes. The themes were then analyzed in relation to the guiding research questions. Figure 1 illustrates the concept mapping drafting that was employed during the thematic analysis.

**Figure 1**

*Thematic Analysis Concept Mapping Draft*



Qualitative researchers should scrutinize their developed themes by constantly checking and rechecking the interpretations against the data and consider alternative explanations and possible misinterpretations (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative researchers should not force the data to fit into any preconceived notions, which can be achieved by looking for discrepant cases (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Discrepant cases were considered during the analysis phase of this study. Throughout the interviews with participants, I reflected on the participants' responses and questioned what I read as I analyzed the archival data and maintained analytic memos. There were no alternative explanations uncovered related to the interview in relation to the study's research questions. Thus, there were no discrepant cases found that refuted the themes which emerged from the data.

Participant member checks were used in this study. Participants were allowed to review their responses to establish the study's credibility. Participants were allowed to consider and respond to their comments on the data and to the researchers' interpretations of the data to help ensure the credibility and reliability of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and reporting (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Transcripts and analytic memos from the interviews were digitally stored and locked in limited access for up to five years after study completion and will then be destroyed or deleted.

## Results

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work. Data collected from the semistructured interviews, archival data, questionnaire, and analytic memos collected in a 3-

month period were coded using an inductive approach which allowed patterns, categories, and themes to emerge in relation to the following two guiding research questions in this study:

*RQ1*. How do women superintendents describe mentorship experiences in their careers?

*RQ2*. How do women superintendents describe the influences of these experiences in their attainment of superintendency?

The results from the thematic analysis of the data were synthesized and presented thematically. Participant quotes were used. Pseudonyms were used for each participant and for any school districts or names that were shared during the interview to ensure the confidentiality of all parties and school districts that are the host of the case study.

**Theme 1: Women's Career Path to the Superintendency**

Superintendents' career paths include professional experiences in the field of education which prepare them to support students, teachers, personnel, and communities. Although many factors contribute to a woman's decision to pursue the superintendency, intentionality was discussed by several of the participants. Some of the participants knew what they were after and took steps to get there while others climbed the latter through what Symphany described as "a natural progression of things." Symphany shared that her path to becoming a superintendent did not start with a clear intention to be a superintendent. "I've just always believed that I should have a degree higher and a certificate higher than the job I had. At some point, I thought to myself, maybe that's the next step in my journey."

Similarly, but more intentional, Ari was driven to make it to the next step in her career until she reached the top-level position. "I've always felt I've been a leader as an educator, even as a classroom teacher. I feel I've been a leader and a role model to my students, and to my

colleagues, moving up into administration as a role model for the individuals that I supervised. I've always wanted to continue to lead and educate at a higher level. I just kept moving up from a teacher to a campus administrator, to an assistant superintendent, to a superintendent." Veronica also desired to expand her reach until she got to the superintendency. "I knew that as a teacher, I was reaching my students. And then I figured that as an administrator I might reach even more students. And then I thought, all right, how about as a central office assistant superintendent. And then I figured, I might as well go for superintendent."

Even though Cataleya had been an educator for more than 20 years, she only decided to get her superintendent certificate because it was offered in conjunction with her academic degree. "The superintendency wasn't something I was striving for, but my doctoral program included the component of the superintendent." Consuelo also unintentionally earned her superintendent certificate while working towards her doctoral degree. "At that time, I was just seeking principalship. The program itself led me to the superintendency." Only one of the six participants had her eye set on the superintendency from the onset of her career in education. Cora knew that she would become a superintendent someday. "Superintendency was always part of my career goal, but I entered the superintendency quite late in my career." She also recalls a White male peer jumping to the superintendency much faster than she did. "I think you have to acknowledge that as a white male, he was just on a much more aggressive trajectory. We both attained our doctoral degrees at the same time, but he got into the superintendency much faster and had the opportunity to do several superintendencies."

According to the results of the 2019 American Association of School Administrators' Decennial Superintendent Survey, the positions most superintendents hold before becoming the

district's highest-ranking educational leader include classroom teachers (94.99%), assistant principal (52.55%), principal (83.17%), master teacher or instructional coach (9.44%), school counselor (4.11%), district-level director, coordinator, or supervisor (44.91%), and assistant, associate, or deputy superintendent (35.14%) (Nash & Grogan, 2022). Participants were asked what their career path to the superintendency was and how long it took them to attain that top leadership position. Table 6 outlines their responses:

**Table 6**

*Career Path & Duration in Various Positions in Education*

| Participant *(Pseudonyms)* | Teaching experience *(duration in years)* | Previous administrative positions *(duration in years)* |
|---|---|---|
| Symphany | HS Math (5) | GEAR UP Specialist (3)<br>STEM Director (2)<br>Middle School Principal (2)<br>HS Assistant Principal (1)<br>HS Principal (2)<br>C&I Director (2)<br>Assistant Superintendent (2) |
| Cataleya | ES Reading (9)<br>ELAR MS (8) | Counselor PK-12 (16)<br>Assistant Principal (1)<br>Director of C & I (4) |
| Cora | ES PE (3)<br>HS Science (3) | Assistant Principal (6)<br>MS Principal (10)<br>HS Principal (9)<br>TEA (1)<br>IDRA *Ed. Non-Profit* (1)<br>Director of Human Resources (1)<br>Assistant Superintendent (2) |
| Ari | HS ELAR (8) | Curriculum Coordinator (4)<br>High School Asst. Principal (6)<br>High School Principal (3)<br>Assistant Superintendent (2) |
| Consuelo | Bilingual Dyslexia (3) | Instructional Facilitator (3)<br>Associate Principal (3)<br>Area Administrator (2)<br>Deputy Superintendent (5) |
| Veronica | ES & MS (9) | Assistant Principal (4)<br>ES, MS, & HS Principal (22)<br>Assistant Superintendent (2) |

According to a study that examined the career pathways of educators with the superintendent certification, the most common pathway starts with obtaining certification while in the principalship and concludes with being hired out of that same position and into the superintendency (36.94%). The second most traveled pathway begins with and continues through the assistant superintendency (14.70%). These two progressions combine to account for greater than half of all superintendent pathways. Furthermore, 57.2% of eventual superintendents were employed in campus-level positions at the time of certification and hiring into the superintendency. Put another way, most superintendents bypass district-level administrative roles (Davis & Bowers, 2019).

One participant detailed that she spent too many years as a campus administrator due to her family obligations. She recognized “a little late” that a woman must get into a district-level leadership role to become a superintendent. “I think what ends up happening, if you're not at a good pace from assistant principal, you become a high school or middle school principal, you don't want to do that for more than three years. Then you got to jump into a central office and then into the superintendency. You don't want to wait too long.”

As shown in Table 6 above, all the participants in the study had classroom teaching experience, campus administration experience, and central office leadership experience before attaining their first superintendency. 66% of the participants ($n$ = 4) had experience as a principal. 100% of the participants ($n$ = 6) were in district-level leadership roles at the time they attained the superintendency, but 33% of the participants ($n$ = 2) were not serving as assistant or deputy superintendents. Women have a stronger requirement to have held a district-level position prior to the superintendency, while male educators more often move from the principalship to the

superintendency (Davis & Bowers, 2019). Table 7 shows the participants' years of experience as a campus principal, the last position held before attaining their first superintendency, and their level of leadership whether campus-level or district-level.

**Table 7**

*Principal Experience and Last Position Held before Attaining 1st Superintendency*

| Participant *(Pseudonyms)* | Principal Experience (*Years)* | Last Position Held before the 1st Superintendency | Level of Leadership |
|---|---|---|---|
| Symphany | 4 | Assistant Superintendent | District |
| Cataleya | 0 | Director of Curriculum & Instruction | District |
| Cora | 19 | Assistant Superintendent | District |
| Ari | 3 | Assistant Superintendent | District |
| Consuelo | 0 | Deputy Superintendent | District |
| Veronica | 22 | Assistant Superintendent | District |

Although Symphany did not intend to become a superintendent, she knew she wanted to get to the next level. She pointed out that some women simply do not aspire the superintendency, but she questions whether that decision is based on self-doubt, women role models, or lack of influence. "I believe that a lot of women stop their thinking at 'I don't want to. That's not the leadership role that I want.' I don't know if it's because women feel that they can't do the job, maybe because they're not represented, or they've just not been encouraged enough." Maranto et al. (2018) explained that women leaders might have been more inclined to stay in teacher roles due to the favorable, family-friendly policies and increased time off surrounding such positions. Women's personal choices were heavily influenced by organizational theory and practice.

While women remain underrepresented in the upper levels of educational leadership in the United States, it is paramount for those women who aspire to positions as high school principals and district superintendents to be knowledgeable about the career paths pioneered by successful

women leaders (Sperandio, 2015). District-level positions are becoming a key point in women's career paths where they gain knowledge about effective instruction and student learning at all levels, an understanding of organizational structures of elementary and secondary schools, and access to the superintendent and other key positions in district-level leadership.

***Influences***

Participants were asked to detail the influences that led them to seek the position of superintendent of schools. All the participants credit their decision to become a superintendent to both internal influences (which are discussed in the subcategory of Personal Attributes ahead) and external influences such as family, colleagues, or students. Even Cora, whose goal was to become a superintendent early in her career, had a strong influence in her life: her father:

> My father was a migrant worker who came to this country as a young little boy - a 7-year-old boy that my grandmother brought with her when she came to the United States. Dad loved going to school, but he only got to the eighth grade because my grandmother needed him to work to support the family. He was the only son. She only had two children - my father and my aunt. Being the only male, she needed him to work. My father tells the story of one of his 8th-grade teachers, who went to their house to encourage my grandmother to reconsider not letting my dad go on to high school. He really saw a lot of promise in my father and felt like he needed to go to high school. And of course, my grandmother didn't know any better. She felt like daddy had received a well enough education by getting to the eighth grade. She herself never attended school. So when my father and mother had their own kids, he did everything humanly possible to make

> sure that his four children were high school and college graduates. I was the oldest. I have three brothers, and we are all college graduates. I was the first in my family to graduate from high school and earn a bachelor's degree, a master's, and a Ph.D. from a reputable university. So, my main influencer is my daddy, and thank goodness, he is still alive; both of my parents are still alive, and everything I do is to honor them.

Cora elaborated that there are now many educators in her family who are also influences in her life but who would not have made it without the influence that her father's humble beginnings had on the family. "There's a lot of educators in our family now. Three of my four daughters are teachers. Now I have a brother who's also in administration, lots of aunts and lots of uncles who are also in education. So, a huge influence along those lines."

Other women were influenced by their colleagues and their supervisors. Symphany shared that "it had a lot to do with the people who had those positions that were before me." She took a sincere interest in what they did and that directed her interest in taking on the role of superintendent. "If I didn't have those two women at the service center that I worked with, one was a colleague, the other was my supervisor. I don't know if I would have left the service center when I did, and I don't think that my journey would have brought me here without their influence. Cataleya's interest in the position was sparked by one of her male supervisors. "He asked me if I had gone to a TASA Midwinter conference. I found a session titled Aspiring Superintendent Academy, and I asked if I could attend that one. He responded, 'Only if you're in it to win it.' I was finishing my doctorate then. TASA is an amazing organization. So, I applied. I just threw my name in the hat. I was still the Director of Curriculum Instruction and I just started

learning from my superintendent. I'm just a sponge absorbing. I learned so much from him. He encouraged me to apply." Ari was also influenced by the people she worked with, particularly by women who held higher positions than she did. "I had a lot of female role models, and I aspire to be like them. That's what led me to keep pursuing an administrative position all the way to the superintendency."

Students are the focal point of the education field. Some of the women were inspired by their longing to expand their impact on students:

> The desire to help more students, I believe, is what influenced me. I knew that as a teacher, I was reaching my students. And then I figured that as an administrator I might reach even more students. And then I thought, all right, how about as a central office assistant superintendent. And then I figured, I might as well go for superintendent. So, my desire was to help more students.

Ari felt that it was her duty as a leader to be a role model to her students and to the people she worked with:

> I've been a leader and a role model to my students, to my colleagues, moving up into administration as a role model for the individuals that I supervised. I've always wanted to continue to lead and educate at a higher level. I just kept moving up from a teacher to campus administrator, to an assistant superintendent, to a superintendent.

Each participant expressed students were a priority, but only 33% of them ($n$ = 2) identified students as an influence in their decision to pursue the superintendency.

Influence from peers and educational experiences are the last type of influence that

emerged from the data. Cora shared that she was influenced by one of her male peers. “We went through our doctoral programs together. We both attained our doctoral degrees at the same time, but he got into the superintendency much faster. I reached out to him when I was ready for mine.” Consuelo was a campus administrator when she was recruited by a university for a unique opportunity to earn a superintendent certification. “It was my education that influenced me. I was just seeking a principalship but the certification program itself led me to the superintendency. I was nominated for the program by two of my peers, so I felt compelled that they took the time to do so.”

### *Leadership*

The leadership of a school superintendent significantly impacts the direction of the district and the overall student achievement of students in the district. The type of leadership experience and expertise that is necessary for school district leadership can be gained from a variety of different roles. Furthermore, superintendents draw upon the variety of their individual experiences as vitally important components of their leadership (Nash & Grogan, 2022). Strong leadership skills are desirable qualities of top-level hires (Blakewood & Ohlson, 2020). Lived experiences allow superintendents to serve in leadership roles, as well as the networks and opportunities they received from their leading leadership roles, helped build their mindfulness of others, helped them gain self-confidence in being a leader, and increased their willingness to serve as mentors to others (Salazar-Montoya & Kew, 2020).

Effective leaders must have an explicit sense of purpose, use strategies to mobilize many people to solve problems, hold the accountability by measured and debatable indicators of success, and undergo assessment in their success of engaging employees’ intrinsic commitment

(Janesick, 2018; Nash, 2018). Ari practices this intrinsic commitment and believes that an important role of the superintendent is to model and build leadership:

> I want to help my staff grow and get better. So, I've always taken the time, no matter how busy my schedule is. When it's time to create goals with my principals, we sit down in their office to talk about their goals for the year. I want them to feel comfortable. I want them to know that I'm there to mentor them and help them grow professionally, not to just be an evaluator who rates high and low. I take pride in helping others grow. I take pride in building leaders and building capacity. Superintendency is not about power. It's about building leadership. We should see ourselves as mentors. We should see ourselves as leaders who are going to create more leaders.

Ari surmises that great leaders don't even realize how they are inspiring future leaders. They just do it because they're passionate and it's in their nature."

Although women are perceived to be more empathetic and compassionate in comparison to their men counterparts, there are women superintendents like Consuelo who view leadership differently. She had a business-minded perspective of the superintendency which she attributes to her background in accounting:

> There are three leaderships that are extremely critical. The manager - you're going to manage your finances, manage your staff, manage your operations; and you have to be good at managing the most critical parts: your instructional leadership, student outcomes, student accountability, and student learning. Learning is the drive of the educational organization. For better or for worse, we are in positions of political leadership. You have

> to learn to network, to collaborate, to know that you cannot work on an island. The superintendency entails working with an entire community, with the city, with the county, with all stakeholders and working in partnership and collaboration. That's critical.

Women are more visible than men in almost every area of education. However, women remain underrepresented in top-tier leadership positions in the education field. There is no shortage of women educators; however, there is a shortage of women superintendents.

**Gender Disparity.** Historically, women in education are disproportionately represented at the highest positions of educational leadership (Bynum, 2015). The number of female superintendents is disproportionate to the number of women who are qualified for the role (Rodriguez, 2019). American women lag behind men when it comes to their representation in leadership positions. Although women make up 49% of the college-educated workforce and almost 52% of professional-level jobs, they have not moved up to positions of prominence and power in America at anywhere near the rate that should have followed (Warner & Corley, 2017).

Some of the participants in this study were very much aware of the gender disparity in the superintendency and several were driven to change it. Symphany pointed out that a superintendent is the CEO of their organization, but the reality is that you see more males running that organization." Cataleya recalled when she realized how scarce women superintendents were the first time she attended a state conference for superintendents:

> When I went to my first superintendents and administrators state conference, let's just say that out of about one hundred superintendents, there may have been, at most, ten females. How can this be? When you look at education, at an elementary, middle, or high school campus, for example, the majority of the staff

> or the educators are mostly women. Why doesn't it look like that at the leadership conferences? It has not changed. We need to empower women. We need to make sure that our voices are heard. I understand that there are some women who simply do not want to be principals or superintendents, but many do. My experience has taught me that women are harder workers and men.

Cataleya shared that it was "that feeling" that pushed her to get to the top. Veronica also tuned in to the gender disparity in the superintendency when she attended the TASA conference for the first time. "It was a challenge to see that because the superintendency is really a male-dominated world. You notice things like that when you go to the TASA conference." After she was overlooked by a male superintendent for a job that was given to, what she felt, was a less qualified, troublesome male colleague, she seeks out mentorships to support her personal and professional development and has become more passionate about helping other women make it to the top.

That sentiment of advocacy and intentional support was shared by Cora who attested that the main reason she accepted to participate in the student is because she is passionate about women leadership and the superintendency. "For me, anytime a female reaches out about a dissertation study or an interview about something in their education, I immediately do whatever I can to assist them. On a very personal level, pursuing the superintendency was about equity and about equity for all children."

Similarly, Symphany admitted that she did read my invitation email to participate in this study until one of her women superintendent friends pointed her to it. As an advocate for women

leadership, she immediately replied with consent and answered the questionnaire. “Supporting other women is very important.” She elaborated that:

> The interesting thing is that the superintendent's world is very much a man's world. When you go to the state level, and you sit in a room with fifty superintendents, it is not unusual for there to be less than 10% females. And it's interesting because at the state level, you sit in a room, and they are typically middle-aged, white males who are all dressed in the same suit. When you walk in, and you're in your high heels, and you've got your blouse on, it's noted. You're not the same, you're not like them, you don't fit in. It's a problem that there's not enough females being represented when the reality is that there's more females in education than men.

One explanation for the disparity in representation is gender differences in the development of mentoring relationships. Mentorship proves beneficial to women who aspire to top leadership positions (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). The impact of mentorship was also a theme that emerged from the data which is discussed subsequently.

The reason for the great discrepancy in the gender distribution of the superintendency is not clear, but despite the problem under study, women today are given the opportunity for advancement as never before (Parker, 2015). According to a prospective student survey conducted by the Graduate Management Council (2015), in comparison to men, women are more focused on acquiring knowledge, skills, and abilities and developing their leadership and managerial skills, effecting change, setting direction, and enhancing their value in the workplace (Bruggeman & Chan, 2016).

**Personal Attributes.** Many more women carry the mantle of leadership as they possess talents and capabilities that enable them to perform leadership functions and duties effectively (Segkulu & Gyimah, 2016). Women demonstrate a strong sense of conviction and self-worth and generally have a more democratic, participative, and collaborative style of leading and are primarily concerned with empowering others and creating consensus (Cheung & Halpern, 2010).

The participants expressed a sincere interest in seeing students, educators, and communities succeed. The participants in this study were also unified by their commitment to learning, serving, and influencing others. On a personal level, all the participants are family-oriented and take on many hats including spouse and mother. In their own experiences, each participant demonstrated resilience, dedication, and perseverance both in their professional and their personal lives. Women superintendents possess many personal attributes that contribute to their success in the superintendency including tenacity, strong work ethic, integrity, communication skills, sound decision-making, multitasking, organization, taking initiative, concern for others, self-reflection, organization, time-management, confident, competent, and knowledgeable, honest, supportive, balancing home and professional lives, and life-long learning.

Consuelo urged that a superintendent must be a person of high integrity and who stands firm on his or her beliefs, values, and morals. “If there's ever a question of integrity, or you're ever asked to do something that goes against your values or your ethics, you have to know yourself. Know your values, know your worth. And don't let anything paralyze you. You have to be confident and know that as one door closes, another will open up.” Furthermore, she asserted that the priority of educators should always be students. “You have to know what you're willing

to stretch and what is non-negotiable. I know what drives me: children. Children will always come first."

**Challenges.** A first step to understanding this gender discrepancy is to identify the challenges that women face as they seek attainment of the superintendency. Underrepresentation, discrimination, lack of transparency in recruitment, promotion, and retention, disciplinary differences, mobility and location, gender pay gap, and issues of choice are well-known barriers that impede women from moving into leadership. Barriers such as these are thought to have an impact on women's leadership opportunities (Maranto et al., 2018).

For Symphany, the greatest challenge in her attainment of the superintendency was her perceived need to obtain a doctorate while raising a family. "I'm a mom, I have three girls, and I started the doctoral program when they were in 5th, 6th, and 8th grade. The 3 years of that were difficult for my family. It's very time-consuming. Just handling my personal life while being a high school principal and a Curriculum & Instruction Director, which are very heavy workloads." She was able to overcome her challenge with strong family and colleague support and personal time management skills. She had "the best husband in the world" and had a family who understood her and cheered her on. "Family support was especially important. I carried a backpack with my dissertation in it with me. Everywhere I went and sat -many softball tournaments- I worked on papers in between games, and timeouts. Whenever I had a chance to type I would type." She also planned with her colleagues to cover games and other school events so she could attend classes and complete her doctorate.

Cataleya's challenge was also completing her doctorate. On top of the demand of the workload, she had to make family sacrifices that affected the entire family. She detailed that she

and her “husband had to come to the conclusion” that they were “going to be separated.” She had conversations with her family and “they all held to their commitment and their support of” her while she completed her goal. Balancing work and family duties is a common barrier that women must overcome in their pursuit of the superintendency.

Veronica also struggled personally with balancing home and work life while earning her doctorate. She had to organize herself to make sure that she attended to her studies, her responsibilities at work, and her family. Knowing that her family would be proud of her once she completed her degree motivated her to see herself through. Cora prolonged her career path for approximately 15 years to spend as much time as possible with her children and her family. “You should never feel guilty about taking care of your personal responsibilities, taking care of your family, and taking care of your kids.”

Symphany’s greatest challenge as a superintendent, however, is the isolation of the job. “It's lonely at the top is the saying, and it's not necessarily lonely in terms of friendship, it's lonely in terms of having people you're looked to as the person that knows the answers, and the person that's going to solve all the problems. And it's lonely, in terms of not having someone, a colleague that does the same job as you within your same system.” Having mentors that you can trust is the way she tackled this challenge.

Some of the women detailed unique challenges in their attainment of the superintendency. Ari, for example, struggled with finding the right time to apply:

> Knowing when you're ready. Everybody needs to understand that leadership comes with time, it comes with experience, and it comes with credibility. That's how I feel on a personal level. I've always been one to say, I need to gain

> experience in this area. I need to gain credibility before I move on to the next level. Telling yourself, now, it's time. I've done all of this, and now I'm able to lead an entire district because I've done so much in my career. That's the most challenging part: knowing when you're ready to seek that superintendency. When you do it, and you get it, you better be ready. You better be ready.

Cora also experienced a unique challenge in her attainment of the superintendency that aspiring superintendents may not consider, but she shared some strategies to mitigate the challenge of feeling non-existent:

> I was no one. I just came out of the woodwork. No one, not even the search company, could vouch for me. They could speak for me in terms of my qualifications and all the experiences I've had, but they really couldn't promote me. In this field, it's about the people who promote you. Who's introducing you? Who's speaking about you? Who is giving you praises? Who is speaking about your accomplishments? All of those things matter. So, I overcame that by having a solid work history. I was able to speak to that. And using that as leverage in the interview process or the selection process. I think about how people can overcome if you've been an unknown, if you've been in the background, taking care of family, or if you've had to step away for personal reasons is to rely heavily on your work history and on your accomplishments, and on the ability to chronicle, document, and communicate that so it's always accessible and ready to go.

Veronica shared that her greatest professional challenge was losing a job to a less qualified man coworker. Her awareness that a man superintendent overlooked her raised a concern. “He

appeared to be threatened by women who would be able to not challenge him but would question things. He gave the position to a person that was not knowledgeable and caused a lot of chaos."

Only one superintendent detailed a specific job-related task as her greatest challenge. Consuelo faced a Reduction in Force (RIF) three times in her superintendent career. "Telling someone that they no longer have a job is the hardest thing to tell any individual." And especially explained that reducing staff due to loss of revenues, or loss of enrollment is the worst. "When you let someone go, you are also taking away the livelihood of an individual. It is very emotional." As daunting of a task as it is, Consuelo felt that it was her responsibility to inform her affected staff members. "This is something that I did not delegate. I was the one who informed those individuals." She overcame this challenge by learning to RIF based on a district analysis of programs and student outcomes which she feels is "the best, most logical and most efficient approach to determine how many teachers or staff need to be cut because you present data and it "removes the feeling that you are personally targeting a team or the individuals affected."

One reason for the lower representation of women in the superintendency is that many women, even today, are not as career oriented as men as other duties and tasks take precedence over a career such as family responsibilities (Parker, 2015). For Cora, factors such as being a wife and having children impacted her set timeline to becoming a superintendent by fifteen years. "You kind of set your personal goals aside and put your family's needs before your own. And I think that's unique to female leadership."

Each of the participants in this study shared some challenges they faced, but they enthusiastically shared the strategies and ways that they overcame them. Participants'

experiences indicate that resilience is needed as research consistently identifies gender bias, lack of career planning and career path, traditional gender role beliefs, lack of mentors and networks, limited mobility, family responsibilities, and the recruitment and selection processes as barriers to women's attainment of the superintendency (Connell et al., 2015; Ramaswami et al., 2010). Women have broken through the barriers and faced these challenges head-on to obtain top positions, an advancement that is attributed to the power of mentorship (Turner-Moffatt, 2019).

Theme 1: Women's Career Path to the Superintendency clearly emerged from the data. The categories that formulated this theme were 1) Influences, 2) Leadership, and 3) Challenges. Patterns in the four rounds of coding and analytic reflection were observed and formulated the category of Leadership which was subcategorized into 2a) Personal Attributes and 2b) Gender Disparity.

**Theme 2: Meaningful Mentorship is Imperative for Women**

Effective mentorships of women in the field are lacking in educational leadership (Muñoz, Pankake, et al., 2014). Research on mentoring has focused primarily on the importance of mentoring women due to the difficulties that women historically have experienced in gaining access to this position and negotiating through men-dominated, established professional networks. Women's outcomes in relation to leadership advancement might be attributed to limited opportunities for effective mentoring of women for leadership roles (Salkeld, 2016). Without meaningful mentorships, women are disadvantaged in making lasting networking relationships in the men-dominated leadership field which may hinder their advancement.

Two unique challenges in the workplace that mentors can help them overcome are lack of confidence and poor self-advocacy. Women often underestimate both their abilities and their

performance, and confidence can be established through meaningful mentorship. Women are happy to advocate for others, but they are often uncomfortable advocating for themselves. Through mentoring, women can become better advocates for themselves by taking part in exercises such as role-playing. Mentoring benefits often inspire women to become mentors to others (Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Most of the participants engaged in informal, primarily self-sought mentors and shared their experiences with mentorship.

Veronica described a meaningful mentorship as "comfortable and safe. It's like a safe network where you feel confident that any of your discussions will be treated confidentially and treated with respect. Knowing that you can just reach out to the minute any time is a big support." Cataleya affirms, "my mentorship experiences have allowed me to grow in areas that I may not have been able to grow in." Symphany describes her mentoring experiences as "positive, supportive, and reflective. Mentoring is the only way you can make it through. You have to have someone who has been in a similar role at a minimum, who sees things from the perspective that you are either seeing or that you need to see."

The essence of a mentoring relationship is that the mentor is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, and/or experience and is willing to share these to positively influence the protégé's career experiences (Janssen et al., 2018). Numerous researchers have advocated that women aspiring to top-level leadership roles in education should seek out mentors and build networks of people who can testify to their leadership capacity (Sperandio, 2015). Having a mentor and the amount of mentoring received are related to greater pay and more promotions (Welsh & Diehn, 2018).

***Benefits of and the Need for Mentorship***

Mentorship is seen and practiced in all occupational fields. Mentorship plays a significant role in developing confidence, leadership, and networking skills (Sherman et al., 2008). Mentorship is often the mechanism whereby continued encouragement is provided (Barrett et al., 2017). There is evidence that mentorship can enhance women's career opportunities. Mentorship has long been suggested to increase women representation in leadership roles (Parker, 2015). Greater access to mentorship for women may build up their self-efficacy (Cheung & Halpern, 2010).

Women leaders in an organization may have greater motivation to provide effective mentoring to other women to reduce barriers to advancement that they may have experienced earlier in their careers (Weinberg & Lankau, 2011). Having a mentor and the amount of mentoring received are related to greater pay and more promotions (Welsh & Diehn, 2018). Symphany had amazing mentors. She asserts:

> Mentoring is the only way you can make it through. You have to have someone who has been in a similar role at a minimum who sees things from the perspective that you are either seeing or that you need to see. There are things that happen that you need to talk through, and you need help understanding. 'Is this the decision-making process that I need to enter? Or is this the path that I want to take?'

Another participant elaborated on the need to latch on to a mentor. "I have several people in my immediate network that I reach out to when I have an issue. It is so incredibly important to have a professional mentor that you can have in your corner, on your shoulder, or in your back pocket that you can call at any time to open those doors and introduce you to people or take you to

conferences and invite you to present with them, invite you to become part of organizations, and to be that voice out there."

"Mentorship made all the difference in the world" to Cora. "Mentoring provides reassurance and a real sense of safety, which in turn, provides that confidence for you to keep going." She recalls two women that attained their first superintendency at the same time she did but who didn't quite make it through the year. She clearly remembers one of them because she was an African American superintendent in a neighboring school district who reached out to her for help securing another superintendent position. "One of the things I asked her was, 'why didn't you call earlier? Didn't you have somebody that you could call and get some help?' Because if you don't make it in that very first year, the chances of you trying to secure yet another position really go downhill fast." Without effective mentorships, women are disadvantaged in making lasting networking relationships in the men-dominated leadership field.

Some of the participants described the need for a mentor because "as you progress through the different layers of administration and reach the superintendency, there's nobody sometimes because you're very restricted in what you can share" and because "it's lonely in terms of not having many people that can fully relate to you or has had experience with the demands of the job." Having a mentor that you trust and who supports you can guide or coach you through whatever you are encountering at that level.

Retention, accountability, networking, and confidence are important benefits of mentorship. Mentorship gives women an avenue to articulate career ambitions and set goals to achieve them. Women in leadership roles can be strengthened through the power of mentorship. Women should take advantage of mentorship programs as they may open doors to new job opportunities

(Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Mentoring relationships have the potential for women leaders to make successful transitions into the role of superintendent and career advancement (Bynum & Young, 2015). Years after her mentoring relationship, Consuelo still attributes much of her success to the mentoring she received:

> He came from a different school of thought. He was older, more mature, but that only validated me. His lessons taught me to value the power of wisdom. So as a superintendent, he guided me, he mentored me, he coached me. From agenda to walkthroughs, he was very strategic. I owe my success, not only to my preparation through the superintendency program I was in, but I owe much of my success to the mentorship I got from him.

The benefits of a meaningful mentorship can last long after the mentoring relationship ends. Several of the women in this study detailed that they still put into practice some of the lessons they learned from their mentors at the beginning of their superintendency.

### *Formal vs. Informal Mentorship*

Mentorship can be distinguished into informal and formal mentoring. The extent of mentoring provided in formal relationships may be less than what occurs in informal mentoring relationships (Weinberg & Lankau, 2011). However, researchers argue that a formal mentoring program is preferred in which an established mentor-protege relationship has been assigned (Bynum, 2015).

One example of formal mentorship is the state's requirement to have new superintendents select a mentor. Ari shared her gratitude when she was able to select her self-sought mentor as her formal mentor. "There's a requirement when you become a superintendent, that in the first

year, you must have a mentor. As long as the person is on the state list, then you, as a superintendent, need to select your mentor. And so, I was thankful that my mentor was already on the list." Symphany also had positive experiences with informal mentors who seemed genuinely vested in her advancement:

> The mentors that I've had along the way weren't likely mentors. They were women who I respected because of the positions that they held, the work that they had done, their reputations, and the school districts they worked for. They were women who took the time to speak to the next generation of female leaders and encourage, probe, and ask questions like: Where are you going? What does your path look like? How are you going to get there?

Cataleya took the initiative to learn from her principal who she considers one of her mentors.

> She would allow me a lot of opportunities to get a front row seat of what she was doing administratively. Many of the experiences that I've had to deal with in this capacity were based on the mentorship that she allowed me, which built me up. She allowed me to present to the board, interact with staff, and plan convocations and other events. She empowered me.

Cora also engaged in self-sought, informal mentorship which she "latched onto" after he "naturally stepped into the role of mentor."

> I never had a professional or formal mentor, but when I shared with my superintendent in a neighboring district that I aspired to be a superintendent, he began to treat me differently in the sense that he began to mentor me and include me in the decisions and in the work. That made a huge difference.

Cora also recalls opening up to another superintendent who never reached out or opened doors for her.

Ari considered the mentors she had early in her career as role models more than mentors since she took the initiative to learn from them by observation.

> I wouldn't necessarily say that I had the mentorship. It really wasn't a mentorship. It was more of the role models that I had, as supervisors myself. I was blessed to have supervisors that were also great leaders, and whom I looked up to and aspired to be.

Like Cora, Ari recognizes that mentors, role models, or "great leaders don't even realize how they are inspiring the future leaders. They just do it because they're passionate and it's in their nature." But, as a superintendent, she acknowledges some of the more seasoned superintendents in her network as mentors. "I can definitely say that that mentorship is now something that has had a great impact on me. My fellow superintendents that have been in their role for many years, your veteran superintendents, have been great mentors to me."

Cora, on the other hand, genuinely enjoyed the formal mentorship she received through the superintendent academy in which she participated.

> He sent me weekly reflections, and I looked forward to that email on Sundays. Every month, he had a highlight for me. He made me reflect. He would ask questions. He became, not only my mentor but a coach and a good support mechanism. He was very strategic and detailed. He guided me to have a remarkably successful first year. That was very meaningful and powerful.

### *Mentorship Relationship and Roles*

Mentoring is typically described as an interpersonal relationship in which a more experienced or skilled person, the mentor, intentionally guides, supports, and counsels a less experienced or skilled person, the mentee, (Dickson et al., 2014). The relationships that develop between a mentor and mentee are aimed at improved role understanding, successful role transition, and completion of goals and objectives (Barrett et al., 2017). Mentors provide advice and guidance to their mentees by sponsoring them for growth opportunities, coaching, protecting them from adverse events, and providing challenging work assignments that increase the visibility and exposure of the mentees. Such guidance should result in mentee progress in the organization (Ahsan et al., 2018). Additionally, mentoring involves intensive involvement and shared commitment (Hackmann & Malin, 2018).

Symphany recalls being heavily mentored by her superintendent while she was an assistant superintendent. Her mentor taught her how to handle board relations, how to address construction issues, manage operations, and other superintendent responsibilities and job-related experiences. “The relationship was really grounded on the personal relationship that developed in terms of my personal professional goals - where I was headed, professionally.” Cora discussed the need for different mentors, particularly someone you can relate to on a personal level.

> I think you should have one close mentor for those personal things that happen like when people hurt your feelings, or people say something ugly about you on Facebook or social media, and you want to cry on somebody's shoulder. That's quite different from needing mentoring or trusted advice in a particular aspect of your job.

**Role of the Mentor**. A mentor can be described as one who teaches, coaches, advises, trains, directs, protects, sponsors, guides, and leads another individual or individuals (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). Mentors can help in many ways, but most mentors are credited with assisting in personal growth or by facilitating and guiding career or educational advancement (Muñoz, Pankake, et al., 2014; Ramaswami et al., 2010). Mentors hold mentees accountable and on track to achieve career goals.

According to Symphany, "a great mentor will ask you probing questions that will allow you to process information for yourself and lead you to a better decision-making process, and ultimately to a better decision." Cora expected her mentors to be able to communicate via phone, text, email, or meet face-to-face, and share resources. "If they don't have the resources or the help that I need, they should, in turn, know who to refer me to or have someone they can call for information." Cataleya believes that "a mentor should be the one cheering you on, being your cheerleader. But by the same token, not sugar-coating anything. If there's a gap, the mentor should be able to hold those crucial conversations." Ari gave examples of some of the questions mentors should ask. "What are your strengths? Where are your weaknesses? How are you going to address those weaknesses, and how can I, as your mentor, help you overcome those weaknesses?"

Collectively, the participants described a mentor as goal-oriented, available, respectful, wise, supportive, non-judgmental, collaborative, capacity-building, good listener, gives feedback, makes you feel comfortable and safe, provides opportunities for networking, flexible, makes sound decisions, and confident. It is important to empower and encourage women as they often face unique challenges in the workplace without the necessary tools to overcome them.

Participation in mentoring relationships and programs are excellent ways for women to acquire these tools. Mentors, whether they are men or women, should guide their mentees through struggles by sharing their knowledge and personal experiences (Turner-Moffatt, 2019).

**Role of the Mentee.** A mentee can be described as a person who is taught, coached, advised, trained, directed, protected, sponsored, guided, and led by another individual or individuals. A mentee will often have specific skills or competencies they want to learn from their mentor. The mentee should evaluate what he or she expects to gain from the mentorship. The mentee should take the initiative to foster a positive relationship which can be initiated by collaboratively establishing goals and meeting regularly to practice or learn new skills throughout the mentoring relationship.

Cora acknowledges that the mentee needs "to be able to nurture that relationship. You just can't pick up the phone when you only need people. You got to reciprocate. It's a two-way street, not just about taking but what can you give or contribute to the mentoring relationship as well. It goes both ways." Consuelo made it a point to set a schedule for regular communication with her mentor. "Contact was on a weekly basis via email, and we met once a month in person. Our mentorship lasted a school year."

Collectively, the participants described a mentee as someone who is reflective, communicative, seeks growth and improvement, a good listener, trusts, takes initiative, asks for support when needed, is receptive to criticism, respectful, open-minded, vulnerable, able to think critically, is a fast learner, takes advantage of opportunities, and shareful. Through their accounts, the women in this study communicated that it is the mentee's responsibility to find the right mentor and to maintain the mentoring relationship by frequently evaluating its effectiveness

and adjusting as needed. Figure 2 illustrates a Word Cloud representation of the participants' discussion of the role and effect of mentorship as informed by interview questions 2 and 3: (IQ2) What role did mentorship have in your pursuit of this top leadership position? and (IQ3) What effect has mentoring had on your career, particularly in your current position? The size of the font represents the frequency of the use of the word; words with the highest frequency are shown in the largest font.

**Figure 2**

*Word Cloud of the Participants' Discussion of the Role and Effect of Mentorship*


**Pay It Forward and Mentor Others.** Through mentoring, women can become better advocates for themselves by taking part in exercises such as role-playing. Mentoring benefits often inspire women to become mentors to others (Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Symphany encourages women who get to the next level to mentor other women:

> Be a mentor once you've made it to. Be someone to help reflect and be that reflective partner. Be whatever it is that the person needs. Make sure that you pay

> it forward. Everything that someone else has done for you, provide that support to someone else. That's one of my passions. It's why I have currently three female administrators working on their doctorates, and I'm heavily recruiting more. Somebody helped me get through that, and we have to help each other.

Cora is also a proponent of the advancement of women leadership. She explained that,

> I'm part of a founding group who encourages Hispanic administrators. To achieve equity, in education and accessibility to opportunities for our kids, we have to get the right leaders in place. We want to increase the number of women who get into the superintendency because we want to ensure that we have adequate representation.

Several other participants also promoted the idea of paying it forward by ensuring that women in leadership mentor other women. "I encourage you to not only find a mentor, and have a strong mentor relationship, but if you haven't already, identify who you're mentoring, who is it that you're going to help guide and support?" One participant believes that women leaders need to cross-regional lines to encourage each other. "Women need to help pay it forward, and help guide, and lead other women, to build a network of women who are successful superintendents - not just in our region, but across the state." Cataleya attempts to make a difference for others within her district. "I try to build what I'm working with. I know that my administrators and my peers have aspirations. I try to give them opportunities the way I was given opportunities to be in the front row and listen and be part of difficult scenarios or even part of celebrations."

Based on the numbers of women with graduate and postgraduate degrees and the number of women holding superintendent certificates, more women should be in leadership roles and have a more powerful presence in top leadership. If women are not empowered to be a part of the

leadership in an organization, then that organization is missing workers who could help it flourish. Women in leadership should not be expected to single-handedly change the culture and values of their workplace. A more effective strategy to increase influence and capitalize on the opportunities they deserve is to find allies and mentors within their organizations.

Women leaders should be empowered through mentoring partnerships (Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Theme 2: Meaningful Mentorship is Imperative for Women clearly emerged from the data. The categories that formulated this theme were a) Benefits of and Need for Mentorship, b) Formal vs. Informal Mentorship, and c) Mentorship Relationship and Roles. Patterns in the four rounds of coding and analytic reflection that were observed in the latter category were subcategorized as a) Role of the Mentor, b) Role of the Mentee, and c) Pay It Forward and Mentor Others.

**Theme 3: Importance of Networking**

Networking emerged in the literature as one of the major needs in attracting and retaining quality school leaders; furthermore, a lack of professional networking for women limits opportunities for them to work and meet with coworkers and mentors who can provide honest reflection and guidance (Raskin et al., 2010). Consuelo acknowledged that the support she received through networking in both her academic program and in her job proved effective in attaining the superintendency. “I’ve been very fortunate to have been part of a well-rounded program that provided a lot of coaching, modeling, and strong support. I have also had good, strong networking in my job which has provided tremendous opportunities for guidance, support, mentorship, and coaching which led me to the superintendency.”

It is necessary to be aware that the position of the superintendency is, in itself, a limited, tight network. Ari suggests that, as superintendents, one must take initiative to collaborate with others. “I'm always going to look to my fellow colleagues for support, for collaboration. I think that's key. We should never isolate ourselves or be an island to ourselves. Yes, it's lonely at the top, but that’s why networking and mentorship are extremely important.” Similarly, Cora understands that it is essential that superintendents and aspiring superintendents extend to others. “I have several key people that I reach out to because all the training in the world doesn't really prepare you for what you actually do on the job. So, when you get that first job, you've got to make sure you've got a good support network to keep you in that job.”

“Networking is huge,” Veronica affirms. “You can't do it alone. You definitely need somebody to lean on about different things.” Ari relies on her colleagues or fellow superintendents as well. “I need that support and affirmation. I need to know what others are doing to see if what I'm doing is the right thing to do. Those with ten years in have lived through things I haven't, and I've been through some unique situations as a 3- year superintendent that, perhaps, a superintendent of ten years never had.” Networking has also proven effective for Veronica. “I look for people with strengths and different experiences so I can reach out to them when wondering about fulfilling a certain task or whenever I want to get that second opinion or affirmation.”

### *Connect With Others and Make Yourself Known*

Women are being allowed to continue to develop their skills and grow their network and to have an example of the possibilities that are out there for them (Turner-Moffatt, 2019).

Consuelo understands the value of networking but also warns of the political nature of the superintendency.

> For better or for worse, we are in positions of political leadership. You have to learn to network, to collaborate, to know that you cannot work on an island. The superintendency entails working with an entire community, with the city, with the county, with all stakeholders and working in partnership and collaboration. That's critical. These components can be ugly at times when it's political. But that's our reality.

Connecting with coworkers at all levels of the company is important. This may lead to additional networking and mentorship opportunities. Veronica connects with people within her district and in neighboring districts for honest feedback. "I'm able to text them or call them at any time and ask them anything, and they'll give it to me straight, be real with me. I like that. At the same time, they ask me things. So, it's a 2-way street."

Cora encourages going beyond the traditional, in-person networking and taking advantage of social media platforms to connect with others and make yourself known. "Social media is huge for people who are applying for jobs. Search companies go out and actually look at what is being posted on social media accounts, what other people are posting about you, and whether or not you have community support. This is a piece to overcome being an unknown."

### *Marketability and the Power of Professional Organizations*

Improving higher education leadership capacity is one response to overcoming the barriers and challenges that women face when moving into leadership roles (White & Burkinshaw, 2019). Though more highly educated, women have unequal access to the superintendency. In addition to superintendent certification, doctoral degrees are perceived as requirements for

women. However, the gender disparities in the superintendency are not due to women lacking educational credentials, and the number of women certified is not proportional to the number of women selected for superintendent positions. Women hold more degrees and certifications and have more experience and skills to successfully lead a district. Women now earn 77% of all education-related master's degrees and 68% of all education-related doctoral degrees (White, 2021).

Eighty-three percent of the women ($n$ = 5) women in the study earned their doctorate before attaining their first superintendency. Cora shared that she knew that it was not a requirement and detailed that it improves marketability as it sends a clear message to the board:

> Having that doctoral degree gives you an edge. And it demonstrates not so much that you have the degree, it demonstrates to the board that's going to hire you as a superintendent, that you were disciplined and that you were dedicated to a goal to a task. For people who attain doctoral degrees, it's not about intelligence, because you're going to continue learning throughout your life, it's about having the discipline to see a doctoral degree through and attaining it and saying, I did it.

Cataleya started her doctoral program after twenty years of being in the same district and she didn't pursue the superintendency until after she completed her academic and certification program. Similarly, Veronica did not earn her doctorate until she was fifty years old. She felt that it was something that she just had to do:

> People ask why, but I'm so grateful that I did it. I really enjoyed the experience. I didn't rush through it. I took like, two classes a semester, maybe, and I would have gotten it sooner or later. I know that I got everything I could from really taking in the full

> experience - really networking with peers in my cohort, really reading those articles and finding some patterns, and putting them in places where I know and can refer to them at any time.

Ari, who does not have a doctorate, sees that "other people are getting positions faster because they have their doctorate. It just really helps them become superintendents. The more experience you have, the better."

Joining professional organizations is also beneficial to women who aspire the superintendency. Cora recalls not having a mentor when she was a principal. As a superintendent now, she believes that mentorship earlier in her career would have opened opportunities that she did not experience until later in her career. "Because I didn't have a mentor as a principal, I did not get exposed to the right things. I didn't have anyone encourage me to be a part of [state] organizations or attend their conferences."

One participant encourages directors and principals to join professional organizations that will help them stay current with what's happening in their field. "Join organizations where you see yourself going next. Because any professional development that you get is just going to make you better at your job. This, in turn, is going to make you provide a better service for all your stakeholders. Leadership affects instruction, and that is what we're about." Cataleya was exposed to TASA when she was finishing her doctorate. She attended an aspiring superintendent academy during their Midwinter conference. She was assigned a mentor who encouraged her to apply and guided her until she attained her first superintendency. "TASA is an amazing organization. I learned so much from my mentor." Veronica also attended a TASA conference and returned inspired to change the face of the men-dominated face of superintendency in the state.

As a superintendent, Cora secured district funds to ensure that all of her principals and directors join and participate in professional organizations. “I tell them, ‘You’re going to attend conferences. If you don't attend every year, put yourself on a cycle that you're going to attend every other year and get that exposure.’ There is a return on investment because involvement in organizations like TASA or TALAS builds leadership capacity.”

### *Important Same-Gender Support*

Gender segregation at the very top of the K-12 public education workforce remains salient. Women still make up only one quarter (26%) of K-12 public school district superintendents even though America’s public K-12 education workforce is dominated by women’s (77%) of K-12 public school teachers, and more than half of all principals are women (White, 2021). The underrepresentation of women leaders in top positions could be the reason same-gender mentorships are not sought. Women superintendents who have had positive mentoring experiences mentioned the importance of having a women mentor and an established support system (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014).

Some of the women who experienced same-gender support or mentorship as they ascended to the superintendency shared the positive impact of the supportive relationships. Cataleya recognized that it was the guidance and support she received from her women principal that built leadership capacity in her. “I learned so much from her. She trusted me with important tasks during my practicum and modeled for me what a mentor should be.”

Women mentors bring a wealth of insight to entry-level management [mentees] regarding the necessary characteristics and behaviors to succeed in a chief-level position (Salkeld, 2016). Symphany promotes same-gender support. “I always encourage women to support each other.

Because other women have supported me, I should support you and help you in any way possible to make sure that you can be successful, too." Ari considers herself blessed. "I had a lot of female role models in my 27 years of education, and I aspire to be like them. They inspired me to keep pursuing an administrative position all the way to the superintendency."

Women who establish trusting relationships with other women and negotiate understanding and meaningful interactions achieve a greater sense of fulfillment. Same-gender mentoring relationships with women are characterized by authenticity, empathy, engagement, empowerment, companionship, collaboration, connectedness, mutuality, and trust. Women who aspire to the superintendency should seek impactful mentorship relationships with other women in the profession.

### *Strong Support Systems for Yourself and Supporting Others*

A unifying experience shared by each of the women in this study is that they leaned on their support systems when they faced personal and career challenges and setbacks. Symphany acknowledges that the support she received from her family and her colleagues was instrumental to her success. "I had the most amazing husband and assistant principal at the time. They took care of things at home and on campus when I was unable to due to my coursework. Having the support I needed allowed me the flexibility to ensure I met the demands of my academic and career goals."

When Cataleya felt she was losing herself trying to balance her personal and professional life, her support system motivated her not only to finish but also to be a strong support for others. "I am so thankful for the people that supported me, the people that influenced me the most and set me on the path. They saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. Now I try to build other

people up like that." She elaborated that it was her family who kept her grounded and kept her on track by holding her accountable.

Most of the participants regarded support as imperative. "Having a family and a supervisor who understands that you will miss important events and who takes the slack for your absence was what got me through. Cora recalled the challenging time in her life when she was recently divorced and had to move across the state with her three children. "It was a very brave thing to do, but I knew that if anything would go wrong, I could call my parents or my siblings to come pick me up. Now I am able to be that bridge of support for my staff and my family." There are immeasurable benefits to establishing strong support systems in your personal and professional life. Incidentally, it may be equally rewarding to be a source of support for others as well.

Theme 3: Importance of Networking clearly emerged from the data. The categories that formulated this theme were 1) Connecting with Others & Make yourself Known, 2) Marketability and the Power of Professional Organizations, 3) Impactful Same-gender Support, and 4) Strong Support Systems for Yourself and Supporting Others. Patterns in the four rounds of coding and analytic reflections were observed and formulated the categories that emerged in the data.

**Theme 4: Key Factors for Attainment and Best Practices for Upholding**

Women who are successful in the superintendency have learned to cope with gender bias, work-family balance, societal and political pressures, and the lack of mentorship opportunities for women. However, women superintendents focus on their strengths and establish themselves as leaders. Women superintendents are perceived to have a purpose that is centered on serving

and influencing their community (Marina & Fonteneau, 2012). Consuelo's commitment to students started at the onset of her educational career. “I will always put children first. Even if there is an inconvenience for adults, including myself, I will always put students first.” Although students should be at the heart of every educator, Consuelo outlines the three most important aspects of district leadership; “management of your finances, staff, and operations; instructional leadership with a focus on student outcomes; and student learning as it is the drive of every educational organization.”

Three key components to women in the superintendency are networking with other people, staying current in the field, and leading by servant leadership (Kelsey et al., 2014). Factors such as motivation, abilities, and opportunities aim to raise women’s self-awareness of their leadership identity, develop academic leadership, increase confidence, and teach proactive strategies to seek support in advancing in leadership positions (Knipfer et al., 2016). Cora shared that self-awareness is crucial for an aspiring superintendent. “You have to be cognizant of yourself, of how you carry yourself, and of how you come across to others because it is so critically important to the community that you are going to serve.”

Mentorship and the ability to network are key factors in women’s attainment and success in the superintendency. Women leaders who engage in either formal or informal mentoring relationships, particularly with other mentors, increase their access to the top positions and overall success upon attaining the position (Sampson & Gresham, 2017; Welsh & Diehn, 2018). Essential elements of a successful mentoring relationship, mutuality, trust, and empathy were hypothesized to produce positive developmental outcomes. In trusting and connected relationships, aspiring women superintendents feel safe to express their feelings and receive

feedback from their mentors, contributing to improvements in their development (Williamson et al., 2019).

### *Advice for Women Seeking the Superintendency*

Participants in the study were asked to reflect upon their lived experiences and share details about personal factors, influences, career paths, barriers, challenges, and support systems as relevant to their attainment and upholding of the superintendency. Although each of the participants freely and enthusiastically shared advice throughout their interview, they were particularly interested in the final question which invited them to offer advice to women who aspire to become superintendents. The narratives of the women superintendents, each told through a personal lens, resulted in a rich description of their experience as superintendents. Because of the rich nature of the advice that was shared, the data that informed this category are presented by participants' responses. An intersectional mini-summary of the advice given to aspiring woman superintendents is illustrated in a Venn Diagram in Figure 3 following the presentation of the rich transcription of the data.

**Symphany.** I would advise that they find a mentor, identify a support system to get the position and that they rely on other women to help them through it. I always encourage women to support each other and then once you obtain the next level, be available as a mentor. Make sure that you pay it forward. Everything that someone else has done for you, provide that support to someone else. Women have a lot to offer, and it has nothing to do with gender more so than whether or not you can be an effective leader.

**Cataleya.** Don't let the fact that education is still very much a male-dominated, "good ole boy" field deter you. Don't let that make you feel less because you've probably done more than

your male counterparts. Just be cognizant of that and get that thick skin go for it. Get that superintendency if you really want it.

**Cora.** Get a mentor but get the right type of mentoring. And don't just get one. I think you've got to have one that's your bosom buddy as a female - someone who knows your trigger points emotionally. I think that's important to have. Now I'm not talking about just a friend but a good mentor who can help you work through those things because we all have personality quirks. Find a mentor who is not afraid to tell you, “You blew it, you let your temper get the best of you, you didn't use the right choice of words, you really need to change your wardrobe, or you really need to go easy on the makeup.” I mean, someone who can be honest on just all sorts of things. I bite my tongue so many times with women, especially if I don't know them.

You have to be cognizant of yourself, of how you carry yourself, and of how you come across to others because it is so critically important to the community that you are going to serve. You need a mentor who can address all of those personal things with you. You need another mentor that is going to keep you current with what's happening in your field, someone who can stick to keep you abreast of what's happening with conferences, or meetings or, or network meetings, sessions that may be happening webinars and may be coming up. There's so much that you want to stay current with. And then you want somebody else that you can kind of call when you're ready to apply for that job, someone who can help you through that process. In interviews, you've got to get to your point, and you've got to be succinct. You can have all the knowledge in the world, but if you can't be concise and succinct and make an impact with your statement, you're going to lose your job and the ability to connect with people.

I guess the other piece of advice I would tell women is to take care of their finances and

to be aware of what's happening with their money. You should always have money in reserve so that if there's ever a question of integrity, or you're ever asked to do something that goes against your values or your ethics, you have enough money in the bank to say, “I'm sorry, this job is not going to be for me, I need to step away from it.” And have a savings to be able to sustain yourself for at least three to six months. I think my biggest piece of advice for women is to have a good, expansive network of people that you have a relationship with. And you've got to be able to nurture that relationship. You just can't pick up the phone when you only need people. You got to reciprocate. It's a two-way street, not just about taking but what can you give or contribute to the mentoring relationship as well. It goes both ways. Don't lose sight of the goal and celebrate other women.

**Ari.** Don't give up. If you feel that you were made for that role, and you feel you're ready, then do it. Seek it out and don't give up. Don't give up because you're going to have a lot of competition. You're going to have a lot of male competition. Don't be discouraged. Don't expect to get the first position that you apply for or even the second position that you apply for. But just continue to strive for that if that's what you truly want. If you truly feel you're ready for it, don't be discouraged by not getting the first position, or the second position, or even the third position, because that's just the way it works. Sometimes that position is meant for somebody else because that's just how the system works, without saying too much. There are a lot of districts who hire based on just finding the right person, not based on politics, and not based on gender.

**Consuelo.** Women who aspire to be a superintendent need to understand that, whether you like it or not, our jobs are political. You have to work with seven or five board members, and even if you make the best recommendations, the best decisions, you are at the mercy of those

board members. And the magic number is always going to be four or the majority. That was the biggest lesson for me. But you have to know your values. You have to know what you're willing to stretch and what is non-negotiable. I know what drives me: children - children will always come first. Other non-negotiables for me are dignity or respect towards each other. That is critical.

You need to know that our jobs are political in nature. For better or for worse, we are in positions of political leadership. You have to learn to network, to collaborate, to know that you cannot work on an island. The superintendency entails working with an entire community, with the city, with the county, with all stakeholders and working in partnership and collaboration. That's critical. They can be ugly at times when it's political. But that's our reality. Know that each of your seven board members have their own political connections. And sometimes that can be great, but sometimes it could be awful. You just have to know and be true to your values, your ethics, and your non-negotiables.

I will share one thing at a personal level. As you get into the career you have more wisdom, more knowledge, more expertise. But what no one shared with me, and I discovered on my own, is that you don't have to wait to be bold and courageous. People say that they get bolder when they get close to retirement. No, you don't have to wait. You have to be bold and courageous. Know your priorities or you can be paralyzed. You'll second-guess yourself. You won't be firm. This has changed my perspective. I just realized that I need to wait till the end of my career to be bold. I'm not saying that I'm perfect or that I am full of myself. But I know that I have added value to this district during my tenure, or even in the past year. Be confident about that. You don't have to wait to gain experience to know your worth and your value.

Don't get paralyzed. Don't let fear paralyze you. I wasted time and energy on my first superintendency. My daughter in middle school taught me this. She said, "Mom, I don't see you happy? I don't see you happy at all. I don't mind eating flour tortillas and rice, but I want you to be happy." So that has been profound. I've embraced it. So, I tell anyone right now, you have to know yourself. Know your values, know your worth. And don't let anything paralyze you. You have to be confident and know that as one door closes, another will open up.

**Veronica.** Don't give up. Don't rush it either. Enjoy the journey because from your journey is where you're going to empower yourself with wisdom to be able to distribute as a leader. If you rush through things and not pay attention to some of those little things that really end up meaning a lot, then you're going to regret it. You know where you're going, and it just makes you that much more fulfilled as the superintendent because you're not rushing through it. Enjoy your family and enjoy your friends, because, in the end, they're the ones who will be there for you all the time.

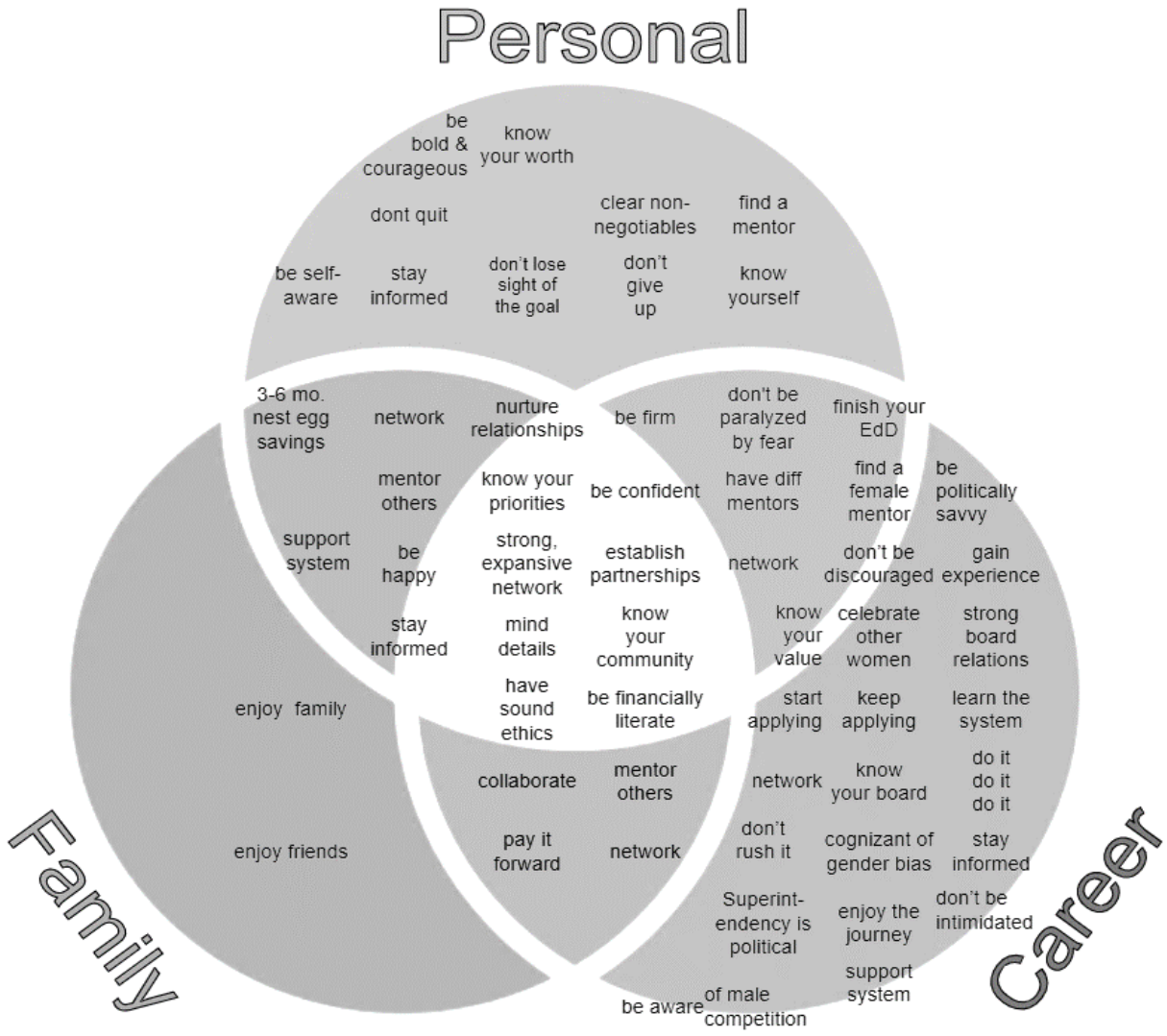
Don't give up. Do it, do it, do it. I know some people who started out with me in the cohort that didn't finish it. And they regret it. So many times, they'll say, I should have finished. I should have done it - especially when there's still trying to get positions and other people are getting positions because they have their doctorate. It just really helps them become superintendents. The more experience you have, the better. Some people try to be a superintendent like right off the bat. They'll go teach two years and be a principal or assistant principal another two years, and then they think they can be a superintendent - which is okay; but you want people to take you seriously. Believe it or not, experience and wisdom do help a lot. It's not just about the doctorate, it's about knowing that the person you're talking to has really lived

through some of the things that they're stressing out about right now. Especially right now with education.

Theme 4: Key Factors for Attainment and Best Practices for Upholding clearly emerged from the data. The category that formulated this theme was Advice for Women Seeking the Superintendency. Figure 3 depicts a Venn Diagram of the intersectional mini-summary of the advice given to aspiring woman superintendents by the participant of this study. The advice was summarized and organized into its respective aspect of life, Personal, Career, or Family.

**Figure 3**

*Intersectionality of the Advice Given to Aspiring Woman Superintendents*




*Note.* This original model was created by Chavarin, A. in July 2022, summarizing the advice offered to aspiring women superintendents by the participants of the 2022 study, "Women Superintendents' Mentoring Experiences and Attainment of the Superintendency."

### *Discrepant Data*

Identifying and analyzing discrepant data is an essential part of assessing a proposed conclusion (Creswell, 2014). Discrepant cases are cases that do not support or contradict emerging patterns, explanations, or themes. I attempted to avoid pitfalls of qualitative data analysis such as (a) failing to analyze the data by stringing data extracts together; (b) paraphrasing, making the questions from the interview guide analytic themes, including themes that do not make sense, overlap too much, or including data that do not support the research claims; or (c) supporting other claims (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

There were differences in women superintendent's responses to the interview questions, which could be possibly explained by the differences in personal characteristics, educational and life experiences, career path taken, school district demographics and geographic location, support systems, and other factors. However, there were no significant discrepant cases in this study. The interview data, archival data, and analytic memos were examined repeatedly to identify and understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work.

## Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the ways researchers can affirm their study's findings are faithful to participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Having a trustworthy study cannot be achieved by using specific, technical strategies; however, there are methods researchers use to increase the trustworthiness of their study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative researchers commonly accept the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability because these concepts aid researchers with visualizing, engaging with, and planning for the

many aspects of trustworthiness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I ensured trustworthiness by using the following steps to analyze these data:

1. Reading and rereading each interview transcript and analytic memo line-by-line and word-for-word to ensure that the text was captured for clear understanding.
2. Employing the inductive approach to open coding as well as in vivo coding using the participants' own words to identify patterns that emerged from the data and formulate potential categories.
3. Analyzing each category to create short phrases to identify themes that emerged; and Synthesizing themes as needed (Saldaña, 2016).

**Credibility**

Trustworthiness of the results is essential for any research to be credible. The internal validity, which establishes credibility, can be implemented through strategies such as triangulation, member checking, multiple coding, discussing negative cases, having peer debriefers, and such (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 188). Appropriate strategies described in Chapter 3 to establish credibility were followed. In this study, credibility was established through reflexivity and triangulation. Generalizing, or the use of inductive logic to generalize these concepts to themes and relating the themes to the research questions, will not only establish credibility but may also allow me to discover social change implications of the data as prescribed for all students engaged in research at Walden University (Walden University, 2017).

Proper methods for interviewing participants and collecting and analyzing data were followed. Only individuals who met the participant criteria received an email with an invitation to participate and a request for consent. Each participant granted consent and completed a pre-

interview questionnaire about demographics and background information. NVivo 12 Plus data analysis software was used only to store and organize the data resulting from the interviews and the analytic memos which were manually coded using an inductive approach and in vivo coding. Credibility was ensured through triangulation and member checking (Burkholder et al., 2016).

## Member Checking

Researchers use member checking to validate the results of the study, which ensures credibility (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Researchers use member checks to check in with participants in a study to assess and challenge the researcher's interpretations and accuracy of the analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Participants were allowed to corroborate the interview and archived data collected with the analysis of the findings. Changes suggested by the participants related to the findings would be included as appropriate; however, no changes were requested.

### *Triangulation*

Researchers use triangulation to verify evidence from two or more sources to confirm the themes drawn, which contributes to the study's credibility (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, I collected and triangulated data from three distinct sources – interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, and analytic memos. I used one data set (archival data) to corroborate the findings of another data set (interview data) to triangulate the data to increase the credibility and accuracy of my findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## Transferability

Transferability, or external validity, is how qualitative studies can be applicable, or transferable, to broader contexts while still maintaining their context-specific richness. The purpose of transferability in qualitative protocols is to ensure other researchers can replicate the

research in varied circumstances to continue to study the phenomenon. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated transferability should be the goal in qualitative research in which qualitative studies can apply to larger contexts. Appropriate strategies described in Chapter 3 to establish transferability were followed. Transferability was established by purposeful selection across the population of women superintendents of public K-12 school districts who are not interim or retired. The selection process yielded 36 potential participants of which nine granted consent but only six completed the pre-interview questionnaire and were interviewed.

Another strategy that was used for external validity was a thick description. A thick, rich description established transferability and was important to transfer the findings of the study. Rich, thick description is describing the context (background information), sample and population, and circumstance. The description of the setting provided a clear context of the research, which allowed anyone unfamiliar with the research to comprehend the context of the study and the research. Sufficient information about the participants' years of experience, degree of education, teaching and administrative experience, and duration in current superintendency; thus, enabling readers to draw their own interpretations or conclusions of these data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The participant selection offered a range of women superintendents' experiences. While researchers may argue that case studies that focus on a particular group are not easily transferable, there is a lack of understanding of how mentoring influences women's attainment of the superintendency. It is important to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work. Using thick descriptions to

adequately demonstrate the findings through the interview responses and evidence found in the literature will demonstrate the transferability of the study (Burkholder et al., 2016)

**Dependability**

Dependability is the stability of the data over time which can be achieved by triangulation and sequencing of methods and by creating a well-articulated rationale for these choices (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Appropriate strategies described in Chapter 3 to establish dependability were followed. Dependability was established by documenting the data collection and data analysis processes used in the study. The use of triangulation was for dependability in using multiple data sources from interview responses, questionnaire responses, and analytic memos. Maintaining a journal of personal notes and thinking during the process of the study provided reliability to monitor reflections through an audit trail, which also enhances dependability and confirmability (Burkholder et al., 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In this study, data were triangulated or collected through multiple sources including interviews, a questionnaire, and archival data.

**Confirmability**

One goal of confirmability is to acknowledge and explore the ways that our biases and prejudices map onto our interpretations of data and to fully mediate those possible through structured reflexivity processes (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Confirmability considers the objectivity in the research and looks to disassociate any bias the researcher may have (Burkholder et al., 2016). Confirmability aims to recognize and identify how our biases and prejudices may influence our interpretations of the data. Appropriate strategies described in Chapter 3 to establish confirmability were followed. Confirmability was established by the continuous reflection of the research process known as reflexivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Reflexivity was employed to detail researcher bias and to increase objectivity.

While engaged in data collection and analysis, I will constantly be mindful of my role as a researcher and any personal thoughts on the topic to mitigate those thoughts and keep an open mind to allow myself the ability to change beliefs and adapt to what the data may reveal. I reflected on my personal bias throughout the data collection process and represented the information as accurately as possible and devoid of interpretation. The integrity of the interview process was maintained by recording the participant interviews. Validity in qualitative research is how the researcher can confirm that the findings are authentic to the participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used various methods that met the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria of a trustworthy study to ensure validity.

## Ethical Procedures

Researchers have the responsibility to ensure ethical concerns are considered before conducting a research study. Ethical issues were possible with this study as I am a woman who aspires to be a superintendent in the future. Appropriate strategies described in Chapter 3 to safeguard and manage ethical procedures were followed. To effectively manage the potential ethical and bias issues that could arise through this process, I maintained and repeatedly reviewed each interview transcript, kept analytic memos, and retained as much formality through the process as possible (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Researchers have the responsibility to ensure ethical concerns are considered before conducting a research study. I ensured that the participants were clearly informed of the study and the data that was used, along with how their privacy was protected.

Specific ethical considerations arise for all research involving human subjects (Yin, 2018). Training is a necessary step in conducting case study research. In preparation to design and conduct an ethical study, I successfully completed CITI Program's "Human Subjects Research" training course on March 16, 2017, and the "Doctoral Student Researchers" training course on May 4, 2020. This study was conducted with special care and sensitivity. Written consent was obtained following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval of the research.

Audio recordings and interview transcripts have been safely kept in password-protected files that will be permanently deleted 5 years after the study is concluded. Throughout the study and in the publishing of the dissertation in ProQuest, confidentiality was ensured when reporting all results (Burkholder et al., 2016). Due to the relatively small sample population and location of the case study, it was crucial to protect the participants' identity and related data to ensure full participation, disclosure, and belief sharing. Pseudonyms were used for each participant and for any school districts or names that were shared during the interview to ensure the confidentiality of all parties and school districts that are the host of the case study

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work. Research is not clear on how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency. The research questions explored how women superintendents describe mentorship experiences in their careers and how women superintendents describe the influences of their experiences in relation to their attainment of superintendency. The findings provide a further understanding of the perceived influence of mentorship for women superintendents.

This study found that women superintendents perceived their mentorship experiences were influential in their attainment of the superintendency. Participants expressed and the data supported that formal and informal mentorship experiences have an impact on a woman's career path to the superintendency. Women's mentoring experiences and their perception of their attainment of the superintendency were also influenced by internal stimuli such as personal goals, external influences like academic or certification programs, leadership opportunities, the known gender disparity in the position, personal attributes, and challenges faced. The data also depicted the importance of networking and seeking same-gender support. The study also found key factors for the attainment of the superintendency and best practices for upholding the position.

In Chapter 5, the purpose and nature of the study will be restated, and I will concisely summarize the key findings in the introductory section. The chapter will include the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, implications including the potential impact for positive social change, and recommendations for practice. I summarize the next chapter with a conclusion that captures the key essence of the study.

# Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I present in this chapter a discussion of the findings and conclusions, starting with the purpose and nature of the study, and a concise summary of key findings in the introductory section. Included is my interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, implications including the potential impact for positive social change, and recommendations for practice. I summarize this chapter with a conclusion that captures the key essence of the study.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work. Existing research was not clear on how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency. I wanted to understand how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency by analyzing the experiences of women superintendents who work in school districts. Data from the narratives tell the story behind women's leadership and offer a compelling description of how women's mentoring experiences influenced their rise to the superintendency. The findings provide a further understanding of the perceived influence of mentorship for women superintendents. The findings may bring attention to the evaluation or creation of mentoring programs for women who aspire the superintendency position.

The findings demonstrated that regardless of how different their lives were, the participants shared many of the same mentoring experiences. Women superintendents who participated in this study were at different ages, stages, and comfort levels in their careers; however, each exhibited tenacity, strong work ethic, integrity, communication skills, sound decision-making, ability to multitask and balance personal, family, and professional duties,

organization, initiative, concern for others, self-reflection, organization, time-management, confidence, competence, knowledge, honesty, support, and a passion for life-long learning while breaking glass ceilings, shattering stereotypes, bulldozing through set and perceived barriers, and blazing a trail for others to travel. The findings indicate that women superintendents perceived their mentorship experiences were influential in their attainment of the superintendency. Participants expressed that formal and informal mentorship experiences have an impact on a woman's career path to the superintendency. Internal influences such as personal goals, external influences like academic or certification programs, leadership opportunities, the known gender disparity in the position, personal attributes, and challenges faced all contributed to each woman's participation in the superintendency. The findings also depicted the importance of networking and seeking same-gender support. Key factors for the attainment of the superintendency and best practices for upholding the position were identified.

## Interpretation of the Findings

Participants' responses were analyzed and interpreted for greater meaning. Thematic analysis revealed insight into understanding the research questions on a deeper level. I drew conclusions through notetaking, coding, categorizing, theme identification, and writing based on the data. Findings in this study added knowledge regarding the influence of mentoring on women's attainment of the superintendency. I analyzed the data using the conceptual framework of constructivism associated with the developmental network perspective (Brass, 1995; Chanland & Murphy, 2018; Debrow et al., 2012; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Ibarra & Andrews, 1993; Kram, 1983). The research questions that guided this study were:

*RQ1*. How do women superintendents describe mentorship experiences in their careers?

*RQ2.* How do women superintendents describe the influences of these experiences in their attainment of superintendency?

The primary themes that emerged from the data included: a) women's career path to the superintendency, b) meaningful mentorship is imperative for women, c) importance of networking, and d) key factors for attainment and best practices for upholding, all of which were important and central to this study. Themes a, b, and c informed RQ1, and Themes c and d informed RQ2.

**Findings Related to Research Questions**

With an awareness of the gender disparity within the superintendency, women who have attained the position were intentional about breaking set and perceived barriers. The shortage of mentoring has been cited as one of the reasons for women's lack of advancement in leadership (Bynum, 2015). Two of the most influential factors in women's attainment to the superintendency were earning a doctoral degree and meaningful mentorships. Mentorship is critical to women superintendents' overall day-to-day success (Salazar-Montoya & Kew, 2020). Most women superintendents engaged in meaningful mentoring experiences in their ascent to the position and to hold the superintendency. Engaging in meaningful mentoring relationships is critical. Mentoring relationships experienced by superintendent women were mostly informal and self-sought. Through their accounts, the women in this study took the initiative to find a mentor that would guide them through their ascension to the superintendency. Women looked for desirable leadership traits and characteristics as well as successful track records in the superintendents and supervisors they selected as mentors.

Mentoring relationships that proved most impactful in a woman's career path were flexible and guided by the needs, interests, goals, and personalities of the mentor and mentee. Mutual trust was required in meaningful mentoring relationships which strengthened over time. The mentoring and professional development components should last over several years as mentees take advantage of opportunities to learn from experienced education leaders (Hayes & Burkett, 2020). The strength of the mentoring relationship was parallel to the frequency of the communication, or the support provided varied throughout the mentoring relationship. This means that women perceived to have a stronger mentoring relationship with mentors whom they were in constant communication with. Mentors and mentees have distinct roles and characteristics in the mentoring relationship. However, it is the role of the mentee to nurture the mentoring relationship. Mentoring involves intensive involvement and shared commitment (Hackmann & Malin, 2018). Having a genuine interest in and commitment to the mentee's growth was consistent in mentoring relationships perceived as meaningful. Women perceived that mentoring provided an array of benefits but gaining field-based experience and opportunities for networking were considered most valuable in their attainment of the superintendency.

Although formal mentoring programs are available in higher education, research typically has addressed informal relationships because they are considered more effective (Hackmann & Malin, 2018). Informal mentoring relationships are an approach that can offer more benefits than formal mentoring relationships (Bynum, 2015). The participants disclosed that there were benefits to having a mentor. The benefits ranged from the relief of having a sounding board they can trust to feeling more confident as they took on challenging tasks and to crediting the attainment of the superintendency to the guidance, support, and networking they received from

the mentoring relationships they had. All the participants' mentoring experiences were overall positive and advantageous in women's attainment of the superintendency.

Mentoring gives women access to new skills and competencies that help them to build the confidence necessary to be an effective and successful leader (Turner-Moffatt, 2019). Women must be mentored by other women who are sensitive to their unique experiences. Aspiring women superintendents must take the initiative to seek mentorship if mentorship is not readily available or offered. Mentoring relationships can shape women's growth and potential in school leadership by boosting confidence and developing a sense of connection and identity as a leader (Bynum & Young, 2015). Some mentoring relationships, when nurtured over time, transformed into close, personal friendships, had a lasting impact, and influenced women superintendents to become mentors to others, particularly to women who are interested in attaining the superintendency.

**Findings in Relation to Literature**

Overall, the findings of this study support the research discussed in the literature review. The experiences of the women superintendents who participated in the study, except for two, followed a conventional path to the superintendency which starts in the classroom as a teacher, followed by assistant principal, principal, district-level administration, and assistant, associate, or deputy superintendent before becoming a superintendent (Nash & Grogan, 2022; Sampson et al., 2015; Sperandio, 2015). Women spend more time in the classroom teaching before becoming an administrator. However, few women administrators hold the position of high school principal. Some believe that this is due to gender bias, and women are perceived as less able to manage the demands of a high school principal position (Dowell & Larwin, 2013). Gender bias created a

major challenge to women's path to the superintendency and their performance after gaining the position (Wallace, 2014). For women, a central office position is a direct career pathway to the superintendency (Sampson et al., 2015).

Women's outcomes in relation to leadership advancement might be attributed to limited opportunities for effective mentoring of women for leadership roles (Salkeld, 2016). Research on mentoring has focused primarily on the importance of mentoring women due to the difficulties that women historically have experienced in gaining access to this position and negotiating through men-dominated established professional networks. Researchers have advocated women aspiring to top-level leadership roles in education should seek out mentors and build networks of people who can testify to their leadership capacity (Sperandio, 2015). Women leaders should be empowered through mentoring partnerships, which are related to greater pay and more promotions (Turner-Moffatt, 2019; Welsh & Diehn, 2018).

The importance of a professional network cannot be overstated (Melendez de Santa Ana, 2008). Networking emerged in the literature as one of the major needs in attracting and retaining quality school leaders; furthermore, a lack of professional networking for women limits opportunities for them to work and meet with coworkers and mentors who can provide honest reflection and guidance (Raskin et al., 2010). However, family and lack of mobility affect a woman's ability and availability to network as women leaders with children are more geographically constrained than men or women with no children (Lepkowski, 2009). Mentoring relationships can shape women's growth and potential in school leadership by boosting confidence and developing a sense of connection and identity as a leader (Bynum & Young, 2015). The experiences of the women superintendents who participated in this study, except for

one, attribute networking and mentor relationships as critical factors in the ascension to the superintendency and are equally as important in upholding the position.

Women need a strong voice in men-dominated fields to promote their own careers as well as to help other young women with similar career aspirations. Women mentors bring a wealth of insight to their mentees regarding the necessary characteristics and behaviors to succeed (Salkeld, 2016). Women superintendents in this study had positive mentoring experiences, recognized the importance of having women mentors, and identified their voluntary responsibility to mentoring other women.

**Findings in Relation to the Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study was grounded on Higgins and Kram's (2001) developmental network perspective. Women superintendents' mentorship experiences and their perspectives about how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency were explored to better understand the influence mentorship has on women's attainment of the superintendency. The findings support that women superintendents' mentoring experiences, and their attainment of the superintendency were influenced by the strength and diversity of their developmental network.

Individuals seeking career advancement should learn to cultivate diverse and strong developmental relationships (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Mentoring interactions can vary, with their complexions and activities depending on various personal, relational, and situational factors (Hackmann & Malin, 2018). Stronger and more emotionally intense developmental relationships provide a variety of career benefits (Dobrow et al., 2012). Given the challenges and constraints faced by diverse women leaders, the developmental network needed to propel them into the

upper echelons is designed to mitigate or overcome both structural and perceptual barriers that their White men counterparts do not experience (Chanland & Murphy, 2018).

Essential elements of a successful mentoring relationship – mutuality, trust, and empathy – were hypothesized to produce positive developmental outcomes. In trusting and connected relationships, youth feel safe to express their feelings and receive feedback from their mentors, contributing to improvements in their development (Williamson et al., 2019). An empirical study (Higgins & Kram, 2001) explored the role of the mentoring relationship and found that the strength, length, and closeness of the mentoring relationship influence the effectiveness of mentoring (Williamson et al., 2019).

A developmental network performs various functions for an individual to work effectively and grow professionally. Developmental functions include career support, psychosocial support, and role modeling, among others (Bishop, 2021). The support that was influential in helping woman superintendents attain their role of superintendent was among the systems or structures of family, peers in post-graduate academic programs and certification programs, colleagues and immediate supervisors, and superintendents both within their own school district, neighboring school districts, and superintendents that they connected with through professional organizations, a large proportion of women responded affirmatively to establishing meaningful mentoring relationships in several if not all of these structures.

All the women who participated in this study reported that mentorship from acting superintendents was instrumental as they provided field-based opportunities and access to networks and resources that will directly assist in the attainment of the position. An equal portion of women acknowledged the influence and support systems established with their families, peers

in post-graduate academic programs and certification programs, colleagues, and immediate supervisors were also key to their ascension to the superintendency. The findings of this study support the research that individuals seeking career advancement should learn to cultivate diverse and strong developmental relationships through mentorship and networking (Brass, 1995; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Ibarra & Andrews, 1993)

## Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study include its small sample size considering the great number of practicing and retired superintendents in the country. Post-COVID-19 pandemic impacts on education may have influenced women superintendents' willingness to participate in the study. Time and access to email and availability to take phone calls may also be limitations that could influence the number of willing participants. To mitigate the small sample size of six participants, purposeful sampling was conducted to ensure variance among the participants to assist in gathering complete answers to the research questions. Individuals were purposefully chosen to participate in this research study for specific reasons that stemmed from the core constructs and contexts of the research questions. Smaller sample populations allowed me to delve deeply into each research question with the participants to assist in reaching saturation in responses (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). This study was also limited by the willingness and openness of the participants to share their experiences with the researcher.

In comparison to this qualitative case study, longitudinal research would provide an in-depth analysis of the effect of mentorship on the attainment of the superintendency and its career path. Provision of mentorship resources for aspiring women superintendents was not made in this study. Due to the geographical limitations of the study, the results may not be reflective of

women superintendents' perspectives across the nation. Additionally, findings from this study cannot be generalized to all superintendents - men, women, or both.

## Recommendations

Women in education are disproportionately represented at the highest positions of educational leadership (Bynum, 2015). Further research on this topic is critical as the number of women superintendents is substantially disproportionate to the number of women who are qualified for the role (Rodriguez, 2019). As a result of the information gleaned from this study, the following recommendations may have the potential to add to the body of research on this topic and have practical implications for university superintendent certification programs. This study explored the lived experiences of six women superintendents of K-12 school districts. Most of the participants were seasoned educators serving in their second or third superintendency. Only one of the participants had less than 5 years of superintendent experience and was in her first superintendent position. This study can be replicated with women superintendents who have 0 to 3 years of superintendent experience to compare the mentoring experiences of new superintendents as opposed to veteran superintendents in relation to their attainment of the position. All the participants serve in rural and suburban school districts. This study could be repeated with women superintendents of urban school districts to see if the characteristics of geographical demographics produce different findings. Exploration of the guidance needed by women for establishing meaningful mentorships and expansive networks is also suggested. Further research should be conducted on university superintendent certification programs to determine the effectiveness of the preparation program in terms of job attainment. The final recommendation for further research is to conduct a study that explores the influence of

same-gender mentorship on women's attainment of the superintendency and how women could best support one another in the ascension.

## Implications

Gender bias and traditional gender role beliefs can keep women from attaining the superintendency (Elprana et al., 2015). It is critical to the success of the nation's schools that all educators be allowed to work in the capacity they are most qualified for, regardless of gender (Muñoz et al., 2014). The findings in this study support the need for greater exploration of mentorship and other key factors that influence women's attainment of the superintendency. The participants' stories detail challenges faced as they ascended to the superintendency as well as personal and professional attributes required to push through the set and perceived barriers.

### Methodological Implications

Due to the small sample size and qualitative case study design of this study, it is worth conducting a similar study using a quantitative approach. To provide more details from varied perspectives and to compare results more concisely, a quantitative study could be created to survey a broader range of new and veteran women superintendents to systematically measure the variables, such as types of mentorships, strength, and diversity of developmental networks, or personal attributes, that influence women superintendent's attainment of the superintendency. A quantitative comparison between these variables would be beneficial in identifying or testing the specific factors which have a greater impact on women superintendent's attainment of the superintendency.

**Positive Social Change at the Individual Level**

The findings indicated that women superintendents placed a high value on developing as a person and as a leader. Women superintendents exemplify specific characteristics and skill sets that are imperative for the attainment of the superintendency and the upholding of the position. Women superintendents possess personal attributes that contribute to their success in the superintendency including tenacity, strong work ethic, integrity, communication skills, sound decision-making, multitasking, organization, taking initiative, concern for others, self-reflection, organization, time-management, confident, competent, and knowledgeable, honest, supportive, balancing home and professional lives, and life-long learning. The potential impact for positive change at the individual level in this study is that aspiring women superintendents can develop or refine their qualities to best prepare for the superintendency.

**Positive Social Change at the Organizational and Societal Levels**

The findings support the traditional career path for women as well the importance of networking and mentorship. Because superintendent preparation programs have a role in shaping the leadership pipeline, they should take steps to expand the diversity of their applicants, enrollees, and graduates, but they should also be upfront with the realities of the position with their students about the conditions of the career pathways they will encounter on graduation. This could better prepare district leaders to take an active role in ensuring more equitable opportunities for aspiring superintendents (Davis & Bowers, 2019). The findings have the potential to bring attention to the evaluation, creation, or improvement of preparation programs for women who aspire the superintendency position. This study informs educational institutions

focusing on the superintendency, such as universities, regional education service centers, and other superintendent certification preparation programs, by providing a better understanding of how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency.

### Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings, it is important for aspiring women superintendents to have a clear understanding of the factors that influence women's attainment of the superintendency such as the gender disparity within the role, challenges and barriers, career path, mentorship, networking, and other key factors like support systems and personal attributes. The ascension to the superintendency is different for women in comparison to that of men counterparts. However, knowledge alone is not enough. More women carry the mantle of leadership as they possess talents and capabilities that enable them to perform leadership functions and duties effectively (Segkulu & Gyimah, 2016). Women who aspire to become superintendents must be intentional, resilient, and resolute both in their professional and their personal lives and must embody other strong leadership skills desirable of top-level hires (Blakewood & Ohlson, 2020). Aspiring women superintendents must seek meaningful mentorship relationships and have expansive networks.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the experiences with mentoring that women superintendents identify as important in their lives and work. The research was not clear on how mentorship influences women's attainment of the superintendency. By analyzing the experiences of women superintendents of K-12 school districts in a southern state informed by interviews, archival data, and analytic memos, this

qualitative case study provides further understanding of women superintendents' mentoring experiences and their attainment of the superintendency. The number of women superintendents is substantially disproportionate to the number of women who are qualified for the role (Rodriguez, 2019). The findings in this study support that mentorship and networking are key factors that influence women's attainment of the superintendency. A continued focus on gender equity in the superintendency is imperative.

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# Appendix: Interview Protocol

Interviewee Code #: Date: Time:

**Demographic and Background Information**

*(Completed via Google Forms by the participant after giving consent but prior to the interview.)*

Name
School district & position
Years in current position
Geographic description of current school district
Size of current school district (student population)
Previous administrative positions
Previous teaching experience
Educational background/degrees earned
Superintendent certification program
Duration of superintendent certification program

**Introduction**

My name is Araceli Chavarín, and I am collecting data for my doctoral dissertation. Thank you for taking time to participate in this interview today. As you know, the purpose of this interview is to gather data on women superintendents' mentoring experiences and attainment of the superintendency. It is my hope that this research will offer some insight both to other women who aspire to be superintendents as well as to superintendent preparatory institutions.

I have some open-ended questions to ask you. Please feel free to elaborate on each question. This should last about 30 to 60 minutes. After the interview, I will be examining your responses for data analysis purposes. Please know that I will not identify you in my documents, and no one will be able to identify you with your responses. You may choose to stop this interview at any time. Please be advised that this interview will be recorded for transcription purposes.

Do you have any questions about the process? Are you ready to begin?

**Personal Factors, Influences & Career Path**

1. What influences led you to seek the position of superintendent of schools?
2. What role did mentorship have in your pursuit of this top leadership position?
3. What effect has mentoring had on your career, particularly in your current position?
4. To what degree were you mentored in your attainment of the superintendency?
5. What was the nature of the mentoring relationship(s)?
6. How do you describe your mentoring experiences?
7. What was your career path to the superintendency and how long did it take you to attain that top leadership position?

**Barriers, Challenges, & Support System**

1. What was the most significant professional challenge you faced in attaining your current position?
2. How did you overcome this challenge?

**Advice & Additional Information**

1. What advice would you offer to other women who aspire to become superintendents?

**Closure**

Thank you for participating in this study. Do you have anything else you would like to share?
Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time and your responses.