

2023

Female Superintendents' Perspectives About the Preparation, Experiences, and Challenges Important to Secure a Superintendent Position

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Erin R. Fasel

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2023

Abstract

Female Superintendents' Perspectives About the Preparation, Experiences, and
Challenges Important to Secure a Superintendent Position

by

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MA, University of Houston-Victoria, 2010

BS, Texas State University, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2023

Abstract

The lack of female representation and gender imbalance in the superintendent position nationwide has been a focus of scholars for many years. Researchers have demonstrated that females have the experiences, preparations, and expertise necessary but are not securing the superintendent position at the same rate as their male counterparts, causing a disproportionate representation in the superintendent position nationwide. The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of female superintendents on the challenges, preparation, and experiences important for females to succeed in attaining a superintendent position in a large southwestern state. The social cognitive career theory was used to analyze the perspective of the participants. Using a qualitative method, data from 10 currently or previous serving female superintendents in a large southwestern state were collected for this study. Two research questions guided the study. The first question included obtaining information about the preparations and experiences important to prepare females to be successful in attaining the superintendent position. The second was to obtain information about the challenges to attaining the superintendent position for aspiring females. The results of these analyses indicated that activities like networking, group activities, mock interviews, professional learning, and creating a network of supportive advocates were imperative when trying to attain a superintendent position. Aspiring females and districts may develop positive social change from the results of this study by leveling the playing field to the superintendent position, by removing the expectation of the high school principalship, and by addressing gender inequities in the position.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Gwen, my children, Kyla and Akira, and to my mother and father, Frankie and John. Gwen, Kyla, and Akira encouraged me, supported me, and pushed me during some of the darkest days. I could not have done this without your continued support, love, grace, and persistence in reminding me to not give up on this journey. I love you all.

Gwen, I appreciate you believing in me and for taking care of our beautiful family while I focused on my writing and my career. I will forever be grateful and could not have done any of this without your love and support. I am so glad that my mother and father are both alive to see this effort come to fruition. 2022 was very challenging for us all, and I am glad that both of you are here to celebrate this with me. Thank you for being wonderful role models in your work ethic and perseverance through even the toughest times. Thank you also for giving me the space and time to spread my wings and be my own true self. I know that it was hard on you both, but hopefully I have made you proud. I love you both.

To all my students, past and present, keep pursuing your dreams. It will be worth it in the end.

And last to my high school teachers and college professors, thank you for the education you provided. I could not have done any of this without the knowledge and skills that you patiently and skillfully taught me.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the staff at Walden University for allowing me to be a part of the program. I am forever grateful to Dr. Blacher-Wilson for never giving up and for recognizing and working through the rough times in my life with me. Your check-ins, assistance, grace, and kind words meant more than you can imagine. Thank you! To Dr. Kingston, for all of your assistance, endless revisions, and kindness during this process; thank you! This journey has been long, and I thank you both for being on it with me. I could not have done this without you both.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

A school district superintendent has many responsibilities and is considered the district's chief executive officer. Due to the intensity of past reforms, the superintendent's role shifted from management to a complicated position of managing and leading change initiatives (Bjork et al., 2018). As noted by Bjork et al. (2018), superintendents must meet demands that call for effective, district-level management systems while expanding communication networks, managing district budgets, and supporting curriculum and instruction. Superintendents must manage and lead the district while juggling their relationship and communication with the board of trustees (Copeland, 2013). No previous evidence suggests that females are less prepared or impactful than males in leadership roles (Farmer, 2016). In fact, in the Bollinger and Grady (2018) study, female superintendents indicated high levels of satisfaction in the superintendent role, and described it as a rewarding experience, especially in creating a vision, instructional leadership, building relationships, and developing others; however, males have been placed in the superintendent position more often than females (Stone-Johnson, 2014). At the rate at which females have become superintendents in the United States, the Center for American Progress suggested it will take until 2085 to reach parity in the superintendent position (Parker et al., 2015). McKibben (2021) stated that equity work in leadership may be messy and uncomfortable, but we must cultivate equity-focused schools and districts.

In this chapter, the problem, purpose of the study, and research questions are discussed along with the conceptual framework used to guide the study. As well as the nature of the study, definitions important to the study and assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations, bias, and the significance of the study are stated.

Background

In 2018, Warner et al. noted that females earned 60% of all graduate degrees, 60% of all master's degrees, and represented 49% of the college-educated workforce nationwide; however, they remain under-represented in the superintendent position. The lack of female representation in the top leadership position is a problem. Many females have a strong background of career-related experience, solid preparation, and leadership experiences but are not securing superintendent positions in a large southwestern state.

Although there have been many studies on the barriers, career pathways, goals, and career intentions from the female perspective about females and the superintendent position, there remains a gap in the research. Allred et al. (2017) offered insight into the goals, aspirations, and career intentions of seven females serving in the superintendent position. Hajek and Ahmad (2017) concluded from their study of 20 female school administrators that females should encourage, mentor, and serve as role models for other females. Davis and Bowers (2019) suggested that because preparation programs shape leadership paths, steps should be taken to expand the participants' diversity and the context of the program's information. In 2007, Brunner and Grogan noted there was a gap in the research regarding information needed to ensure an equitable future for females who desire to lead schools. Knowledge obtained through this exploratory case

study from currently or previously serving female superintendents on the educational preparations, experiences, and overcoming challenges of navigating to the top position may be relevant for females to attain the superintendent position successfully. This research is needed to provide valuable information that will give voice to aspiring females to determine a plan that could increase the likelihood of superintendent position attainment.

Problem Statement

The problem that led to this study is that females with strong career-related experience, solid preparation, and leadership experiences are not securing superintendent positions in a large southwestern state. The school superintendent position is the most influential and highest executive position in a school district. Further, the superintendent position has remained gender disproportionate (Robinson et al., 2017). There has been an underrepresentation of females in the K-12 school superintendent position despite personal interest, demonstrated preparedness, and application for the role of superintendent in the educational workforce by females (Wallace, 2015). As of 2017, Robinson et al. noted that nationwide, females represented 75% of all K-12 classroom teachers; however, among school superintendents, females only represented 27% of these leadership positions. In the 2015 American Association of School Administrators mid-decade study, Finnan et al. (2015) reported that females made up only a quarter of all superintendents but followed similar career paths to the superintendent position as their male counterparts. Allred et al. (2017) found that females participate in superintendent leadership programs and became credentialed to hold the superintendent position.

The education school board has continued to be the most influential factors in attaining a superintendent position (Williams et al., 2019). Male-dominated boards and search firms posed a challenge for females who aspire to become superintendents (Bernal et al., 2017). Male-dominated boards and search firms have been a barrier to the superintendent position due to assumptions that females lacked knowledge about issues related to the superintendent position, such as disciplinary actions, budget, and other non-instructional technical abilities (Bernal et al., 2017). Females have often been noted as relationship builders, mentors, and as role models (Hajek & Ahmad, 2017). Despite non-instructional technical abilities however, Hajek and Ahmad (2017) reported that female leaders struggle to break into male-dominated superintendent positions.

Characteristics considered predominately male, such as emotional stability and assertiveness, are now considered universal and applicable to females in leadership roles (Sabharwal, 2015). Females in leadership roles have developed essential organizational leadership traits and bring traditional characteristics of sensitivity, kindness, emotional stability, and assertiveness needed to be influential leaders (Sabharwal, 2015). Females have developed a strong sense of self-efficacy while ascending career ladders and have been willing to demonstrate determination and endured ethical challenges presented to them in the position (Rodriguez, 2019). The profiles of female and male superintendents can be considered more alike now than ever (Robinson et al., 2017). As recently as 2019, Davis and Bower noted that females continued to have a substantially lower probability of becoming a superintendent as their male counterparts (Davis & Bowers, 2019). In a study of 133 established and aspiring superintendents, the struggle to break into the

“good old boy's network” is labeled as one of the top three challenges (Calderone et al., 2020).

The lack of female representation in the superintendent position is an issue for numerous reasons. First, despite women significantly outnumbering males in education, there has been a noted imbalance of gender in the superintendent position compared to the rest of the K-12 workforce (Wallace, 2014). Second, as of 2014, only a quarter of superintendents were females, which did not mirror or represent the gender of students in education (Wallace, 2014). Female and male students must see females in the superintendent position so that young men and young women have role models in the most powerful position in education to encourage all students to strive for whatever role they desire. The third issue is that school districts are held accountable for their academic performance and females notably are focused on curriculum and improving academic scores. Lastly, according to Robinson et al. (2017), the lack of female representation in the superintendent position has created issues in fairness and equity for those who have prepared and aspired to become superintendents. Gender diversity in the superintendent position could create a gender balance in the education workforce, a balance of gender compared to the students served, a balance of essential traits of successful leaders, and will raise awareness of the need to focus the superintendent's role on academic excellence. A study that asks successful female superintendents about the preparations, experiences, and challenges that helped them attain the superintendency would help identify elements that could be incorporated into preparation programs and hiring decisions.

Purpose of the Study

Females remain underrepresented as superintendents in public schools nationwide. In the large southwestern state that was the focus of this study, there is a lack of gender diversity in the position. The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore the perspectives of current and previously serving female superintendents about the preparation, experiences, and challenges that are important for females to successfully secure a superintendent position in one large southwestern state.

Research Questions

RQ1: What preparations and experiences are important to prepare females to be successful in attaining the superintendent position in this large southwestern state?

RQ2: What are the challenges to attaining the superintendent position for aspiring females in this large southwestern state?

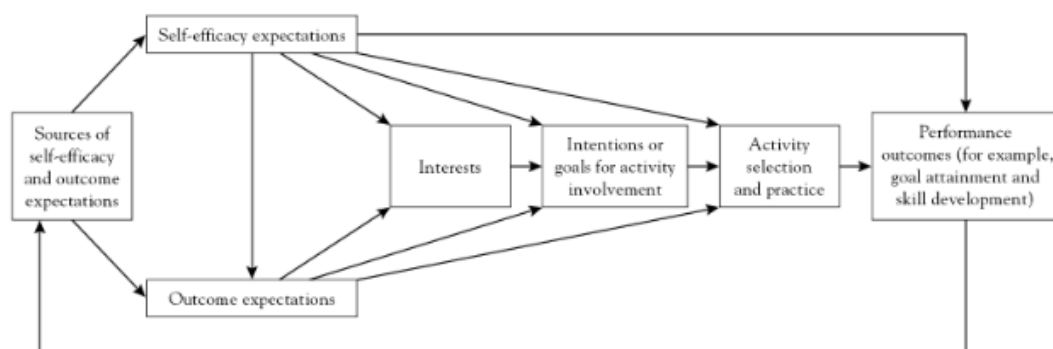
Conceptual Framework

The social cognitive career theory developed by Lent et al. (1994) grounded this study. This theory focuses on personal variables as they relate to career selection. Social cognitive career theory asserted that career development has three elements that build upon the concept that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals play a specific role in successful career outcomes (Lent et al., 1994). In connection to this study, perspectives of female superintendents about the personal and job-related experiences, preparations, and challenges important for females aspiring to the superintendent position in relation to the social cognitive career theory were studied. The social cognitive career theory can be visualized as it appears below in Figure 1 (Lent et al., 1994). Figure 1

depicts a picture of the relationship between self-efficacy and outcome expectations as they are driven by personal interests, intentions, activities that become performance outcomes.

Figure 1

Social Cognitive Career Theory



Self-efficacy can be defined as an individual's beliefs and capabilities to perform a course of action to refine skills and develop personal performance standards (Lent et al., 1994). Self-efficacy is an important event in career choice and the movement of female administrators into the superintendent position (Mehta & Sharma, 2014). Regarding self-efficacy, the theory has four components: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states (Lent et al., 1994).

Components of the social cognitive career theory directly align with the research questions in this study. In this theory, career engagement, effort, and persistence are all noted to yield the desired outcome (Lent et al., 1994). Aspiring female superintendents may understand and apply what specific educational engagement and professional development activities are essential for aspiring females to attain the superintendent position. Further investigation into the principles defined by the social cognitive career

theory may allow females to find appropriate answers to help them attain the highest leadership position in school districts (Lent et al., 1994).

Outcome expectations, the second tenant of the social cognitive career theory, are related to consequences and beliefs (Lent et al., 1994). The effort, ability to persist, productivity outcome, and successful encounters within leadership all promote positive outcome expectations and increased goal setting (Lent et al., 1994). This study's outcomes could allow for further understanding from the perspective of current and formerly serving female superintendents about the levels of effort, persistence, and goal setting required for aspiring female superintendents.

Personal goals and the intention to attain specific performance levels are the third components of the social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994). Personal capabilities and expected outcomes from a line of actions are defined as goal setting and were broken down into two separate areas: choice goals and performance goals (Lent et al., 1994). Reaching or failing in those goals defines a person's personal belief in self and future issues or self-fulfilling prophecies (Lent et al., 1994). Through this study, experienced female superintendents can help shape, influence, and identify development areas for those females aspiring to the superintendent position.

Nature of the Study

This study is an exploratory single case study conducted in a large southwestern state, and the research was informed by previously and currently serving female superintendents' experiences and perspectives. The case study approach allows a researcher to explore situations where the evaluated interventions have no single set of

outcomes (Yin, 2009). Exploratory case studies allow for findings when research questions are posed in the how and why format, where the investigator has little control over events, and when studies are focused on a phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2009). This exploratory case study was qualitative. Qualitative research relied on data obtained through first-hand observations, interviews, and many other data collection instruments, including field notes, focus groups, review of documents and archival data, questionnaires, and participatory methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This study focused on interviews and reviews of professional preparation and experiences in the participant's natural setting. The researcher analyzed the data by coding the interview information and triangulating the data to establish credibility.

Definitions

For this study, the following terms are defined.

Gender Bias: The tendency to give preferential treatment to one gender over another. Gender bias can result in unfair disadvantages like pay, leave, and the ability to secure male-defined positions (Maranto et al., 2018).

Self-Efficacy: Beliefs about one's ability to manage specific tasks necessary for career preparation, entry, adjustment, or change (Lent et al., 1994).

Superintendent: In the United States K-12 educational system, the superintendent represents the preeminent leadership position within a regional school district. They are the chief visionary, advocate, communicator, and negotiator; as such, the school superintendent wields tremendous influence over the quality of teaching and learning under his or her stewardship (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Mentorship: A professional relationship between a more experienced and a less experienced employee meant to enhance career development (Yip & Kram, 2017).

Sponsor: A catalyst that can significantly influence career advancement by speaking positively about a person's leadership qualities (Duevel et al., 2015).

Assumptions

Due to the small number of female superintendents in the large southwestern state, I attempted to interview candidates who were not acquaintances and that a personal relationship did not already exist to get the most transparent answers possible. Interviewers should not be personally acquainted with or have a developed trust to get transparent answers without issues or concerns (Raheim et al., 2016). Throughout this research, there was an assumption that the participants would respond honestly and would be willing to share information with anonymity for the study. To protect their confidentiality, leaders responsible for running school districts may be unwilling to share very specific or detailed information. Participants in this study will be assured that their identity was kept confidential, and the results of the interviews and study would be shared with them. As the researcher, I committed to reflect throughout the research and data analysis processes. The writing is objective and inclusive, leaving any bias, preset opinions, or preferences behind in this study. These assumptions were necessary to create an unaffiliated and unbiased but conclusive study that protected all participants' confidentiality in the case study.

Scope and Delimitations

Specific aspects of the research problem addressed in the case study included discovering the perspectives of currently or formerly serving female superintendents about the position's experiences, preparedness, and gender biases. These focus areas were chosen for the study results to assist aspiring female superintendents in choosing professional pathways and mentorships that may assist them in overcoming challenges to attain a superintendent position. This case study is limited to female superintendents in one large southwestern state who hold or have held the superintendent position and were willing to participate. Other administration members or male superintendents will not be contacted to participate in this case study. Although the selection of the professionals for this case study is challenging and limited due to a lack of female superintendents across the state, this case study is limited to female superintendents who were not former colleagues or previous supervisors of the researcher.

Limitations

Proximity, time, many districts across a vast distance are all limitations of this study. Therefore, virtual or remote interviews will be done due to the distance and COVID-19 limitations for face-to-face interactions.

I will avoid selection and participant bias by contacting as many serving or previously serving female superintendents as provided from the state agency and service centers. All participants will be contacted by email. Publication bias will be limited by including qualitative and quantitative information in available studies. Interview bias will be avoided by ensuring all participants are asked the same questions, in the same way,

and by paying particular attention to not steering any responses. Data collection bias will be avoided by collecting the data in the same way from all participants. Analysis bias will be avoided by sorting, analyzing, and reporting on the data samples without focusing on a negative or positive aspect of the data. I will avoid using ambiguous language or leaving out important facts from the data. Last, I will reduce limitations in this study by keeping the participants, perspectives and all identifiable information confidential.

Significance

Females with seemingly strong career-related experience, solid preparations, leadership experience, and successful management of challenges to the position are not securing the school district superintendent position in a large southwestern state.

Although the outlook for women in the superintendent's role is significantly better than ever, only 24.1% of superintendents nationwide are female (Maranto et al., 2017). The lack of female leaders' promotion to the superintendent position leaves it void of diversity (Rincon Dies et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to the future success of aspiring and serving female superintendents to be informed about the preparations, experiences, and challenges to overcome that are necessary for females to achieve the highest leadership position in U.S. school districts (Robinson et al., 2017). By using the cognitive career theory presented as the conceptual framework, the study results may positively affect career choices and attainment (Lent et al., 1994) for aspiring female superintendents.

Females in educational leadership roles have been more likely to have curriculum and instruction experience (Maranto et al., 2017). School boards often evaluated

superintendent's management duties (Maranto et al., 2017). There is a need to bridge the gap in knowledge for females in educational leadership roles between what they already know and have experience in, and what they will need to know for the superintendent position. Howard et al. (2017) concluded that mentorships between experienced female superintendents and those new to the position were essential in learning, finding strength, promoting growth, and allowing for successful entry into an established circle of leadership. Educational leadership preparation programs must address essential behaviors and characteristics for females throughout the programs to increase females' placement in superintendent positions (Allred et al., 2017). Mentorships and preparation programs may help aspiring female superintendents by focusing on specific learning opportunities that will assist them in attaining a superintendent position and the management duties that play a role in a superintendent's success.

Maranto et al. (2018) identified fewer opportunities for females in the superintendent position. Whether or not there were fewer females in the superintendent position because of gender bias, so few females have presented a significant challenge to the profession (Sadker & Sadker, 2013). The perspectives from those females who lead or have led in the superintendent role could play a key role in increasing gender diversity, equitable access for females to the highest leadership position in school districts and allow for a more balanced gender, inclusive representation in the educational workforce. The results of this research contribute to positive social change by giving insight into the preparations, experiences, and challenges for females who aspire to serve in the superintendent position, which may, in turn, help alleviate the gender imbalance.

Summary

Robinson et al. (2017) suggested that future researchers probe to find answers to the causes of this gender imbalance. Doing so will better inform females aspiring for the position of superintendent, which is the most essential leadership role in the United States education system. The need for a gendered perspective on the superintendent position from females who are or have been successful in the role continues to be critical (Skrla, 2003). It could be vital to informing aspiring females of the preparations, experiences, and navigation of the challenges necessary to attain the position.

This case study explored current and previously serving female superintendents' perspectives about the preparation and experiences necessary for females to successfully secure a superintendent position in one large southwestern state. This study's completed exploration of the researched population's preparations and skills to become a superintendent could assist other females in attaining this position. The research questions presented will shed insight into these issues and allow for a thorough review of the perspectives of preparations, experiences, and challenge navigation that successful female superintendents have to offer. The critical terms identified and used throughout this study were related to K-12 education language and identified vocabulary from previous studies connected to females in leadership and those aspiring to the superintendent position. There were limitations and assumptions in this study.

Chapter 2 is an overview of the superintendent position's historical aspects and information on females in administrative and superintendent roles. Information regarding barriers, challenges, and gender bias related to females in the superintendent position and

career paths, preparations, experiences, mentorships, and networking for females in education are all discussed in Chapter 2. The conceptual framework, social cognitive career theory, which grounds this study, is presented to explain further the aspects of self-efficacy, mentorship, and goal setting as they relate to the understanding of females aspiring to the superintendent position.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The problem that led to this study is that females with strong career-related experience, solid preparation, and leadership experiences are not securing superintendent positions in a large southwestern state. The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore the perspectives of current and previously serving female superintendents regarding the preparation, experiences, and challenges that are important for females to successfully secure a superintendent position in one large southwestern state. The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature related to the school superintendent position and better understand the educational preparation, experiences, and challenges for females to be successful in attaining the position. This chapter includes information about gender bias and the challenges aspiring female candidates and currently serving female superintendents' experience. This chapter will also include the career experiences and preparations innately associated with the superintendent role. This chapter also includes a further discussion of the social cognitive career theory as presented in the conceptual framework and how it aims to understand and explain the career choices for females pursuing the superintendency (Lent et al., 1994).

Upon the chapter's conclusion, it will be apparent that females aspiring to become superintendents face many challenges. It is also conclusive that there is needed research from the female superintendents' perspectives on the most important aspects of career preparation and career experiences to navigate the gender-biased superintendent position. Mountford and Richardson (2021) state that it is clear from the most recent decennial

study of superintendents nationwide that if the modern school superintendents continue to be middle-aged, white males who are serving increasingly more diverse districts, then understanding how superintendents can best address equity amidst this disconnect is a topic of dire importance.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search strategy was to explore multiple databases and educational journals to obtain current literature on the literature review topics. Some of the databases and resources included Google Scholar, ERIC, SAGE Premier, EBSCOhost, Walden University Library, ProQuest Multisearch, Education Agency publications, Public Administration Quarterly, and Advancing Women in Leadership. A collection of peer-reviewed journals and dissertations were also used to complete the literature review. The literature review information was directly related to females' backgrounds, career-related experience, preparation, challenges, and leadership experiences building up to and within the school superintendent position in a large southwestern state.

The criteria for all articles were to be published in English, peer-reviewed, available for free and in full-text access, and published or related to a publication less than seven years old at the start of this research. This study includes 94 references. Many keywords were used to search for literature on the topics covered in the literature review. Some keywords and phrases were as follows: *gender in leadership roles; females in the superintendency; women in education; female education leaders; career path for females in education; perspectives of female superintendents; history of female superintendents; and tenure of female superintendents*. Other keywords and phrases were *females in*

school leadership; stereotypes in education administration; gender bias in education; underrepresentation of females in education; and career ladder. Often the US state where the research was focused was used to narrow the literature search.

Conceptual Framework

The social cognitive career theory developed by Lent et al. (1994) grounded this study. The purpose of this study was to study multiple female superintendents' perspectives on the preparation and experiences necessary for females to successfully secure a superintendent position in one large southwestern state. Interpretations of these findings were done through the social cognitive career theory lens related to refining skills and developing personal performance standards (Lent et al., 1994). This theory had three facets or interests of career selection and development. As explained by Dziak (2023), these are the development of interests that lead toward a career, the ways people make decisions about their careers, and how people ultimately achieve success in their chosen careers. These three facets are examined from three closely related variables: self-efficacy, expectations of outcome, and overall goals for careers (Dziak, 2023).

Self-efficacy can be defined as an individual's beliefs and capabilities to perform a course of action to refine skills and develop personal performance standards by exerting control over their environment (Lent et al., 1994). The theorists understood self-efficacy to be a more specific version of self-confidence (Dziak, 2023). Self-efficacy is an important event in career choice and the movement of female administrators into the superintendent position (Mehta & Sharma, 2014). It is noted that self-efficacy includes components that may impact the depth of self-efficacy that a person has toward their

career choices, such as their performance accomplishments in their career and their experiences in life that may lead to the career (Lent et al., 1994).

Outcome expectations, the second tenant of the social cognitive career theory, are related to consequences and beliefs (Lent et al., 1994). The theorists maintained that individuals are strongly motivated and influenced by the expectations they hold of the outcome of behavior (Dziak, 2023). Therefore, as noted by Dziak (2023), people look ahead for the likely consequence of a particular choice and tend to make choices that yield positive results. The effort, ability to persist, productivity outcome, and successful encounters within leadership all promote positive outcome expectations and increased goal setting (Lent et al., 1994). Both self-efficacy and outcome expectations are said to influence career choice (Dziak, 2023).

Personal goals and the intention to attain specific performance levels are the third house of the social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994). As explained by Dziak (2023) in this theory, goals may be subjective and unique; these goals involve improving life for the individual and loved ones, such as through fulfillment, respect, money, possessions, or fame. Personal capabilities and expected outcomes from a line of actions are defined as goal setting and were broken down into two separate areas: choice goals and performance goals (Lent et al., 1994). Reaching or failing in those goals defines a person's personal belief in self and future issues or self-fulfilling prophecies (Lent et al., 1994).

Choice goals or choice of a career are often defined because of interest but some people choose careers that do not interest them (Dziak, 2023). Career choice or goals is

usually a detailed process that involves a person having intentions to pursue a career and taking necessary steps to prepare for and attain the career (Dziak, 2023). Performance goals are two-fold in definition, as one part is about the amount of success a person achieves in the career, and the other is defined as the ability a person has to overcome career-related obstacles (Dziak, 2023).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

History of the School Superintendent

The school superintendent position was created and filled around 1837 in Buffalo, New York, and Louisville, Kentucky (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Thirteen large cities in the United States had established the position by 1850 (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005), all filled by males (Shakeshaft, 1989). Policymakers and boards then identified the superintendent position as one that emphasized management with intentions to improve systems and operations, and prioritize time and efficiency (Tyack & Hansot, 1988).

From the Colonial Period through the mid-19th century, teachers and leaders in school districts were primarily men (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). By the 1850s, women were becoming more prevalent in teaching positions; however, more were needed to increase the opportunities and place more females in the superintendent role (Blount, 2017). When the Civil War began, many males left for the army, and females filled vacant positions in teaching and campus administration (Blount, 2017), a trend which continued through World War II (Funk, 2004). Females fought for equal opportunity and representation before 1868, when the 14th Amendment to the Constitution provided equal rights to all (Tarbuton, 2019). The fight for equal rights continued into the 1920s, when

females were given the right to vote, hold more important status in society, and be allowed to enter the workforce (Tarbutton, 2019). Although the 14th Amendment provided equal rights, and females had been given the right to enter the workforce, only an estimated 11% of all superintendent roles in the nation were filled by females during the 1930s; still, by the 1970s, only approximately 3% of females held this leadership position (Blount, 1998).

Small strides were made for females in the position since the 1970s. In 1992, Glass reported that 7% of the nation's superintendents were female, a number that grew slightly by 2000 to 13.1% (Glass et al., 2000). By 2010, more females served in the position at 24.10% (Kowalski et al., 2011); in the most recent decennial study of 2020, Tienken et al. (2022) reported that approximately 26.68% of superintendents nationwide were female. It took two decades for the number of female superintendents nationwide to double (Mountford & Richardson, 2021). According to the Census Bureau, the school superintendent position was identified as the most male-dominated executive position in the US (Glass, 1992) and continues to be inequitable.

Significant initiatives such as the Workplace Gender Equity Act of 2012, the 'He for She' movement of 2014, and the "Me Too" movement of 2017 proved continued efforts for females and gender equality (Tarbutton, 2019). However, none have seen a significant change in gender equality in the superintendency (Tarbutton, 2019). As a result, the 2020 decennial study revealed that less than 27% of all superintendent positions in the nation are filled by females (Tienken et al., 2022).

The Superintendent Role

The superintendent is considered the chief executive officer of a school district. The superintendent's responsibility is ever-changing and comes with astronomical expectations ranging from being the instructional leader to political expert. The expectations for superintendents in 1993 were to focus on student achievement, balance student diversity, staff schools with excellent educators, and deal with media, board, and community relations (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). The superintendent position was considered managerial and historically rooted in personnel, finance, and operations, while females often have backgrounds strong in curriculum, instruction, and child-centered education (Maranto et al., 2018).

Over time, the expectations of the school superintendent have increased. Some of the expectations added to an already extensive list included: being a change agent, being transformational, and being visionary (Halevy et al., 2011). Superintendents are required to show increased levels of growth in instruction or face the threat of financial and accreditation sanctions. Often superintendents are very interested in moving students forward academically. Due to rapidly advancing global technology, the nature and direction of schools has shifted. The superintendent has been required to ensure that students have the skill sets needed to compete in the global, information-based economy (Bjork et al., 2014). In 2015, Kowalski reported that moving students and districts toward improved test scores and academic gains were at the forefront of the expected knowledge and skill sets a school superintendent must have.

Females in the Superintendency

In 1874, the first female superintendent, Ella Flagg, took charge of Chicago's schools (Blount, 2017). In the early 1900s, and throughout World War II, females succeeded in attaining the superintendent role (Blount, 1998). By the 1930s, females held approximately 28% of Chicago county and city school systems and 11% of the superintendent positions nationwide (Blount, 1998). Female superintendents were considered credible, honest, and successful in the superintendent role during the early 1900s (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). By 1971, only 1.3% of all superintendencies in the US were held by females (Knezevich, 1971). Pioneer researchers such as Shakeshaft, Hansot, and Tyack highlighted issues about females in administration (Robinson et al., 2017). These researchers challenged the idea that education administration positions, specifically the superintendent, were best run only by males (Robinson et al., 2017). In 1992, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) reported that around 7% of all US superintendent positions were filled by females (Glass, 1992). By 2000, the US Census Bureau categorized the superintendent role as the most male-dominated position of any executive profession in the United States (Bjork, 2000). By 2010, there was an incremental rise in females to the superintendent position to 24.1% (Kowalski et al., 2011). In 2015, there had only been an increase to 27% female superintendents nationwide, an abysmal 3% increase between 2010 and 2015 (AASA, 2015). The slow growth would take until 2040 to close gap (Young et al. 2018). In response to the results of the decennial study of 1,218 American school superintendents, Mountford and Richardson (2021) reported that 72.91% of the superintendents were male while 26.68%

were female and that the superintendent position in America continued to be overwhelmingly dominated by white males.

Females who served as superintendents were more likely to be in small districts, be older than their male counterparts, considered to have been instructional leaders, and had more formal education and professional experience (AASA, 2015). As recent as April 2018, a large county with many districts, large and small, in one large southwestern state, reported that although over 70% of educators are female, only one female superintendent served as a district education leader in the entire county (Donaldson, 2018). In 2021, slightly more females reported serving in districts with the largest enrollments than in previous years; however, overwhelmingly 71.46% of the women in the decennial survey worked in districts with less than 3,000 students (Mountford & Richardson, 2021). Although females occupy many workforce positions, they received only 80 cents on the dollar compared to males (Schmitz, 2017). In 2018, there were increased numbers of qualified females who applied for and got superintendent positions (Donaldson, 2018). The number of females who became certified and enrolled in certification programs was more significant than their male counterparts (Donaldson, 2018).

According to Bollinger and Grady's 2018 study, 96% of the 126 female superintendents studied consistently reported being either satisfied or highly satisfied with their job. Female superintendents indicated that the job was rewarding in various aspects, such as creating a shared vision, instructional leadership, building relationships, developing others, and a variety of other tasks (Bollinger & Grady, 2018). Females in the

study stood firm in their focus on impacting students, their love for students, and their desire to create better schools and districts for their students (Bollinger & Grady, 2018).

Challenges for Females in the Superintendent Position

Female superintendents and those who aspire to the superintendency face many challenges that range from societal stereotypes to entrenched gender bias. Tarbutton (2019) noted that females were more visible than males in almost every area of education; however, they were underrepresented in top-tier leadership positions. One of the most critical challenges to recognize is that females were still perceived as inferior in strength and intelligence and were more inclined to make decisions based on emotions (Bernal et al., 2017). The Broadhurst et al. (2021) study indicated that females are often seen as nurturing versus the male traditional leadership traits. These stereotypes may be a factor in the number of female superintendents. Stereotypes such as these have resulted in females being labeled as non-ideal workers that were not always competent in their responsibilities (ElAtia et al., 2022). Maranto et al. (2018) wrote that school leaders and education policymakers often fail to see that even after decades of mainstream acceptance of equal opportunity workplaces, public education careers and promotion pipelines continue to be shaped by narrow gender norms. Donaldson (2018) noted that females face many challenges on their path to the superintendency, including too few willing mentors, added family responsibilities, and reluctance in their abilities.

The lack of females in leadership positions is not only a problem in education but in business as well. Females are underrepresented in executive officer positions in Fortune 500 companies and the US Government. As recently as 2016, females remained

underrepresented in Congress, which was three-quarters male (Hill et al., 2016). There has been an uptick of female legislators in more recent years, but as recent as January 2022, only 27% of legislators in Congress were female (Butler, 2022). Females promoted in male-dominated jobs have experienced discrimination and a lack of support. They have been promoted to less favorable positions, which often pushed them over the edge and out of the profession, a term known as the ‘glass cliff’ (Sabharwal, 2015).

Donaldson (2018) noted that females learn quickly and that their ambition could be associated with negative traits, while males moved up quicker when expressing higher aspirations. As a result, females often did not voice their ambitions and settled for less desirable positions (Donaldson, 2018). One female superintendent noted that she had been expected to work harder during her career, show up more often, and be happier than her male counterparts (Bernal et al., 2017). Gender stereotypes have created unfair disadvantages for females (Wallace, 2014). The disadvantages were felt even at the highest level of government, with only a quarter of all elected representatives in our nation’s legislature being female and with no females yet attaining the president’s role (Wallace, 2014). Not much had changed by 2018 when Warner et al reported that gender leadership disparities, or the “glass ceiling,” particularly in high-profile S&P 500 positions, continue to be well documented. The same patterns continued to hold for other prestigious leadership positions, particularly in medicine, law, and education (Warner et al., 2018).

The attitude of colleagues toward female superintendents can also be a challenge. Family and marriage have been obstacles for females on the superintendent journey. The

lack of family-friendly leave policies at administrative levels and wage differences played a role in females staying in the classroom rather than moving to top-level roles (Maranto et al., 2018). In one study, all female participants noted that it is a significant struggle to have a work-life balance serving as the superintendent (Allred et al., 2017). Familial obligations such as marriage, being responsible for care for a house, and caring for children have often been questioned and posed as challenges to the superintendent role (Bernal et al., 2017). However, females in the superintendent role were less likely than their male counterparts to be in a marriage or relationship and three to four times less likely to have children (Robinson et al., 2017). The maternal wall, referred to as the limitation on a female's ability to pursue career goals earlier in life due to the requirements of motherhood, has changed significantly over time, and the effects of the maternal wall have been noted as weaker for women because men share what were previously considered feminine duties (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). Often, females struggled with societal expectations, such as being evaluated on how they dressed, rather than issues that impacted performance (Bernal et al., 2017).

Females also struggled with pathway challenges to the superintendent role, and often, they never overcame those challenges. Females often led elementary schools and had careers focused on curriculum, while the high school principal role, most often filled by men, was the most valuable stepping stone to the superintendency (Robinson et al., 2017). Bush (2021) noted that the lower proportion of female principals may have been due to bias and discrimination in some contexts. Superville (2017) noted that nationwide the superintendency is closely aligned with the high school principal position. Since 70%

of principals are male, this led to an unfair advantage in favor of men. Females often reported leaving districts to escape the gender norms that kept them from promoting past the elementary principal level in their current district (Maranto et al., 2018). Many females have encountered issues with their mentors before attaining a superintendent position, discouraging them from becoming superintendents in high school districts to avoid the requisite late-night obligations (Bernal et al., 2017). Caldron et al., (2020) suggested that females must support and advocate for female colleagues as they make critical life choices toward the superintendent role.

The male-dominated board of trustees can also create challenges for females. Male boards and search firms hired females at a lower rate than males and viewed that female applicants lacked prior knowledge on crucial district issues and lacked chemistry with the board (Bernal et al., 2017). Unwritten rules challenge the superintendent position because of the predominance of the board roles held by males. Boards often asked females to be more of a boss or to be heavier-handed in their leadership (Bernal et al., 2017). Boards of trustees in 2013 paid females in the superintendent role less than males by 12%, and more recently, female superintendents earned about \$2100 less than male counterparts in similar districts (Schmitz, 2017). Fontenot et al. (2018) reported that in 2017, women working full-time and year-round in the US typically were paid just 80% of what men were paid. In the specific southwestern state in this study, females were paid 81% of what men were paid (Fontenot et al., 2018). At the rate of change, females in the US were not expected to reach pay equity until 2059 (AAUW, 2019). Such challenges

mean it has been harder for females to achieve success at the highest level, so much so that some females have not even attempted to attain the position (ElAtia et al., 2022).

Career Paths, Experiences, and Preparation

The acceptable career paths, experiences, and preparations for females in education have had to shift to become viable options for the superintendent role; it continues to be a challenge to break into the most influential leadership role. Warner et al. (2018) defined the glass ceiling as a gender-based leadership disparity. While Hill et al. (2016) stated that career positionality and the glass ceiling effect were common challenges in the path for female superintendents. Caring for children, aging parents, and family was more often done by females, and that was a barrier that has resulted in females removing themselves from the workforce (Tarbutton, 2019). Females entered the superintendent role later and spent more time in the classroom and intermediate leadership roles than their male counterparts (Robinson et al., 2017). According to the 2015 AASA study, 69.3% of all female superintendents were 51 or older (Robinson et al., 2017); however, females have been applying for and have felt fully prepared to enter the role in their 40's (Duevel et al., 2015). According to a study of seven females in one large southwestern state, only about 40% who entered education intended on becoming a superintendent (Allred et al., 2017). Females in one study noted that they sought the superintendent position after serving in other educational roles and witnessing ineffective instructional leadership, frustration with ineffective superintendents, and after effective mentorship by female superintendents (Allred et al., 2017). Of the seven participants, 71% sought superintendent certification after being approached by a supervisor or

professor (Allred et al., 2017). The top four motivating factors for females in the study were a personal drive for excellence, a desire to make a difference, and a desire to get acknowledgment of achievement and progress for the district (Allred et al., 2017).

Females have served in the superintendent role longer than ever before, with an average of almost seven years (Robinson et al., 2017). More than 60% of all female superintendents had a doctorate, statistically higher than males (Robinson et al., 2017). Females used to spend more time in the classroom teaching; however, according to the AASA mid-decade survey, males and females alike spent 11 or more years as classroom teachers (Robinson et al., 2017).

Female career paths still differ considerably from their male counterparts. The superintendent role has often been linked with the male-dominated high school principal role, which left females in the minority in attaining the position because that was not their traditional pathway (Donaldson, 2018). Females most often followed the path of a classroom teacher, elementary principal, central office director, or assistant superintendent and then were named to a superintendent role (Robinson et al., 2017). In the Grossane and Tatum (2019) study, females noted that all paths do not have to look like a teacher, supervisor, assistant, or principal do the job well. In a recent study of aspiring assistant superintendents, the females noted that the insider path, moving up in the same district, or applying to nearby districts to obtain the superintendent position, was most optimal because of their relationships and reputation (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). Insider career paths were sometimes more scarce but were careers that females sought and entered more often (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). Grossane and Tatum (2019) reported

that more attention to the various pathways that female superintendents have navigated may provide insight to boards of education and search firms seeking to increase the pipeline of qualified candidates. Boards of trustees must first be willing to listen.

Grossane and Tatum (2019) noted that search firms, recruiters, and boards should increase their pipeline of qualified candidates by extending their job experience criteria.

Females have different personal and professional goals and leadership qualities than males in the superintendent position. In one study on gender bias in the superintendent position, females reported that the essential leadership qualities for females have to include the ability to communicate, to use soft language in their communications, to build relationships, to implement the district's vision and to manage the role as a female (Bernal et al., 2017). While another study revealed that personal traits of assertiveness and confidence are advantageous characteristics in educational roles (Rodriguez, 2019). Many females had professional and personal goals during and after their tenure in the superintendent position, including consulting for search firms, teaching at the university level, and taking on the challenge of a larger district before retirement (Allred et al., 2017).

Female Mentorships, Sponsors and Networking

The superintendent position is isolated, therefore, mentors, sponsors, and a strong network of supporters are essential for the female superintendents' success. Mentors often focused on first-year survival skills for new superintendents (Liang et al., 2019). Historically, mentoring was perceived as a dyadic relationship between a mentor and a protégé that helped a less experienced person realize their personal and professional goals

(Yip & Kram, 2017). Unfortunately, females often found networking in a male-dominated role was one of the most challenging aspects of the position (Robinson et al., 2017). In the Broadhurst et al. (2021) study, the female participants felt that not only did they have to face challenges to advancement, but expressed that achieving leadership positions with little support essentially set them up for failure. In the Bollinger and Grady (2018) study, females indicated that fellow superintendents, other educational professionals, and family and friends were their support systems.

Often female superintendents have noted that they were the only female in the room, and because of that, current superintendents, professional organizations, and higher education institutions must find an opportunity to engage more females to serve in the superintendent position (Bollinger & Grady, 2018). Duevel et al. (2015) stated that all educational leaders must mentor and promote competent, passionate, and inspirational males and females into school leadership roles. Both males and females should be included and connected in social networks that promote success in this isolated role (Duevel et al., 2015). Equally important was that females have sponsors, mentors, and catalysts who were not all females and would speak positively to others about their ability to lead (Duevel et al., 2015). Females were often reluctant to consider the superintendent position until leaders of both genders encouraged them to believe in themselves and their capabilities (Duevel et al., 2015).

Caldrone et al. (2020) noted that females had a dim view of men as supporters of their advancement into the superintendent role, a role that has been often noted as the good old boy's network. The females in the Caldron et al. (2020) study clearly defined

this as a constraint to access the role, and they did not receive male support or encouragement in the male-dominated role. According to Allred et al. (2017), leadership preparation programs needed to address rural school district leadership concerns because females, who made up most of the educational leadership program participants, were more likely than males to serve in rural districts during their careers.

In 2015, the mid-decade survey indicated that 94% of all female superintendents had mentors. However, only 72% of all female superintendents had mentored an aspiring or serving superintendent (Robinson et al., 2017). Yang et al. (2019) noted that graduate programs were increasingly placing females directly into leadership positions, specifically when females had a distinctive inner circle of females in their network and a connected set of female contacts. Specifically, in male-dominated positions, females needed to gain trustworthy social supports (Yang et al., 2019). This may indicate that females need to reach out to other females who are in the superintendent position. Females, new to the leadership role, were inexperienced; therefore, districts and universities needed to build strong partnerships and develop mentoring programs where experienced administrators advocate for these inexperienced females (Duevel et al., 2015). Those female superintendents who had a mentor indicated that their mentor played a significant role in their success and was a voice of inspiration (Robinson et al., 2017).

In a survey, on a formal mentor program of new superintendents and their mentors, superintendents defined professional ethics as the most crucial goal for their first year, while their mentors rated management as the highest responsibility during the first year (Liang et al., 2019). This suggested disconnect between the thoughts and goals

of superintendents and their mentors. In the minds of mentors, management continued to be inseparable from leadership in the superintendent role (Liang et al., 2019). Gender also significantly impacted the Liang et al. (2019) study in that female participants in the formal mentoring program tended to be more collaborative, and valued relationships while leading. Whether a mentorship is formal or informal, the findings of the Liang et al. (2019) study were consistent with previous findings and confirmed that a new superintendent's success is critically aligned with a successful mentorship and the board-to-superintendent relationship.

Mentorships do not have only to be formal mentorships. Yip and Kram (2017) described mentorship as a relationship where people were actively involved in helping others develop, both formally and informally, across various sectors and settings. These mentorships varied depending on a female superintendent's need and access to a network of mentors. Mentors may have included developmental partners such as a junior colleague or subordinates with value expertise or a family member who provided personal and professional support (Yip & Kram, 2017).

The Board, Gender and Politics

One of the most influential factors that determined whether a person acquired the superintendent position was the school board of trustees (Williams et al., 2019). One of the school board's most critical responsibilities was hiring the superintendent (Ford & Ihrke, 2016). School boards were often the gatekeepers, and did not consider or hire females at the same rate as males (Bernal et al., 2017). The glass ceiling effect, attitudinal or organizational challenges that prevented qualified individuals from advancing, has

impacted females' advancement in executive leadership positions (Superville, 2017).

Superville (2017) acknowledged that educators see subtle biases in how school boards and search firms recruited candidates, and negative stereotypes about females' abilities to lead large institutions were still pervasive and influenced females' circumstances in attaining the position.

School boards control the hiring process early on, allowed fewer females to get past the initial paper screening process, which narrowed the opening for applicants to proceed to the next step of the hiring process (Bernal et al., 2017). Maranto et al. (2018) suggested that hiring committees and school boards implement practices to advance males and females at similar rates. Another variable limiting female opportunities to the superintendent position was that boards and search firms searched for their next superintendent by defining the principalship, particularly the high school principalship, as a requirement for recruitment; a position disproportionately filled more often by males than females (Grossane & Tatum, 2019).

Relationships with the board were also a significant factor. Females in one study identified the need to communicate everything with the board, while males did not feel the need to share everything with their board (Bernal et al., 2017). Hill and Jochim (2018) reported that in addition to the board of trustees being in an internal competition to the top, some board members came in with single-issue agendas to try to build their reputation, often at the superintendent's expense. Often this resulted in superintendent turnover, which can diminish the position's professional reputation (Hill & Jochim, 2018). Williams et al. (2019) noted that the number one issue was having a good

relationship with the board, however, every election brought change in the board which had a significant impact on the tenure of the superintendent. Some boards of trustees have wanted to see results quickly during the first year; however, superintendents have focused on just a few quick wins and short-term goals and then educated the board on establishing and working on long-term goals (Polka et al., 2014). Many superintendents have noted that the main reason they want to acquire a superintendent position is to make a positive difference or impact on students however, they were often not supported and sometimes actively blocked from making those impacts (Williams et al., 2019). Balance and cohesion with the board were essential, especially when overturning ineffective practices (Bernal et al., 2017). In contrast with their male counterparts, female superintendents needed to negotiate boundaries such as more flexible time and compromise decision-making with their board of trustees before making firm decisions (Bernal et al., 2017). The relationship and cohesion with the board of trustees can be a potential threat if there are unattainable expectations especially if they are male-oriented. Therefore the establishment of trust and ability has been challenged and has impacted the ability to be impactful in the organization (Bernal et al., 2017).

Social expectations exist for females. Often, females were expected to fulfill their traditional familial obligations, a pressure that has impacted decisions to take on roles in districts with those expectations (Bernal et al., 2017). Countering that concern, Gullo and Sperandio (2020) suggested that in more recent years, women and men shared what used to be considered feminine duties, allowing females to pursue career goals and enter leadership roles earlier. In a study of 290 school leaders, only the male superintendents

noted family as a factor that disinterested them in their career path choice to the superintendent position (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). Females have often been brought into districts to make quick and sometimes aggressive changes. Males were expected to be proficient in discipline, budget, and non-instructional abilities, while females were often questioned about their abilities in these areas (Bernal et al., 2017). Females were more reluctant to use hard, direct language, give direct orders or direct requests, and instead felt required to use soft language to front-load board members, and paid close attention to word choice and tone (Bernal et al., 2017). Female superintendents must pay close attention to and make instructional leadership changes that lead to higher accountability ratings.

As noted by Sabharwal (2015), the glass ceiling or challenges women were confronted with in their attempt to rise to leadership positions, were residual aspects of the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon, which has been an ongoing problem for females aspiring to ever-higher leadership roles (Polka et al., 2014). Showunmi (2020) reported that it is clear there is a strong perception that leaders were stereotypically older middle-class white males who tended to recruit in their image, and when diversity became an issue, white women were recruited to fill the gap. The Broadhurst et al. (2021) study echoed a similar sentiment from its participants that the lack of females as formal leaders at the school or district level often meant that when people thought about a superintendent, they thought of a white male. The United States ranked 49th out of 144 countries in an index that measured gender parity (Marinosdottir & Erlingsdottir, 2017). At that rate of progress toward equality, the US would not reach gender parity in the workforce for

another 168 years (Marinosdottir & Erlingsdottir, 2017). To correct this slow progress, a deconstruction of the leadership gap status quo and professional development for those hiring superintendents must be a priority (Tarbutton, 2019).

Summary and Conclusions

In conclusion, chapter 2 and the literature review affirmed that several factors hinder females from aspiring to be superintendents. Although the gender of the superintendent has evolved throughout time, one thing remains constant: gender inequity continues to exist in the superintendent position in one large southwestern state and nationwide. Females are underrepresented, face challenges that their male counterparts do not face, and lack valuable networking and mentoring opportunities at the same rate as their male colleagues. These issues make it extremely hard for aspiring female superintendents to attain a position. The research questions in this study attempted to find the preparations, experiences, and challenges females aspiring to the superintendent position must have to successfully attain the position.

Social cognitive career theory, which focuses on self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goal setting, has guided this research on female superintendents to produce information that may be used for aspiring females to attain the superintendency. Additional research is needed to comprehend how females can move into the superintendent position (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). As more and more females became superintendents, their knowledge and insights have enlightened progress and led to opportunities for the future success of those females aspiring for the position (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Chapter 3: Research Method

It was important to understand the female superintendents' perspectives on their journeys as they prepared for the superintendency through to the actual work of leading a school district. This exploratory case study investigated the perspectives on preparations, experiences, and challenges that current and previously serving female superintendents in one large southwestern state deemed important for females to attain the superintendent position. Using social cognitive career theory to identify the preparations and experiences purposefully was vital to understanding the motivations, self-efficacy, and support needed to reach the superintendent position for females (Lent et al., 1994). Robinson et al. (2017) suggested that future researchers should probe to find answers that will better inform female aspirants to the superintendent position for the position to be more gender-balanced in our society.

In Chapter 3, the case study research design is discussed. There is also a review of the data collection and the data analysis process used for this study. The population of participants will be addressed in this chapter. Finally, the ethical considerations of this study are presented.

Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore the perspectives of current and previously serving female superintendents about the preparation and experiences important for females to successfully secure a superintendent position in one large southwestern state. The second data point of the case study was the self-disclosed discussion of the professional preparation resume and each participant's experiences. The

interviews investigated the female superintendents' perspectives about the preparations and experiences needed to attain the superintendent position, along with the challenges they had to overcome. The self-disclosed discussion of resumes was reviewed, and the data were used to support the preparations and experiences necessary to attain the position and the challenges they faced while attaining the position. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What preparations and experiences are important to prepare females to be successful in attaining the superintendent position in this large southwestern state?

RQ2: What are the challenges to attaining the superintendent position for aspiring females in this large southwestern state?

Females represent the majority of workers in classrooms and other areas of school districts across the large southwestern state. Many females undergo in-depth preparation, programs, and breakthrough challenges to obtain career and leadership roles; however, few become superintendents in the state. Through a systematic collection, organization, and interpretation of data from interviews, I sought to explore the reason behind this social phenomenon as experienced by females who aspire to become superintendents, as well as those who are or have been superintendents.

This study took a qualitative approach, which seeks to search for narrative data to provide context for the studied event (Yin, 2016). The researcher is the crucial instrument in qualitative research, and actively works to minimize the distance between themselves and the people under study (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research allows the study to occur in the participant's natural setting while allowing the researcher to gather data and

discover themes that answer the research questions (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is used to uncover patterns or theories to help explain the study's outcome of interest (Creswell, 2014; Allred et al., 2017).

The type of qualitative research was an exploratory case study, which is a method that involves studying a case of contemporary, real-life events to explain a current social circumstance with little or no control over the behavioral events (Yin, 2016). Creswell (2014) also defines a case study as the study of a case within a real-life or contemporary context or setting bounded by shared experiences. This case study was ideal for researching innovation or exploratory practices but should not be used to generalize theories or results (Scholl, 2017). This exploratory case study was conducted to discover the real-life events and perspectives of females who have served or are currently serving in the superintendent position.

The chosen tradition of a qualitative, exploratory case study differs from other traditions. In contrast, a phenomenological method transfers individual experiences to a description that grasps the universal idea of that phenomenon, only portraying the essence of the experienced phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). A phenomenological case study uses conscious experiences from the first-person point of view and delves into several individuals' experiences to create meaning (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenological data analysis is systematic and rigorous in procedure, and it focuses on examining shared experiences that may not provide the range of perspectives needed for this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, I set out to explore the experiences, challenges, and preparations from multiple perspectives of the female superintendents' perspectives,

rather than to grasp an overall idea of the phenomenon as a phenomenological method describes.

In grounded theory research, the study involves multiple sources of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents that seek to generate theories from the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Grounded theory research is also iterative and recursive, and it involves purposive sampling with a variety of data collections that include interviews, surveys, focus groups, and other relevant data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this case study, I did not focus on generating theories from the data collected, and I did not do any observations or collect data beyond interviews of the participants.

Ethnography is another qualitative method that was not appropriate for this study because ethnography research seeks to gain perspective by prolonged time and immersion in a setting to fully understand the culture (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A researcher using the ethnographic method would immerse themselves into the participant's real-life, natural environment and is usually an in-depth study of people, cultures, habits, and environmental differences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The research in this study was not immersed in a setting for an extended period, nor did this research try to understand a culture. Instead, the research was done through interviews to explore the preparations, challenges, and experiences necessary for females to become superintendents. The second data point of the case study was a self-disclosed discussion of each participant's professional preparation resume and experiences.

Role of the Researcher

My role was to interview and understand the perspectives in this exploratory case study to identify the perspectives of currently or previously serving female superintendents in one large southwestern state about the preparations, challenges, and experiences necessary to attain the position. Specifically, my role was to find participants, set up interviews, conduct interviews based on the interview protocol, collect data, and analyze the data. To minimize bias, the interview protocols were developed and used to ensure each participant's interview was managed and conducted similarly. Collaboration, reflexivity, and ethical research standards also guided this research. I conducted all interviews and examined information from the study objectively, professionally, and by reflecting on biases. Ravitch & Carl (2016) noted that using reflexivity activities such as monitoring the personal role of the researcher by assessing and reassessing the positionality, subjectivities, and guiding assumptions as they directly relate with and shape the research assists researchers in monitoring personal roles in qualitative research. I avoided any previous perceptions by paying particular attention to appropriate interviewing techniques, as noted for consideration when asking questions and recording responses (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Additionally, I had ethical responsibility in qualitative research to allow everyone involved to be experts in their experiences by bringing wisdom and generating knowledge on their own accord.

There were no participants that I had supervisory or an instructor relationship within this case study. Due to the small number of female superintendents in the large southwestern state, I did know some of the study participants. One relationship was

between one female superintendent and myself; both attended the aspiring superintendent's academy in the large southwestern state where she was a presenter for the conference. The second relationship was between one participant who was a superintendent in a district in the same region as myself, where both attended regional education meetings with other superintendents. There was no power over or supervisory relationship with any of the participants. Because the participants had no or little connection to me, I remained objective during all interviews. Also, there were no preconceived assumptions about the perspectives learned from this research allowing me to remain ethical and unbiased (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The design of this study minimized any of my personal bias or preconceptions. This was done by remaining aware throughout the study of potential bias, using a sample method to find participants for the research, using interviewing protocols on each participant, interpreting the data with objectivity, and using member checks to establish validity and credibility.

I used to be an aspiring female superintendent and have served as a female superintendent in a large southwestern state. Further, I am very familiar with the effort it takes, along with the tools, techniques, tactics, and personal sacrifices that had to be made to attain the superintendent position. Bringing personal bias into the study is an ethical consideration when interviewing is the primary source of information (Duggan, 2015). Collaboration and engagement of participants, colleagues, and mentors were necessary for conducting ethical and valid research that challenges a researcher's biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Methodology

Ravitch and Carl (2016) defined methodology as the research approach, design, methods, and implementation that shape the overall approach to a study's methods. Those methods included the related processes that informed the study and the specific research methods used to collect and analyze data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Using a qualitative, exploratory case study revealed patterns and themes that helped create an overall understanding of females' preparations, challenges, and experiences to attain a superintendent position in the large southwestern state.

Convenience sampling was used for this study. Etikan and Alkassim (2016) noted that convenience sampling is a non-random sampling where members of the target population meet specific practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, availability, and willingness to participate. Females who fit the criteria of the research study were selected on a non-random basis. Due to my geographical location and the limited number of females available for this study, convenience sampling was effective (Etikan & Alkassim, 2016). Females serving or who had served as a superintendent in any of the service center areas in this large southwestern state in the previous three years were considered for this study. I identified participants by utilizing knowledge of those serving in the superintendent role and utilizing lists from the state Regional Education Service Centers to identify female superintendents.

The large southwestern state is divided into 20 Regional Education Service Centers. These regional centers serve as a point of contact for districts, parents, and community members in over 1200 school districts (Snapshot 2019, 2019). Education

service centers are the heart of the information, technical assistance, and training for superintendents and their staff (Snapshot 2019, 2019). Before conducting any interviews, I checked the education service center directory and school superintendent listings or prior years' listings to ensure all participants met the criteria. Ten females were selected for this study based on participant criteria.

I contacted participants for this study through email addresses provided by the state education agency, school district websites, and service centers. For those females meeting the criteria who expressed interest in participating, a Letter of Consent was sent that directly identified the research needs, expectations, and outcomes. The 10 interested females were considered in the order in which they were received. I used the 10 participants to reach saturation. Saturation occurs when no additional data will surface or similar instances occur over and over in research making the data saturated (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Another way to say this is that saturation happens when the quality and quantity of information in qualitative research are at the point where there are no new themes or information to observe in the data collected (Guest et al., 2020).

Instrumentation

For this study, face-to-face or virtual interviews were conducted using open-ended questions designed to gain perspectives, insights, and opinions from a targeted group of female superintendents. As part of the interview, there was a self-disclosed discussion of the professional preparation resume and each participant's experiences necessary to attain the superintendent position. This data was used to support the interview data. Flexibility and open-ended interview questions were used, and I asked the

participants probing questions or for expansions of their answers throughout the research to elicit in-depth responses. The participants' perspectives were the focus of this study, and the structure of the qualitative research lent itself to obtaining knowledge from current or previously serving female superintendents on the educational preparations that may be relevant for females to successfully attain the superintendent position. The questions were used to conduct the initial interviews with all participants. In the literature review, researchers pointed to areas that needed further research on female superintendents, and this informed the questions that I asked the participants.

Interviews were conducted and recorded using the interview protocol as noted in Appendix B. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the geographic location of the participants, the interviews were done virtually and were recorded through the online platform. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim using speech-to-text. The speech-to-text function provided a convenient method for transcribing every word into typed documents.

The interview protocol developed for this case study was written to address the two research questions. Follow-up questions were used to clarify answers. This protocol was designed to ensure the questions were straightforward and addressed the research questions to provide content validity. Content validity is the extent to which the questions cover the study's full range (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To establish content validity, one participant who met the criteria for this study but did not participate in the study was asked to participate in a field test interview to ensure that all questions were

straightforward and elicited discussion that addressed the research questions for this study.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Before any participant recruitment or data collection for this study, the Walden University Institutional Review Board reviewed and ensured that the research complies with the University's ethical standards and federal regulations. Once approval to proceed with the study was granted by the district, and IRB approval was granted, the following procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection occurred. The large southwestern state's education agency publishes names, districts, and regions of superintendents in each service area and statewide every year. Each female superintendent or previously serving superintendent was contacted via email named research recruitment email to explain and identify the research and case study's purpose for recruitment of research participants, the need for submission of a resume, the interview platform, review of the transcripts for validity and reliability, privacy protection and participant requirements (see Appendix A).

After receiving IRB approval, participants were additionally recruited by sending a prescriptive email called the leader interview consent form which identified that the researcher was seeking current female superintendents or those who had previously served in the past three years to participate in a study. The participants were clear about the role of the researcher and the data collection instruments used throughout the process including sample questions and their resumes as secondary resources. All participants were given details about their role in the research, and any questions or concerns about

the study were addressed at that time. The phone conversation included a detailed overview of the Letter of Consent that each participant reviewed, signed, and returned prior to interviews. The Letter of Consent was sent electronically to all interested parties before the phone call.

The Letter of Consent included a brief overview and purpose of the study and the overarching research questions. All procedures were explained, including the length of time for the audio recording and the transcript review. The letter also explained that to complete the study, there had to be informed consent. The Letter of Consent consisted of the following parts: a description of the voluntary nature of the study; the risks and benefits of being in the study; the payment each participant would receive; the privacy and confidentiality of the study; the Walden University IRB approval and expiration dates; and, the researchers contact information. All participants had to sign this Letter of Consent to participate in the study.

Once the Letter of Consent was sent back to the researcher, an email exchange or phone call (depending on which method the participant preferred) was made to set up the interview date, time, and location (if face-to-face). This was followed up with a confirmation email about the meeting details. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any time without any penalty or consequences. There was not enough interest generated from the contact list from the state education agency, so the researcher reached out to the female superintendent group that communicates daily through an online platform to search for potential participants. This online platform was set up by and is run by one of the female superintendents in the large southwestern state

that was the basis of this study. A Letter of Consent was sent to any additional participants who agreed to participate in this study. The Letter of Consent was meant to be a tool to inform participants of this study about the purpose, procedures, and sample questions, use of the resume, required privacy protection, as well as the risks and benefits of the study. After printing and signing the Informed Consent document, all participants in this study could return it by either US mail or fax or simply by giving consent by email. Interviews were set up on a participant-by-participant basis and were dependent upon the participant's preference in communication. The interview protocol as noted in Appendix B was used for all interviews and similar questions were used to highlight points in the resumes. Before the interview date of each participant, they were asked to send their resume to the researcher's email address in order for me to explore the secondary resource and formulate questions that may lend more insight into the preparations each participant made in attaining the superintendent position. The virtual interviews were all recorded, and hand-written notes were taken throughout the process. Because good listening and asking good questions are a natural part of good qualitative research, I focused on practicing good listening and note-taking skills (Yin, 2016). When all data was collected, data analysis began. The entirety of the interview was recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim using text-to-speech software which provided a convenient method for transcribing every word into text format and then transferring it to typed documents.

Member checks were used to establish validity, credibility, and adequate representations of their realities and to determine the accuracy of analysis (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). Once the interviews were transcribed, the participants were sent their transcript, and asked to respond if there was any need for clarification or a follow-up interview.

Data Analysis Plan

A qualitative design approach allowed for themes to form and unfold through interviews and interpretation of the data (Clandinin, 2016). There must be interpretation through shared responses, data transcription, and processing of coded information once it is collected (Roller, 2016). According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), coding organizes data into manageable chunks so that I could find, group, and thematically cluster various pieces of data related to the research questions, research questions over their specific resumes, findings, constructs, or themes across the data set. The data was broken down into codes, themes, and contextual materials to identify and look for similar themes and identify the broader meaning and context (Creswell, 2014). I moved the collected data around in various ways to identify patterns, insights, and concepts that could emerge through data manipulation (Yin, 2014). Matrices and categories for targeted data placement, visual displays, and graphics for exploring patterns and themes are all examples of possible interpretation strategies (Yin, 2014). All transcripts and field notes were coded during the data analysis process. The data was analyzed according to the steps listed below:

1. Completed the recorded interviews.
2. Reviewed notes and recordings.
3. Transferred the data from speech to text.

4. Completed an open coding process to develop themes and categories.
5. Conducted a pattern-matching process.
6. Built a case study explanation.
7. Defined common perspectives until there were confirmed themes and data saturation.
8. Developed a description of meanings from the participants' perspectives representing the entire group.
9. Repeated the process as needed in order to confirm that the information is dependable (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Trustworthiness

Member checks were conducted to address any issues with the credibility of the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that member checks are one of the most critical provisions that can be made in order to increase credibility. Member checks are a way to measure and establish credibility (Guba, 1981). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the investigator must be able to purport that his or her reconstructions are recognizable to audience members as adequate representations of their realities, and they must be allowed to react to them. All participants in this study were allowed to review the accuracy of their transcripts and had a chance to give feedback on the interviews that provided clarification as needed.

According to Guba (1981), qualitative research aims not to produce factual statements that can be generalized to other people or settings but to develop descriptive, context-relevant statements. Transferability is one-way qualitative studies can apply to

broader contexts through their content-specific richness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Transferability in this research was achieved by providing detailed descriptions of the data and the context so that readers can compare their own or other contexts based on the information provided (Guba, 1981). Females desiring to attain a superintendent position in the large southwestern state, can make educated decisions about the transferability of the findings and how they may apply them personally or to organizations that are preparing females to attain the superintendent position.

Dependability means that the researcher has a defined way of collecting the data and that the data are consistent with the study's argument (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The participants of this study were described, and all criteria were met in terms of being female and currently serving or having previously served as a superintendent in the past three years. The themes and perspectives uncovered in the study may be helpful for females seeking the superintendent position or for programs and organizations preparing females to attain the superintendent position. The process is outlined in detail so that the study can be repeated and to avoid any concerns related to dependability (Guba, 1981).

Qualitative researchers do not seek objectivity, but they seek confirmability or findings that can be confirmed (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Researchers seeking confirmability must acknowledge biases and prejudices and their involvement in the data's interpretations (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this qualitative study, I am a female who at one time aspired to become a superintendent and I have served in the superintendent role. I collected information from multiple resources (Yin, 2014), and the study results directly reflected the perspectives of the females who participated.

Ethical Procedures

To avoid ethical complications and limitations on research design, no research was conducted at my workplace, including selecting participants or collecting data on the researcher's colleagues or from the researcher's viewpoints (Research Ethics FAQs for Educational Settings, Walden University, 2020). As previously noted, potential participants received information about the entire research process, and any questions had been answered before beginning the interview.

According to the Walden University research ethics approval checklist, all recruitment, consent, and data collection steps must be clearly articulated. A Letter of Consent used for this study. The researcher protected the privacy and confidentiality of all participants throughout the study, and all names will remain confidential. Names have only been stored on completed consent letters and served as a means for the researcher to have appropriate contact information to conduct interviews. Interview data was stored on a password-protected computer with password-protected documents. Real names and consent documents have been stored in a separate, locked area, and code names were used for the entirety of the study to protect the confidentiality of all participants. According to the policies consistent with the Walden University Institutional Review Board, all paper records, data files, consent letters, and digital recordings will be destroyed after the fifth year of the completed study (Sample Letter of Consent for Adults, Walden University, 2022).

According to the Walden University research ethics approval checklist, the US federal regulations define minimal risks as the probability and magnitude of harm or

discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. There were minimal risks associated with participants' psychological, relational, or professional reputations in this study. Because the participants' identities in this case study were kept confidential and all participants could stop the interview process at any time, the risks were minimized.

Although little conflict of interest exists, I was once an aspiring and serving female superintendent in a large southwestern state. To encourage honest responses and to avoid conflicts of interest, I asked female participants for this study who met the requirements and chose participants who were never subordinates or had any real personal relationship with me. The interview transcript was provided to the participants, and the participants were allowed the opportunity to review their responses. There was little burden put on the participants in this study. No coercive language was used in the recruitment of participants for this study. A Yeti coffee cup and a \$15 Amazon gift card were offered at the study's end, but many participants declined the offer. No recruiting occurred nor was encouraged in the work environment, and no service providers were used for recruitment. Because of the small number of female superintendents in the large southwestern state, my name, face, and school district may have been known by some of the participants before the completion of the study. The researcher paid particular attention to the selection of participants. I avoided selecting participants with any relevant knowledge of me, and I had no relevant knowledge of any participant during the course of this study. This recruitment method even further reduced the number of eligible

participants for this study. Throughout the study, I was appropriately qualified through the research course sequence and data collection techniques learned during doctoral coursework at Walden University and was supervised remotely by Walden staff (Research Ethics Approval Checklist, Walden University, 2022).

Informed consent was received from each of the participants in this study. The Walden University Letter of Consent template was used for this study. The Letter of Consent included an explanation of the process, the study, the purpose, the participant criteria, data collection and time commitment procedures, and all participants' privacy. The language of the Letter of Consent was easily understandable and clearly defined that participation was voluntary and could be stopped at any time. The Letter of Consent noted the reasonable risks and benefits that could result from the research. I required the Letter of Consent to be signed and returned via US mail, fax, or email before interviewing any participant.

Summary

In conclusion of chapter 3, a qualitative case study research design was used in this study. A qualitative, single case study based on content analysis was used to reveal patterns and frameworks that helped create an overall profile of the preparations, challenges, and experiences necessary for females to attain a superintendent position in the large southwestern state. To gain data for this study, I interviewed 10 females in one large southwestern state who are currently serving or have previously served as superintendents in the last three years. For this study, online interviews were conducted using open-ended interview questions designed to gain perspectives, insight, and opinions

from a targeted group of female superintendents (Creswell, 2014). Data was collected and analyzed for themes and meanings while considering all of the ethical practices and procedures defined by Walden University and IRB Review Board.

Chapter 4 analyzes the research conducted and includes information about the findings. Specific information about the setting, data collection, and further information on trustworthiness are also discussed. A complete account of data analysis and the results of the female superintendents' experiences and perspectives in this study are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this case study was to explore the perspectives of current and previously serving female superintendents about the preparation and experiences important for females to secure a superintendent position in one large southwestern state. The two research questions that guided this study were as follows:

RQ 1: What preparations and experiences are important to prepare females to be successful in attaining the superintendent position in this large southwestern state?

RQ 2: What are the challenges to attaining the superintendent position for aspiring females in this large southwestern state?

The process and questions were designed to understand the perspectives of currently and previously serving female superintendents about the preparation and experiences that were important for females to successfully secure a superintendent position in one large southwestern state. Participants were asked seven interview questions guided by the two main research questions. Each participant discussed their resume based on questions relevant to the two guiding research questions. This chapter reviews the setting, demographics relevant to the study, the data collection process, and results of the data analyzed using a qualitative case study research design.

Setting

The participants in this study were interviewed in an online format. The interviews were recorded on a computer and via a secondary recording device to ensure that a technology failure did not impede data collection. Each of the participants chose what setting they preferred to use for the interview. Many participants were interviewed

from an office within their workplace, and two were interviewed from a home workspace. To my knowledge, there were no organizational or personal conditions that influenced participants.

Demographics

One criterion for this study was that all participants were currently serving or had served in the last three years as female superintendents in one large southwestern state. All participants met this demographic study criterion. Table 2 notes the research interviewee order, the district identifier or area in which each participant was serving or had previously served during the interview process, and the years of experience as a superintendent for each participant at the time of the interview. Each participant is serving or has previously served in a district ranging from just over 500 students to a district with nearly 27,000 students.

Table 1

Order, District Identifier, and Years of Experience by the Research Participant

Order	District Identifier	Years of Experience
Participant 1	East	5 years
Participant 2	West	7 years, 6 months
Participant 3	West Central	1 year
Participant 4	North	9 years
Participant 5	Northwest	6 years
Participant 6	East Central	7 years, 6 months
Participant 7	South	3 years
Participant 8	Southeast	3 years, 3 months
Participant 9	South Central	4 years
Participant 10	West	2 years

Data Collection

The data collection process included 10 interviews, which were approximately 60 minutes each. Interviews were conducted between October 2021 and June 2022. Each participant was voice recorded through an online recorded session and recorded on a secondary source. There were no variations in the data collection method. No unusual circumstances existed in any of the interviews. One participant who interviewed from home had numerous background sound issues during the first part of the interview that presented an initial communication challenge; however the issues were quickly corrected, and the interview progressed with no impact.

Data Analysis

A qualitative design approach that allowed themes to unfold through shared similar responses, data transcription, and processing of coded information was used during the data analysis. As Ravitch and Carl (2016) suggest, coding is organizing data into manageable chunks so that the researcher can find, group, and thematically cluster various pieces of data related to the research questions, findings, constructs, or themes across the data set. The data were coded during data analysis until patterns, insights, and concepts emerged. All transcripts were coded during the data analysis process.

A vital first step to data analysis is to read the entire transcript without any coding interruptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), so I began my data analysis process by doing an unstructured reading. I then re-read the data to do open coding that specifically centered on the research questions and explored how aspects of the participants' perspectives informed the analysis while identifying regularly occurring patterns. During the open

coding process, I noted similar phrases and words used by the participants. I looked for gaps in the code set that provided meaningful information but did not fit into any descriptive category. To identify relationships and diverging themes across the data, I grouped, combined, and deleted codes while considering any overlapping codes to determine if data was missing (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). During the open coding process, I developed a list of descriptive codes, categories, and characteristics that emerged during data analysis. The data were analyzed according to the steps listed below:

1. Completed the recorded interviews.
2. Reviewed notes and recordings.
3. Transferred the data from speech to text.
4. Completed an open coding process to develop themes and categories.
5. Conducted a pattern-matching process.
6. Built a case study explanation.
7. Defined common perspectives until there were confirmed themes and data saturation. An example of this can be found in Table 1.
8. Developed a description of meanings from the participants' perspectives representing the entire group.
9. Repeated the process as needed in order to confirm that the information is dependable (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

In the event of a discrepant case, I pored over the data throughout this research to uncover assumptions, illuminate alternative explanations, and pay thoughtful attention to

these participant perspectives that would advance credibility for the findings, and increase the overall understanding of their preparations, challenges, and experiences.

Table 2

Themes and Perspectives

Categories	Perspective	Emerging Theme
Challenges	women with children may not be able to put enough time into the job	Acquiring the position in spite bias
Challenges	females will not be able to redirect a head football coach	Acquiring the position in spite bias
Challenges	a female will not be able to redirect other male employees	Acquiring the position in spite bias
Challenges of bias	ability to balance family obligations and the superintendent role	Acquiring the position in spite bias

The data analysis process began as I read each transcript without any coding. The transcripts were read again to perform open coding, specifically centering on the research questions and identifying patterns and themes from the participants' perspectives. Similar phrases and words used by the participants were noted during the open coding process. Gaps and outlying responses in the data set that provided meaningful information but did not fit into any descriptive category were also noted. A list of descriptive codes, categories, and characteristics that emerged during data analysis is discussed later in this chapter.

Data analysis occurred by using the following steps: (1) the interviews were recorded; (2) the notes and recordings were reviewed; (3) the data was transferred from speech to text; (4) an open coding process to develop themes and categories was completed; (5) a pattern match process was conducted; (6) case study explanations were built; (7) common responses confirmed themes and saturation; and (8) a description of

meanings from the participants' perspectives that represented the entire group was developed. The process was repeated as necessary to confirm dependability as suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2016).

Evidence of Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), one way to establish credibility during qualitative research is to use member checking for adequate representation and accuracy in analyzing each participant's reality. Member checking was used with each participant to establish credibility. They were sent the transcript from the interview and responded to the transcriptions to ensure the information was recognizable as an adequate representation of their reality. They were all allowed to give feedback and clarification to the transcripts as needed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The purpose of qualitative research is not to produce statements that should be generalized or reach generalizability; rather, it is to develop descriptive, context-relevant statements for others to understand (Guba, 1981). This research has many descriptive, context-relevant statements specific to each currently serving or previously serving female superintendent that may be helpful to aspiring female superintendents. While these statements should not be generalized, they can be transferred into a broader context. Transferability allows qualitative studies to be applied to broader contexts through content-specific richness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Descriptive, context-relevant information in this research provides detailed descriptions of the data and context so readers can compare them to their own or other contexts based on the information provided (Guba, 1981). Females who desire to attain a superintendent position in the

large southwestern state can make their own informed decisions about the transferability of the information within this research, along with how it may apply to them specifically in their context, or how it may relate to the superintendent preparation program they attend.

When data were collected in a defined manner, and the data are consistent with the study's argument, then dependability is established (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The process of data collection has been outlined for this study and can be repeated if desired, and every participant in this study was a female who is serving or has served in the last three years as a superintendent in the large southwestern state. Thus, dependability was reached in this study.

Reflexivity is using activities throughout the research, such as monitoring the personal role of the researcher by assessing and reassessing the positionality, subjectivity, and guiding assumptions that shape the research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). All interviews and information derived from the study were done objectively, professionally, and by reflecting on possible biases. Any of my previous perceptions were avoided by paying particular attention to following the interview protocol, using appropriate interviewing techniques when asking questions, and recording responses; therefore, reflexivity was achieved.

Results of Analysis

The participants in this study were interviewed using seven questions developed from the two main research questions. Each participant also provided their resume, and a

discussion about their resume was part of the interview discussion. The interview process and questions answered the two research questions in depth.

The two research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What preparations and experiences are important to prepare females to be successful in attaining the superintendent position in this large southwestern state?

RQ2: What are the challenges to attaining the superintendent position for aspiring females in this large southwestern state?

The interview questions aimed at specifically studying the preparations, experiences, and challenges to the superintendent position for females looking to attain that position. In addition, the questions used for each interview explicitly related to how each had sought specific experiences, as noted in their resume, to attain the superintendent position.

Results by Research Question

This section summarizes coded units to more significant representations of categories and themes for each research question. As a result of the coding process, Table 3 provides detail of the codes developed from both research questions.

Table 3

Categories and Themes

Question #	Categories	Themes
1	Pathway	Breaking traditional barriers to the superintendency.
1	Preparation	Achieving depth in preparation and knowledge.
1	Networking	Navigating the social networks present in the position.
2	Bias	Acquiring the position in spite of the bias.
2	Challenges	Overcoming gender norms and stereotypes.

Theme 1: Breaking traditional barriers to the superintendency.

RQ 1: What preparations and experiences are important to prepare females to be successful in attaining the superintendent position in this large southwestern state?

The traditional pathway to the superintendent position most often follows the route of the classroom teacher, assistant principal, campus principal, central office administrator, assistant superintendent, and then superintendent. Although a few participants followed parts of the traditional pathway, each spoke about finding a way to fill perceived gaps in experience and having the ability to, or intentionally breaking, the traditional pathway to the superintendent position. All participants began their journey to the superintendency by teaching. Eight participants had some form of campus leadership experience, including the assistant principal or principal role. Eight participants had central office experience as a director, assistant superintendent, or deputy superintendent before attaining the superintendent position. Two participants went directly from the campus level to the superintendent position.

This data showed there were two critical areas of knowledge, no matter the pathway to the superintendent position. First, each had to learn and understand the needs of campus leaders. Second, each had to learn and understand the systemic processes and perspectives of employees in the central office.

Participant 7 stated, “The more you can experience so that you have reference points, the better prepared you are.” Participant 3 said it is not a “single title, it is the multi-faceted experiences across the district that help” with the knowledge base needed to be a superintendent. Participant 4 stated “find the pathway that gives you the depth of

experience you need but continues to allow you to position yourself to move forward toward the position.” One participant noted that she made a life choice in her pathway as a new mother and went the central office route instead of becoming a principal (Participant 4), while another participant noted that she was “told many times to go back and be a campus principal” but did not. Participant 5 explained, many “times in our industry, people think that you have to be a high school principal, and I think that is a fallacy. It is more internal because we women hold ourselves back by thinking that we have to sit in every single seat and be prepared before we take on the challenge. If there is any takeaway, it is that that is not true.” Although most participants were similar in their thoughts on not having to have been a principal prior to attaining the superintendent role, two participants noted explicitly that the principalship was a necessary experience. Participant 1, who did not have or take the opportunity to be a campus principal, said, “if you have the opportunity to be a principal, don’t pass it up.”

Theme 2: Achieving depth in preparation and knowledge.

RQ 1: What preparations and experiences are important to prepare females to be successful in attaining the superintendent position in this large southwestern state?

The preparations needed to attain the superintendent position as a female can be summarized as vast and include serving as an educator, directing programs, obtaining certifications, fostering mentorships, serving on committees, and attaining the highest-level degree. All of the females in the study stated that they had many years of education. All participants held a master’s degree, most went through a superintendent certification program, and the majority held a doctorate or were pursuing it at the time of the study.

Participant 1 expressed that having a background in federal programs and understanding funding, instruction, and data were critical in becoming the ultimate instructional leader. The research portion of the master's and doctoral degrees were crucial elements that allowed Participant 2 to understand how to dig into policy successfully. The superintendent certification program and learning about the 10 functions of a superintendent, specifically in human resources, operations, safety, political aspects, change management, and curriculum, were all noted as being valuable by Participant 3. Participating in mock superintendent activities in her superintendent certification program was noteworthy for Participant 4. Participant 5 noted that the separate superintendent certification program taught her skills in competencies such as "bonds, taxes, maintenance and operations, governance, board relations, political stances." At the same time, her master's degree in teaching and learning gave her "a good grasp on curriculum, instruction, and assessment." She noted that "both positioned her to be successful in the superintendent position." Participant 6 noted that her doctoral program prepared her most for the superintendent position because "many of the professors had been or were serving superintendents that provided lots of opportunity to do case studies on the content they were studying." Participant 7 said that the most helpful educational preparation was her superintendent internship and that "it was successful because of the willingness of the superintendent to allow her to see the reality of the day-to-day, which gave her a better view of what it would be like in the position." While Participant 9 and Participant 10 listed their doctoral programs as being most helpful in providing "good principles of leadership" (Participant 9) and providing

“knowledge on the principles of leadership and a lens in which to look at” (Participant 10) the many facets of the superintendent position. Although educational preparation seemed helpful to all participants, many participants listed an array of preparations outside of the traditional university setting.

A majority of the participants said or alluded no educational or preparation program or support system prepared them for the superintendent role except for actually being in the position. Because the superintendent position includes responsibilities for students, staff, budget, maintenance, transportation, teaching, learning, and coaching, among many other things, no one program can prepare a person for the complexity of the position. Participant 1 stated

Nothing prepares you for the day-to-day stress and responsibility of the superintendency. The superintendent role is a reminder that no course can prepare you for the actual position. There is even an ongoing saying that they use in her district, that they did not teach me that in superintendent school.

Participant 10 spoke about her superintendent preparation program as a way to gain insight into the different elements of leadership, but “they only touched the surface and did not help her with the complexity of decision making. It is only living the life that has helped her” be a superintendent.

Theme 3: Navigating the social networks present in the position.

RQ 1: What preparations and experiences are important to prepare females to be successful in attaining the superintendent position in this large southwestern state?

There is a need to serve in state associations, participate in women's leadership councils, work with mentors, and use headhunters to build a strong network of professionals who can promote females as having the ability to serve as a female superintendent actively and positively. Many of the participants noted that networking was helpful and sometimes even necessary.

Participant 4 recommended actively participating in the state's Association of School Administrators, whether serving on a committee or going through the Aspiring Superintendents Academy, the Future Ready Superintendents Academy or the Midwinter Conference. Most participants noted that the state's Association of School Administrators was influential in their ongoing preparation and success as superintendent and as a means of networking so that people would know their names. Multiple participants also noted that getting involved with the Association of School Business Officials, specifically the budget boot camp or the yearlong budget cohort, was a good training and networking opportunity for those aspiring to be a superintendent and those serving in the role. The Council for Women School Executives was also mentioned as a reliable way to be supported by females as female superintendents in the state. However, numerous participants noted that the membership has been more helpful while they have been in the role than while they were trying to attain the position.

Theme 1: Acquiring the Position In Spite of Bias

RQ2: What are the challenges to attaining the superintendent position for aspiring females in this large southwestern state?

There is a need for aspiring females to prepare for maneuvering bias by proving in-depth knowledge, appearing dominant, and having the most advanced degree. All participants spoke about gender bias they had to overcome, work through, or ignore while acquiring the position.

Two participants, 3 and 4, were asked about their ability to balance family obligations and the superintendent role. Participant 4 was asked if she could make the hard decisions if the district continued to experience significant financial challenges and cut funding.

Participant 9 suggested that this bias during the interview comes from fear – fear that women with children may not be able to put enough time into the job or that females will not be able to redirect a head football coach or other male employees. She stated that during the interview, you have to

Be able to specifically convince them and lean in, look eye to eye, and say that maybe with some women, but tough conversations and critical conversations for me are not difficult because the stakes are too high for me to allow mediocrity to occur.

Appearance during the superintendent interview also came up with a potential bias. Participant 9 was told by a colleague involved in superintendent searches that “there was an association of males in the superintendent role, so she needed to enter the interview in a power suit.” Participant 4 noted that “her physical and personality characteristics are outside the norm of a perceived female,” making it hard for people to refer to her as weak.

Multiple participants also spoke about the board asking questions about their depth of knowledge in finance, construction, and male perceived roles. Participant 9 said “you have to sell yourself on things that men don’t have to sell themselves on.” Multiple participants spoke about the need for having a doctorate as a female to be considered for the position. Participant 8 stated that “for females, it is a must,” and she thinks it “is a fluke” for females to be considered for the position or interviewed without the degree or at least being in a doctoral program to attain the degree.

Female participants described specific times when they had to overcome gender norms and stereotypes to attain or succeed in the superintendent position. Four areas of gender norms and stereotypes were exposed. The first can be defined as the organization in which females served, the second was defined as gender norms as part of society, the third was the networking or mentorship they experienced, and the last was the internal or personal struggle. Overcoming the gender norms and stereotypes of the educational organization itself was mentioned throughout the interviews. One example of educational organization gender norming or stereotyping was that females needed to have their doctorate to be considered for the superintendent position.

Theme 2: Overcoming Gender Norms and Stereotypes

RQ2: What are the challenges to attaining the superintendent position for aspiring females in this large southwestern state?

Participant 7 said, “I believe that women have to have their doctorate to even get their foot in the door in a lot of cases versus a man that doesn’t.” Another organizational gender issue is that female salaries and benefits may be unequal to their male

counterparts in the position. Participant 1 said that the salary of her superintendent contract was lower than that of her male predecessor and it would take her longer to get to that salary. Multiple participants talked about how the education organization is broken down into parts, some of which are stereotypically female and some are stereotypically male. Participant 7 mentioned that questions from females are usually “geared around curriculum and instruction, program decisions, and those types of things, while the male side of the room was more about finance and operations.” Participant 8 echoed that some parts of the organization are female roles and some are male roles when she was working on a construction project and had to work through the construction manager because “he’s a guy and he may actually know what is going on and you wouldn’t.”

Other gender norms and stereotypes that stemmed from the societal level were discussed. Participant 3 spoke about the societal expectation that females should be compassionate, have empathy, and be emotional. When she had not displayed emotional behavior in her role, she was considered “cold-hearted.” Participant 6 talked about how societal stereotyping allowed for making assumptions that females do not “understand anything about sports” and the continued practice of “the ‘good ole boy network,’ especially in the football district.” Participant 5 spoke about the societal expectations of females versus males that begin early where females are encouraged to be prepared while males are told to be brave and take risks. She said that when her dad took her to school as a kid, he “rolled out of bed and took us to school” while her “mom showered, put makeup on, made us breakfast and was set before she took us to school.” Describing this as a societal pressure that “even something as small as personal hygiene, women have to

better prepared, and have to be perfect while boys get to take risks and girls can't take risks because they would be risking perfection." Participant 6 summed up the societal stereotyping with the statement that "you just have to work harder as a woman in the job. You have to work harder at gaining people's respect." Some of the gender norming were described as mentoring challenges. Participant 10 said that she believes she stayed so long in her role as the assistant superintendent because she felt like her superintendent thought that was the best role for her. He groomed her male colleague, which was in an equal role as an assistant superintendent, to move into a superintendent role but never pushed her.

Participant 5 had a completely different experience and "spent a lot of time with a superintendent in a district that championed women as professionals." Because of those experiences she would meet the gender bias assumptions head-on by having conversations about the assumption and getting past what a good leader does and does not look like and act like, using these moments as teachable moments. Participant 7 stated that her mentor specifically took time to engage her in activities that had nothing to do with curriculum and instruction that better prepared me to be a superintendent: "Having a good mentor who will assist you, introduce you, and be a champion for you is important." According to Participant 9, "you do not even get in front of a board without being in someone's stable." She explained that men have been doing this for years for each other, and until recently, women were not doing this for other women. She also explained that a good mentor will make you "able to negotiate" and ensure you are "getting your highest salary numbers," rather than things that are not considered salary. To avoid gender norms

and stereotypical issues in the position, Participant 9 stated that “we have to do better within our support systems and network.”

Some of the gender norms and stereotypes were more personal. One participant mentioned that she felt she needed to go to the central office instead being a principal because she was a new mom. Other participants spoke about the fear of dealing with things like construction or storm damage that they were not comfortable with being a struggle for them. Participant 4 explained that “because females look at job descriptions and think they can only do 90% of the job, they hold back because they think they are not really ready because of the 10% they don’t know about” is a personal struggle. She said to not hold back because of the struggle but rather focus on “a history of successes” that would allow for future success. Participant 4 summed up the personal struggle by stating that it

Is more of an internal thing because women hold themselves back by thinking that we have to sit in every single seat and have to be absolutely prepared before they take on the challenge. If there is any takeaway, it is that that is not true.

Summary

In conclusion, 10 female superintendents or previously serving female superintendents were interviewed from a variety of different regions in one large southwestern state. The group represented an array of ages, previous professional experiences, experiences as superintendents, and preparation types. The themes that emerged and developed include breaking traditional barriers to the superintendency, achieving depth in preparation and knowledge, navigating the social networks present in

the position, acquiring the position in spite of the bias, and overcoming gender norms and stereotypes. Each of the themes explained the journey for aspiring female superintendents to navigate. The themes and perspectives uncovered in the study may be helpful to females seeking the superintendent position or for programs and organizations preparing females to attain the superintendent position.

Chapter 5 includes the discussions, conclusions, recommendations for further research, and implications for practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The problem that led to this study is that females with a strong career-related experience, solid preparation, and leadership experiences are not securing superintendent positions in a large southwestern state. The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore the perspectives of current and previously serving female superintendents about the preparation, experiences, and challenges that are important for females to successfully secure a superintendent position in one large southwestern state. This study was conducted to understand the preparations, challenges, and experiences necessary for aspiring female superintendents to attain the position because there continues to be a disproportionately lower number of females in the superintendent position nationwide. The data collected through this study highlighted commonalities that may help shape how females prepare themselves, engage in preparation programs, and seek professional educational roles to help them to attain the superintendent position. Understanding and interpreting the data can support and enhance future practices for females desiring to move into the superintendent position in the large southwestern state.

The superintendency used to be defined by policymakers and boards as a management position over systems and operations (Tyack & Hansot, 1988); however, the job has evolved and comes with much greater responsibilities. More recently, superintendents must have solid managerial skills, ensure students can compete in the global, information-based economy (Bjork et al., 2014), and make academic gains with improved test scores (Kowalski, 2015). The data in this research confirm that being

prepared and knowing a vast array of areas is essential, but also that superintendents are held accountable monetarily, and their school district's accreditation status is dependent upon the superintendent's successful instructional leadership. This research was grounded in the philosophy of social cognitive career theory, where career development has three aspects – career interests, career choices, and career obtainment – all grounded by the principles of self-efficacy, mentorship, goal setting, and outcome expectations (Lent et al., 1994). The perspectives of the female superintendents interviewed as the data relate to the social cognitive career theory will be discussed.

Interpretation of the Findings

Throughout this study, the findings confirmed, disconfirmed, and extended the previous knowledge compared to the peer-reviewed literature and the conceptual framework. The research questions used to guide this study were developed to help understand the preparations and experiences important for aspiring superintendents to be successful in attaining the superintendent position, as well as the challenges to overcome in order to attain the position. This research addressed the following research questions:

RQ 1: What preparations and experiences are important to prepare females to be successful in attaining the superintendent position in this large southwestern state?

RQ 2: What are the challenges to attaining the superintendent position for aspiring females in this large southwestern state?

The themes of this study included: (1a) breaking traditional barriers to the superintendency, (1b) achieving depth in preparation and knowledge, (1c) navigating the

social networks present in the position, (2a) acquiring the position in spite of bias, and (2b) overcoming gender norms and stereotypes.

Much of the literature in Chapter 2 discussed recent research on the females in the superintendent position and the challenges that may impact females' attainment of the position. As presented in Chapter 2, the superintendents' responsibilities are ever-changing and come with high expectations in this demanding role (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). The findings in this study confirmed this, as every participant echoed that the expectations of the superintendent's knowledge are vast and challenging. Additionally, the results showed that the extensive superintendent role includes the normal expectations of leading students, staff, departments, programs, and the board; however, it also expects to manage an environment of social justice, community, and safety.

A study by the American Association of School Administrators in 2015 indicated that females who serve as superintendents are more likely to be in smaller school districts and have been instructional leaders (Robinson et al., 2017). This research confirmed that most of the participants in this study served in small districts, with seven participants serving 2,000 or fewer students, one serving just over 8,000 students, and one serving over 26,000 students. Additionally, confirming is that all the female participants in this study were instructional leaders in some form during their careers prior to becoming superintendents. In 2017, females served an average of seven years in the superintendent position, and over 60% of the females who served had their doctorates (Robinson et al., 2017). This study confirms that 80% of the participants had or were pursuing their doctorate; however, this study did not confirm the seven years of service. The

participants in this study only had an average of 4.8 years of service in the superintendent position.

Much like in the literature review, some participants spoke about experiences of stereotyping or gender bias during the interviews. Bernal et al. (2017) found that one perceived barrier that females faced is that they made decisions based on emotions. One participant confirmed that she was accused in a letter from a community member of leading with emotion rather than logic, while another confirmed that because of her gender, she was expected to show compassion and empathy and was criticized for not having enough of either as a female superintendent. Donaldson (2018) noted that females face many challenges to the superintendency, including too few willing mentors and added family responsibilities. This study did not confirm the notion of having too few mentors; in fact, most participants spoke about having great mentors who played a significant role in their success. Only a few participants confirmed family responsibilities being a challenge; however, many participants spoke about the importance of having supportive spouses and families.

The literature review found that females struggle with societal expectations like being evaluated on how they dress, among other expectations (Bernal et al., 2017). The notion of societal expectations was not confirmed by all or a majority of participants in this study; however, one participant did speak about her experience of being told to wear a power suit by a headhunter because she was interviewing for a position with men. At the same time, another participant spoke about the difference in the expectations of things as simple as household chores between males and females at a young age, appearance

expectations for females, personal hygiene, preparedness, and perfection expected of females. Another noted barrier in the literature review was that in the United States, the path to the superintendent position is often closely aligned with the high school principal position, which is filled 70% of the time by males (Superville, 2017). This study confirmed that only four out of 10 participants held the high school principal position before becoming a superintendent. Multiple participants, however, also confirmed that the high school principal experience is one of many positions that can provide females with the skill set they need to become a superintendent.

Acceptable career paths and preparations continue to be a challenge in attaining the superintendent position. Females most often followed the path of a classroom teacher, elementary principal, central office director, or assistant superintendent and then were named to a superintendent role (Robinson et al., 2017). This study confirmed that all the participants' career pathways differed but still led to successfully attaining the superintendent position. Many participants took routes that did not include campus leadership, but they included upper-level administration, work in the district's central office, and service center positions.

Recent studies by Duevel et al. (2015) and Robinson et al. (2017) indicated that superintendents connected through programs and social networks that promoted success, were a voice of inspiration, and advocated for success in the isolated role. A significant finding of this study was that social networks and mentorships were influential in both attaining the position and being successful in the superintendent position. Every participant in this study spoke about the importance of a social network or mentorship.

Multiple participants confirmed the importance of mentoring others to succeed in attaining and thriving in the position. Multiple participants also confirmed that the superintendent role is a lonely place without a support network, and it is vital to seek out someone to converse with and ask for advice on how to handle situations. Equally important was that females have sponsors, mentors, and catalysts, who will speak positively to others about their ability to lead (Duevel et al., 2015). All of the study participants confirmed this. One participant confirmed that females must have someone in their network to introduce them to headhunters or someone connected to the position that will get them in front of the hiring board.

As cited by Bernal et al. (2017), school boards were often the gatekeepers of the superintendent position, and they did not consider or hire females at the same rate as males. While Superville (2017) acknowledged that educators saw subtle biases in how school boards and search firms recruited candidates, search firm or board of trustee bias was not confirmed during this research. Only one participant mentioned that there may have been a gender bias with the board or search firms as she had not received invitations to interview after numerous attempts at application.

The conceptual framework based on social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994) asserted that career development has three related aspects: career interests, career choices, and career obtainment and that all three elements build upon the concepts that self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals play a specific role in successful career outcomes. A study by Mehta and Sharma (2014), noted that self-efficacy was an essential event in female's career choices before moving into the superintendent position.

This study confirms the importance of the concept of all four components of self-efficacy as it relates to the social cognitive career theory because every participant spoke about the importance of believing in themselves, recognizing and honing in on their career accomplishments, having well-rounded career experiences, being a part of a social or mentoring network and maintaining their emotional preparedness prior to becoming and during their service as female superintendents.

The second tenant of social cognitive career theory relates to the effort, ability to persist, productivity, and successful encounters within leadership that promote positive outcome expectations and increased goal setting. Every participant in this study confirmed the notions of being productive and good at the job and having successful encounters with people who will become advocates in the superintendent's pursuit. Although only some participants talked about setting goals to become a superintendent, and some spoke specifically about not ever formally having plans to become a superintendent, all participants spoke about having goals to move into or higher up in educational administration. This study confirms that the participants valued and had outcome expectations for themselves as they aspired to become female superintendents.

As cited by Lent et al. (1994), personal goals and the intention to attain specific performance levels is the third house of the social cognitive career theory. This study confirms that every participant either personally set a goal to be an administrator in education that led them to aspire to become a superintendent or set specific performance levels for themselves, which in turn provided them the opportunity to become a superintendent. Moreover, an extension of this was confirmed with all ten participants

explaining that their career pathway and performance were important but equally important was having knowledge of and finding ways to fill in any knowledge gaps they had in all aspects of education.

Limitations of the Study

Proximity, time, the large number of districts, COVID protocols, and distance were all limitations of this study. Therefore all of the interviews in this study were done virtually.

Recommendations

Throughout the study, numerous ideas repeatedly resonated as crucial to successfully attaining the superintendent position, but how to do them still needs to be explored. To form a complete picture of females aspiring to the position, further studies are needed in a couple of critical areas. First, based on this research results and limitations, I recommend conducting this study on a larger group of female superintendents in face-to-face interviews to allow for a broader perspective regarding the preparations necessary for aspiring females to succeed in attaining the superintendent position.

Throughout this research, it was mentioned many times that without the coaching, advice, and lived experiences of good networking and mentorship, there would have been missed opportunities for the participants in this study. Participants also spoke about the importance of headhunters, hiring boards, and social networks; therefore, I recommend specific research on the perspectives on how exactly to build relationships with headhunters and hiring boards in whatever position a person is in and how to become an

active participant in the social networks that are important for both attaining and surviving in the superintendent position. I also recommend research on success and job satisfaction from the female perspective in the superintendent position, as this may assist those aspiring to the position to focus their expertise in areas that will allow them to be most successful and satisfied in the position.

This study focused on the preparations and experiences needed to attain the superintendent position as well as the challenges that females faced however, there was only a glimpse of information provided about interview preparation and practice. Therefore, I recommend future researchers include perspectives and information about the most common interview questions and preparations important for the first and second interviews, as well as research on how districts and university programs can better prepare those aspiring to become a superintendent.

Implications

Positive Social Change

This study supports implications for positive social change. Participants in this study noted that although the position continues to be male-dominated, some systemic changes have made the position more welcoming for females. There is still a need to develop a level playing field for females to make the position more equitably attainable. Implications from this study showed that equal pay for females in the superintendent role may still be an issue when comparing females to male predecessors or area superintendents. As noted by one participant, her salary was much lower than the male superintendent who preceded her. Using available salary information or area salary

surveys by hiring boards and headhunters could lead to positive social change by creating equal pay no matter the gender of the superintendent applicant.

Further implications from this study showed that most females were neither afforded nor took the opportunity to be a high school principal on their pathway to the superintendent position. The high school principalship was mentioned several times in the literature review as the stepping stone to the superintendent position. Positive social change could occur in this area if applicants, hiring boards, and headhunters removed the barrier or expectation of having high school principal experience before becoming a superintendent. This research suggests that many other professional pathways can result in successfully attaining the superintendent position.

Conclusion

In conclusion of this study, the results provided insight into the perceptions of female superintendents on the experience, preparations, and challenges to overcome to attain the superintendent position successfully. This research found that there is no 'one size fits all' answer; however, there are some core activities and preparations that may assist aspiring females in getting closer to the career outcome they desire. According to participants in this study, the career pathway a female takes before attaining the superintendent position is important, but equally important is being good in the current position, and finding ways through networking or mentoring encounters to fill gaps in knowledge. Recommended actions were to attend conferences, and participate in group activities and mock interview sessions that prepare you for what is expected of a superintendent. Additionally, creating and maintaining a network of people who will

advocate for you in pursuing the superintendent position is vital. Also, ensure that families are prepared for and support the commitments required for the position. This research supports the perspective that numerous factors related to the social cognitive career theory are involved in attaining the superintendent position. Some factors include setting goals and becoming involved in social or mentoring networks. In contrast, others were more internal factors such as believing in yourself, your accomplishments, and your work and finding support to assist with the emotional preparedness required to become the highest-serving educational administrator in a school district.

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Appendix A: Research Recruitment Email

Seeking female superintendents or previously serving female superintendents to participate in a study.

This study is about exploring the perspectives of current female superintendents or previously serving female superintendents in one large Southwestern state. The focus of these perspectives will be on the preparations, and experiences that are important to overcome in order for females to attain the superintendent position. The results of this study could help future aspiring females prepare for and be successful in attaining the superintendent position. For this study, you are invited to share your perspectives and experiences, along with your resume, during your journey to and throughout the superintendent position.

This research is part of the doctoral study for Erin Rene Fasel, an Ed.D. student at Walden University.

About the study:

- A resume submitted as part of the research from each participant.
- One face-to-face or fully pictured remote interview will take place - 60 minutes.
- All participants will have the opportunity to review their transcripts during the data analysis process to ensure validity and reliability of your perspectives and the results of the study.
- To protect your privacy, all participants will be given code names, no schools or district information will be shared, and data will be locked during the study and will be destroyed after five years concluding or resulting in a completed dissertation.

Participants must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- Female
- Be a currently serving superintendent of a school district in Texas; or
- Be a previously serving superintendent of a school district in Texas within the last three years

Contact Information

If you are interested in participating in this study, contact the researcher.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Title of the Case Study: Female Superintendents' Perspectives about the Preparation and Experiences Important to Secure a Superintendent Position

Basic Information about the Interview: The interview will last no more than 60 minutes. The interview will consist of researcher prepared open-ended interview questions and a discussion about the preparations and experiences as noted on your resume. The interviewer will ask each participant questions about the preparations and experiences necessary to attain the superintendent position in the large southwestern state.

Time of Interview:

Date:

Location:

Name of Interviewer: Erin Fasel

Name of Interviewee:

Information about the recording and storing of this interview: The interviewer will take handwritten notes during the interview. The interview will also be audio/video recorded. All names in this research will remain confidential. Names will only be stored on completed Letter of Consents and as a means for the researcher to have appropriate contact information to conduct interviews. Interview data will be stored on a password protected computer, with password-protected documents. Real names and consent

documents will be stored in a separate, locked area, and code names will be used for the entirety of the study to protect the confidentiality of all participants.

Introduction

1. The interviewer will introduce herself.
2. Please introduce yourself.
2. The interviewer will explain the purpose of the study
3. The interviewer will confirm that there is a signature of informed consent
4. The interviewer will ask if the interviewee has any questions before getting started with the interview.

Introductory Interview Content Questions:

1. What is your title right now in the educational system?
2. How long have you been or were you a superintendent of schools?
3. What are you or have you served as a school superintendent?

Interview Content Questions:

1. What professional preparations in the classroom, and as an administrator do you feel have been most useful in your role as the superintendent?

Probing questions: Tell me more about, please explain, what does “x” mean

2. What educational and program preparations did you have prior to becoming a superintendent and which of them do you think prepared you the most and least in being successful in the superintendent role?

Probing questions: Tell me more about, please explain, can you clarify what type of training/program that was

3. Have you experienced biases based on gender in your role? If so, how did you overcome them while in the position?

Probing questions: Tell me more about, please explain, can you give me an example of, could you explain what that means

4. What is the most important title, experience, challenge that you have held or experienced that is important for females to have in order to attain the superintendent position?

Probing questions: Tell me more about, please explain, can you give me an example of, could you explain what that means

5. What preparation programs or support systems are important to be a part of as a female superintendent?

Probing questions: Tell me more about, please explain, what does “x” mean

6. When you look back over your education, preparations and experiences, can you describe some pivotal moments that led you to pursuing and attaining the superintendent position?

Probing questions: Tell me more about, please explain, can you give me an example of, could you explain what that means

7. How often and for what purposes do you or have you interacted with other female superintendents and do you believe those experiences are necessary for females to successfully attain the superintendent position?

Probing questions: Tell me more about, please explain, can you give me an example of, could you explain what that means

Closing

Those are all the questions I have for you today. Do you have any questions for me? I will follow up with you with a prepared transcript and any follow up questions that I may need answered.