

Taking the Leap: The Mix of Motivators and Inhibitors that Impact the Decision to Pursue or Not to Pursue the Superintendency

Authors: Susan Bonaiuto, Ellin Booras, Kerry Dunne, Lauren Gilbert, Jose Antonio Libano, Lincoln Lynch

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BOSTON COLLEGE

Lynch School of Education

Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education

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TAKING THE LEAP: THE MIX OF MOTIVATORS AND INHIBITORS THAT
IMPACT THE DECISION TO PURSUE OR NOT TO PURSUE THE
SUPERINTENDENCY

Dissertation in Practice

by

SUSAN BONAIUTO, ELLIN BOORAS, KERRY DUNNE, LAUREN GILBERT,
JOSE LIBANO, & LINCOLN LYNCH III

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Jose Libano, & Lincoln Lynch III

Abstract

Framed in the context of increased media attention focused on a shortage of qualified candidates for the superintendency of public school districts, this study examines the thought process of educational leaders who are in a position to pursue the superintendency. A review of the literature explored the increasing challenges of the position itself, and examined business and psychology literature concerning applicant attraction and the concept of fit including the factors that may attract and deter potential applicants. Qualitative research methods were used to illuminate the thought process that accompanies consideration of the superintendency. The following research questions were considered: *what factors, including job desirability and accessibility, influence the pursuit intentions of individuals qualified to be superintendent and how does the mix of motivators and inhibitors impact the decision to pursue or not to pursue the position?* Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with graduates of a doctoral program in educational leadership, all currently working as educational leaders in public school districts. Coded transcripts from the interviews highlighted the importance of perceived positional and organizational fit, the use of a common mental checklist to conceptualize fit, and the weight that is applied to different factors. Data also pointed to the ways in which female and racial/ethnic minorities experience the pursuit process differently, especially in terms of their access to pipeline networks. Recommendations are made for professional associations of educational leaders, search agencies and school districts, and higher education.

Keywords: superintendency, recruitment, applicant attraction, thought process, fit, pursuit intentions

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Executive Summary

Context and Background

In a recent *Boston Globe* article, Thomas A. Scott, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS), pointed out that “nearly one in four superintendents, 66 out of 277, will leave their positions this year in public school districts” (Rosenberg, 2011, p. 11). In another interview, Scott commented that “at one time, the turnover rate [for superintendents] was probably a third of what it is right now” (O’Connell, 2011). Many districts will be searching for new leadership, struggling to meet performance standards and operating with resources compromised by an unstable economy. The confluence of these factors can be very difficult for school districts.

The turnover evidenced in Massachusetts has also occurred at a national level amid much debate and discussion about the nature of the superintendency (Kowalski, 2006). “Across the nation, educational leaders, especially superintendents are being eaten alive by politics” (Van Shura, 2011, p. 22). Given the perfect storm of enhanced accountability, depleted budgets, and a charged political arena, many qualified candidates may be reticent to take the leap to assume a superintendency. Exacerbated by the fears and realities surrounding the current economic recession, the candidates’ reluctance to leave a safe harbor to navigate turbulent waters may contribute to the diminishing applicant pool. Jacqueline Roy, a search consultant in Massachusetts for more than twenty years, stated, “We have to do an enormous amount of networking and recruiting” (Riede, 2003). Throughout the Northeast, where a search used to yield 50-80 applicants, Roy noted that a new applicant search might net ten viable candidates out of a pool of no more than 20-25 applicants. “Even a once envied job like the leadership of a high

achieving 3,000 student district at a salary approaching \$200,000 drew fewer than two dozen applicants in a recent search” (Riede, 2003).

Academic literature and professional associations such as MASS and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) have explored a perceived shortage of qualified candidates for the position (Bjork, Grogan, & Johnson, 2003; Harris, Lowery, Hopson, & Marshall, 2004). The popular press reports growing concerns around factors that may influence candidates’ decisions to pursue or not to pursue the superintendency. Scott stated in an interview that the environment defining the work realities of a superintendent is fraught with challenges such as higher levels of accountability, more scrutiny from the public, and fewer resources (personal communication, April 20, 2011). These barriers may be deterrents to qualified candidates. Scott referenced the political framework noting that a superintendent is hired and fired by a group of people who serve at the will of the voters. He noted, “Not only can the job of superintendent be thankless, it can be unforgiving. This detracts educators who know, whether I turn left or I turn right, it is possible that I am going to make a wrong turn and end my career” (2011). Arthur L. Bettencourt, Executive Director of the New England School Development Council (NESDEC), an organization that conducts local and national superintendent searches, noted that the position may have lost its attractiveness. “Accountability is up and resources are down” (personal communication, April 24, 2011). Glenn Koocher, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) stated, “There are not a lot of people who are interested in that type of work” (Baker, 2011). Whether the shortage is perceived or real, the fact that the perception exists may have a negative effect on the applicant pool.

Purpose of the Study

Those responsible for preparing superintendents, as well as for recruiting them, face a formidable challenge with unanswered questions. Little is known about how qualified candidates assess their interest in pursuing the position of superintendent of schools (Pounder & Young, 1996; Winter, Millay, Bjork, & Keedy, 2005; Winter, Rinehart, Keedy, & Bjork, 2007). Educational researchers have noticed this predicament and called for in-depth analysis. Winter et al. (2005) wrote, “What is lacking relative to the superintendency are...studies about recruiting these essential leaders....analysis of factors that influence the reactions of potential applicants to position vacancies holds the best possibility for informing superintendent recruitment” (p. 434). Newton and Witherspoon (2007) also recognized the problem, citing: “There continues to be a scarcity of empirical studies providing direction for the recruitment of superintendents” (p. 40).

Guided by some of the social science literature on vocational decision-making, the research team set out to create knowledge and understanding of the thought process that impedes or propels potential candidates to take the leap to the job of superintendent. This study sought to answer two questions:

- What factors, including job desirability and accessibility, influence the pursuit intentions of individuals qualified to be superintendent?
- How does the mix of motivators and inhibitors impact the decision to pursue or not to pursue the position?

The research team probed the nexus of what job and career development theorists have identified as predictors of applicant attraction and what educational scholarship has

identified as factors defining the superintendency. The work of vocational psychologists such as Phillips and Jome (2005) addressed the importance of the research on job attraction, “The literature on vocational choices over the past few decades indicates that there has been considerable interest in theorizing and learning about occupational choices, in studying how rewarding those choices are, and in deciphering how the decisions were made” (p. 127). Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, and Jones (2005) also wrote about the advantages of an in-depth understanding, stating: “The knowledge gained through research in these related areas has helped to guide human resource practitioners regarding ways to attract and influence the job choices of top applicants” (p. 928).

The research study revealed an intricate mix of motivators and inhibitors around which individuals framed their thoughts, and ultimately their pursuit intentions. The goal was to create a heightened awareness and understanding of the thought process of qualified candidates in a position to pursue the superintendency.

Methodology

Qualitative methods were employed to uncover the complexity of the thought process of potential applicants considering the superintendency. The six investigators conducted in-person interviews with twelve participants, all of whom earned a doctorate degree in educational leadership within the past eight years. All attended the same prestigious institution, re-named Anywhere College of Education (ACE) for purposes of this study. As ACE students, all received similar educational experiences and held positions in educational leadership when admitted to the program. All are theoretically qualified to be a superintendent. The twelve participants were selected to maximize

variability in the sample by current position, gender, and race/ethnicity. The participants included five individuals who have become superintendents since graduating from ACE, two assistant superintendents, three principals, one assistant principal, and one educator who was not an administrator at the time of the study. Five were women, and seven were men. Of these, nine were white, and three were racial/ethnic minorities, including one Asian, one Latino, and one African-American.

Using NVivo software, the data were coded and analyzed using an initial set of codes informed by the literature review and initial interview results. Codes were modified or expanded throughout the process as suggested by the data. The team used a consensus method for applying codes to text in all twelve transcripts and field notes. As the coding process evolved, all six investigators worked together and identified emerging themes in answer to the research questions. Analysis of the interrelationships among the themes led to hypotheses which formed the foundation of the study's findings, discussion, recommendations, and suggestions for further study.

Findings and Discussion

The twelve participants considered a process of pursuit for the superintendency that is best described as a complex personalized journey through a myriad of internal and external factors. All twelve participants referred to "fit", explicitly or implicitly, as they appraised their likelihood of pursuing the superintendency in general, and of pursuing available openings and districts in particular. Using different lenses, all participants developed perceptions of the degree to which they believed that their own values, skills, and experiences aligned with those inherent within, or expected by, the job and the

organization (Breugh, 1992). The research team identified five findings that shed light on the participants' thought process as they reflected on their pursuit intentions.

Perceived fit is the framework around which candidates develop their thought process. All twelve participants discussed their values and beliefs, as well as their desire to seek alignment with those of the community where they might serve as superintendent. One participant, Beatrice, said, "I don't think I am ready for it right now, I think. I still have so much to learn and so many more experiences to gain, but, I can see it being a potential fit in the future. I went through a doctoral program, so on one hand, I've got sort of the education background, but, I think there are so many experiences that I still need to have in order to feel internally like I am qualified for it." Participants' mention of fit when they contemplated taking the leap prompted the research team to return to the literature. A better understanding of the concept of fit (Williams, 2001) provided a framework to organize and to analyze the emerging data. Specifically, person-job (P-J) fit and person-organization (P-O) fit (Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1990) offered context for the ways in which participants talked about their interest in the job itself and how they might think about pursuing superintendentcies in specific districts.

Candidates have a predetermined mental checklist to assess fit that is relatively constant and consistent for all potential candidates. As participants answered interview questions about their careers, job changes, and thoughts about whether or not to take the leap to the superintendentcy, it became clear that participants used a mental checklist. According to one participant, Chuck, "I'd want to know the fiscal condition of the town. I'd be looking at standardized test scores. I'd want to know where they are in their contract situation with their teachers....I would want to work in a

place where there's a sense of making things better." The interview transcripts revealed several areas of commonality among the participants' checklists pertaining to P-J fit and P-O fit. When they thought about P-J fit, they contemplated whether they were destined to be a superintendent at all. Typically, they characterized success in the position as impacting student learning, but they also explored many practical considerations. For example, they thought about the time requirements, the pressures and high profile nature of the position, and whether their career and educational preparation had sufficiently readied them for the job, particularly with respect to fiduciary and political matters. All five participants who had already become superintendents believed the career path they had taken was a good and viable one.

Once participants could foresee themselves as a superintendent (P-J fit), they also considered where they might see themselves working (P-O fit). They focused on aspects of the community such as district demographics, values, and educational priorities. They considered what the district could offer such as compensation, a favorable commute home, and opportunities to positively impact the district. All twelve further considered what kind of relationship they were likely to develop with the school committee and expressed concern about working with a difficult or dysfunctional school board. Overall, demographics and its associated influence on participants' perceived fit in a particular district was brought up repeatedly and highlighted as a major factor by all participants. Compensation was a consideration but not a significant issue. Juxtaposition of career and family goals and potential to achieve work life balance created a recursive dynamic influencing the participants' thought process.

When evaluating the questions on their mental checklist, candidates use a process of applying weight depending on individual circumstances and stages in life.

As individuals consider pursuing the superintendency in general, or the superintendency in a particular district, the weight given to any one question changes in relationship to their perception of risk and reward. Participants considered some factors differently depending upon where they were in their careers. Participants evaluated the risks and rewards associated with the pursuit process with increased scrutiny as they progressed closer to becoming a superintendent.

Women and racial/ethnic minority candidates experience the pursuit process differently as they contemplate and seek access to the job of superintendent of schools.

All women and racial/ethnic minority participants were aware that they did not fit the typical profile of a superintendent. Females seemingly asked themselves whether a particular district would even consider hiring a female superintendent, and racial/ethnic minorities questioned whether a particular community would hire a non-Caucasian superintendent. Women and racial/ethnic minorities questioned whether their candidacies would be genuinely considered on their own merits, or if they might be included merely to diversify the pool of candidates or to fill a quota. Women also wondered how their age, appearance, children, or marital status would be viewed by the hiring district. Further, the female participants felt that in order to be considered for the superintendency they needed to build their credentials more than men. Racial/ethnic minorities described their non-Caucasian status as a significant factor, one that is part of their everyday life. All three shared that race/ethnicity was a dynamic outside their control. They were pragmatic about a second set of unstated rules that shapes their reality.

The work of Tooms, Lugg, and Bogotch (2010) shed some light on the concept of fit and how it can be applied to the experiences of the female and racial/ethnic minority participants. They said that in practice, common uses of the word fit have both, “blurred the important distinctions among persons, roles and communities [and] also hindered the capacity of public school officials to recruit, select, and support leaders who might better serve us in facilitating school reforms” (p. 101). In other words, perpetuating a narrow view of who a school leader should be might limit the pool of candidates.

Candidates pursue the superintendency using a network of formal and informal contacts. Most participants said the network of sitting superintendents, retired superintendents, and recruiters was powerful. This was particularly evident among the male participants who were more likely than female participants to be made aware of an opportunity through contact with a person of influence. The three male superintendents all mentioned connections to a network of influential current and former superintendents and a male professor at ACE as key determinants in getting the job. Jay offered, “I was informally recruited in the sense that the chair of the school committee took me out to dinner and expressed really certainly that he would be interested in my candidacy and that he hoped I would apply.” This was in stark contrast to the women and ethnic/racial minority participants who did not use any language that would suggest a network, or actually stated that they were not part of the network. Three female participants mentioned either an “old boys’ network” or a male “superintendents’ club”.

Participants described two distinct paths to checklist activation: pursuing the job themselves or being recruited. Awareness of a position, completing a milestone such as the earning of a doctorate degree, or experiencing a change of circumstances personally

or professionally prompted them to activate the checklist and to consider pursuing the job. Alternatively, most male participants described being contacted or recruited as activating their checklist items.

Recommendations

Informed by the literature and research findings, we offer the following recommendations for several audience groups, including: professional associations of educational leaders, search firms focused on school executive searches, institutions of higher education such as Anywhere College of Education (ACE), and districts seeking to fill the job of superintendent, as well as prospective candidates.

Recommendations for professional associations of educational leaders.

Offer formal and informal professional development for aspiring superintendents to demystify the application and interview process for aspiring superintendents.

Professional associations of educational leaders, such as the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS), Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC), Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators' Association (MSSAA), and Massachusetts Elementary Schools Principals Association (MESPA) should consider taking action that would broaden and diversify the pool of potential superintendents. The application and selection process for the superintendency can be grueling, daunting, and unfamiliar to new applicants to the position (Kenney, 2003). Qualified candidates may benefit from guidance and support in the interview, application, and all other aspects of the superintendent search process.

Encourage districts to identify and to cultivate aspiring administrators at an early juncture in their careers. Professional associations should encourage districts to identify

and to groom a diverse group of young professionals for administrative positions. Once districts respond with the early identification of a potential talent pool for the superintendency, MASS and other professional associations could provide support and professional development focused on reinforcing a sense of positive expectancy among aspiring administrators. Workshops and/or sessions at conferences focused on pathways to and questions about the superintendency would help to identify and to support aspiring candidates.

Initiate or expand programs to identify and to address the needs of women and racial/ethnic minorities. As professional associations plan mentoring programs and interest groups similar to the women's professional group in place at MASS, they need to identify strategies to respond to the sense that females find the world of superintendents to be male-dominated. Creating opportunities for honest and mutually supportive dialogue among females and seasoned superintendents could ameliorate the concerns felt by some women and racial/ethnic minorities about their feeling excluded.

Address the perceived barriers. Several participants, both male and female, referred or alluded to an "old boys' network" – one they perceived as limiting access to the superintendency. While the effect of networking on candidates' access to positions demands further study (Glenn & Hickey, 2010), the perception, or possibly the reality (Tallerico, 2000), that the job can only be accessed by insiders who know key people in the field may indeed be causing quality potential candidates for the superintendency to decide not to apply. Providing "open to all" networking opportunities to broaden access to district leaders could help combat the perception that the position is not open to those without established connections.

Explore ways to reduce the risks associated with the application process. The selection process itself may be deterring excellent candidates who are reluctant to jeopardize their good standing in their current jobs by applying (Wolverton, 2004). Further study of ways to make it less risky for candidates who are not ultimately selected could have a positive impact on the candidate pool. Advocating with local legislatures and public policy makers with the goal of modifying open meeting laws may protect the privacy of candidates in the early stages of the selection process.

Examine the job expectations of the superintendency as currently defined. Governing bodies should investigate the potential of adjusting expectations and responsibilities of the superintendency to mitigate the impact on work life balance. Participants commented on the demands of the position and the potential impact on their quality of life. Changes in the job expectations may result in more candidates entering the position at earlier stages in their careers. Perhaps if professional organizations openly recognized the untenable nature of the job as it is presently construed, districts could consider building or expanding central office teams. Deputy superintendents could be charged with managing operational issues allowing the superintendent to be primarily defined as the instructional leader of the school district.

Look for ways to build harmonious, supportive relationships between superintendents and school committees. Perhaps professional associations such as MASS and MASC could work together in offering joint professional development for superintendents and school committees to build consonance while reducing dissonance. Our research indicated that participants were concerned about governance responsibilities and were savvy in finding out about the behavior of school committees. Potential

candidates made active decisions not to pursue positions in communities where school committees were perceived as lacking in civility, cooperation, and communication. Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) recommended taking steps to “ensure superintendents and school boards function as collaborative teams, with appropriate community, administrative, and political support” (p. 9). School committees whose members escalate conflict during public meetings perpetuate the sense that serving as a superintendent could be fraught with difficult and potentially distracting dynamics.

Expand accessibility to trainings and workshops on school governance to include aspiring candidates. Many participants expressed personal concerns about insufficient empirical knowledge of governance issues. Implied in their observations was a concern that a lack of pragmatic understanding of the fundamentals of school governance could impair their ability to construct a productive relationship with the school board. In designing trainings and workshops, it would be important for professional associations such as MASS and MASC to share examples of communities where positive and productive relationships between the school boards and their respective superintendents already exist. Such insight could brighten the prospect of job satisfaction for applicants and expand the pool of applicants eager to work in a wider variety of districts.

Support the establishment of a central database of qualified candidates to coordinate applicant preparation, opportunities, and access. Professional associations could serve as a catalyst in encouraging the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and other states’ departments of education, in cooperation with professional associations, to facilitate the creation and management of a database of qualified candidates for the job of superintendent. Encourage hiring authorities to post

superintendent job openings publicly on the DESE website, or other central location, for a period of time.

Recommendations for executive search agencies and school districts.

Broaden access to the superintendency. Research indicates that more than half of superintendents are invited to apply by recruiters (Terranova et al., 2009), and that recruiters do serve an important function as gatekeepers to the superintendency (Kamler, 2009). Broadening access to the network, making it more inclusive, and creating alternative networking opportunities could serve to remedy perceptions of exclusivity held by potential candidates. Specifically, organizations that conduct executive searches could provide deliberate, targeted networking opportunities for qualified individuals who are considering the profession. More widespread posting and marketing of positions could dispel the notion that candidates need to know someone powerful to be considered.

Address race-based equity issues by helping school districts to create and uphold diversity policies specifically for the recruiting and hiring of superintendents. Working together, school districts and search consultants could more deliberately and widely advertise open positions to improve recruitment of racial/ethnic minority candidates for the superintendency. MASC could assist districts in crafting or improving diversity policies to insure that concerted efforts are made to diversity the workforce, especially amongst district leadership positions.

Recommendations for higher education programs in educational leadership.

Organize alumni networking and career placement services within the school of education. In order to improve employment prospects for all students seeking the superintendency, ACE and other institutions of higher education can enlist the support of

program graduates who have become superintendents. In addition, ACE professors could deliberately and equitably provide support to all students. They could bring in working district leaders as guest presenters and instructors, providing natural networking opportunities for students, as well as current and relevant advice in a quickly changing field.

Provide career coaching with the goal of preparing candidates for the search process. In response to the finding regarding lack of confidence in job seeking accompanied by a need for networking among its graduates, particularly racial/ethnic minorities, ACE and other university programs could provide deliberate instruction to prepare potential candidates for all aspects of the application and interview process. This effort could commence at the beginning of the doctoral program allowing students to develop the requisite skill sets such as public speaking, designing presentations, and facilitating groups of people. Building on the positive feedback gleaned from male participants, higher education programs could establish an expectation that professors guide students through the applicant process, providing support and encouragement to both male and female graduates.

Revise coursework to better prepare students in the areas of school finance and governance. In light of our finding regarding fit, which included evidence that prospective superintendents worried that their expertise in fiscal management and navigating governmental responsibilities was insufficient, ACE and other doctoral and preparatory programs might carefully study the design of educational leadership programs. Many of our participants felt ill prepared for the fiduciary and operational responsibilities of the superintendency. Adding more university instruction in this area

would provide otherwise qualified candidates enhanced competency in these critical skill sets. Specifically, ACE students would benefit from a credit-granting course in public school finance. Similarly, ACE might consider providing explicit instruction in state and local governance, the role and responsibilities of the school committee, collective bargaining, and strategies for developing mutually productive partnerships with municipal and school boards.

Present the role of the superintendent in a positive light citing and reinforcing the high rate of satisfaction among existing superintendents. Curricula could present a fair and multi-dimensional representation of the roles and responsibilities of a superintendent at the undergraduate and at the master's level. Instructors could place emphasis on the ability of a superintendent to have a positive impact on students' experiences. Programs should embed shadowing a sitting superintendent into the course work. Required internships should be structured to include experience in budget deliberations, collective bargaining, and public presentations to the school board, parents, and community groups. Institutions of higher education should work in conjunction with MASS and other professional associations to create and to support opportunities for doctoral program students to interact with and to learn from skilled and successful superintendents who are eager and willing to encourage new talent.

Conclusion

The recent discussion in the literature and among professional associations coupled with a steady commentary in the popular press about a perceived shortage of superintendents gave impetus to our research. It was the intent of the research team to shed light on the thought process of qualified individuals in a position to pursue the

superintendency.

Concerned that the job was becoming increasingly untenable, and cognizant of the anticipated acceleration of turnover, the research team set out to explore the reasoning behind qualified candidates' pursuit intentions. Our findings brought attention to issues around fit, weighing of risk and reward, hesitancy to leave the safety of a current position, variables impacting the decisions of women and racial/ethnic minorities, equity and access issues, and the demands of the job itself. The team provided recommendations to professional associations, executive search firms, school districts, and higher education. The goal was to inform practice with knowledge and insight. Increased awareness could eventuate in broader applicant pools replete with outstanding and courageous candidates prepared and eager to assume the role of superintendent of schools.

Introduction

Thomas A. Scott, Executive Director for the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS), recently pointed out that “nearly one in four superintendents, 66 out of 277, will leave their posts this year” (Rosenberg, 2011). In another interview, he also said, “at one time, the turnover rate [for superintendents] was probably a third of what it is right now” (O’Connell, 2011). During a 2011 school committee meeting in a Massachusetts community, Glenn Koocher, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC), informed the members of the hiring authority:

You are not alone in trying to fill a superintendent vacancy. There are not a lot of people around who are interested in that type of work. There is not necessarily a shortage of people who want the job, but the tier of highly qualified applicants is smaller than it was in the past. In this economy, some superintendents are hesitant to leave their positions to accept an administrative post in another community (Baker, 2011).

These statements make it apparent that public school districts in Massachusetts often find themselves searching for a new leader. What is occurring in Massachusetts has also happened at a national level amid much debate and discussion about the nature of the superintendency (Kowalski, 2006), as well as amid a public perception that there is a shortage of qualified candidates willing and able to assume the position (Bjork et al., 2003; Harris et al., 2004). As such, it is probably not uncommon to read a local newspaper about a superintendent vacancy somewhere in the country and come across

statements such as one drawn from an in-depth report in *The Detroit News* on the impact of the declining number of high-quality candidates for the superintendency:

A superintendent shortage in Michigan is forcing school districts to hire top leaders with less experience and pay them more, experts say. If the trend continues, educators fear a lack of experienced leadership could hurt efforts to raise student achievement at a time when education standards are toughening (MacDonald, 2004, p. 1).

Educational researchers aware of this predicament have called for in-depth studies. Winter et al. (2005) wrote, “what is lacking relative to the superintendency are...studies about recruiting these essential leaders....analysis of factors that influence the reactions of potential applicants to position vacancies holds the best possibility for informing superintendent recruitment” (p. 434). Winter et al. (2007) reinforced this declaration stating, “despite the importance of assessing qualified applicants for superintendent vacancies, the education literature contains almost no empirical research about applicant attraction to the position among individuals” (p. 36). Newton and Witherspoon (2007) also recognized the lack of research concerning recruitment of new superintendents noting, “there continues to be a scarcity of empirical studies providing direction for the recruitment of superintendents” (p. 40). This context in mind, qualified candidates, as well as those responsible for preparing, recruiting and hiring them, face a formidable challenge fraught with unanswered questions.

This study seeks to fill a void in the literature. In an effort to identify and to more fully understand the thought process, the study focused on recent graduates from a prestigious university, re-named Anywhere College of Education (ACE) for purposes of

this study, who have completed the necessary course work for the degree of Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. The study sought to answer the following two research questions:

- What factors, including job desirability and accessibility, influence the pursuit intentions of individuals qualified to be superintendent?
- How does the mix of motivators and inhibitors impact the decision to pursue or not to pursue the position?

To answer these questions, our team of six investigators reviewed the literature, interviewed leaders of professional associations, and conducted a qualitative research study. While there appears to be a paucity of scholarship on what motivates or inhibits the pursuit intentions of qualified candidates, much information has been gleaned from those who have already become superintendents. For example, data from the *MASS Member Snapshot Survey: Results and Analysis* communicated that while respondents feel that the job is more stressful than initially anticipated, 80% are satisfied in their positions (Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, 2011). These surprisingly positive findings about the level of job satisfaction among superintendents only add to the puzzle around the difficulties that many districts experience when looking for a new leader, as filling vacancies with qualified individuals is a challenge for school districts (Harris, Marshall, Lowery, & Buck, 2002; Tallerico, (2000). *The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study* highlighted the changing dynamics of the superintendency, noting:

Now, more than ever, the work portfolio of America's superintendents is increasingly diverse: they are responsible for student progress and achievement

while balancing the diversification of their student and staff populations, the explosion of technology and the digital divide, an expanded set of expectations and involvement from the federal level, the media, the board and community relations, all in the context of an increasingly globalized educational system. The work is difficult, the hours are long, and the job comes with challenges and difficulties (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011, p. xiii).

Sharing a similar perspective, Arthur L. Bettencourt, Executive Director of the New England School Development Council (NESDEC), an organization that conducts local and national searches, suggested that the superintendency may have lost its luster due to political volatility and a monolithic emphasis on standardized testing (personal communication, April 24, 2011). Consequently, it is probable that these and other highly publicized variables such as available compensation packages (Herbert, 2011) and the public nature of searches (Kenney, 2003) are acting as either deterrents or incentives to qualified individuals pondering whether or not to pursue a superintendency. Existing ethnic and gender barriers (Harris et al., 2004; Kamler, 2006; Wolverton, 2004) may compound the issue for some potential candidates. Hence, given “anecdotal evidence suggests [sic] that when top education jobs are advertised, fewer candidates apply” (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carrella, 2000, p. 8), as well as the documented impact of strong and enlightened leadership on student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009), it has become increasingly important to understand how and why individuals qualified to become superintendents reach the conclusion that they should or should not pursue the position.

Given the shallow applicant pool, coupled with the need for effective leaders, it is essential to broaden awareness of existing positions. Qualified candidates may not be aware of superintendent vacancies. The issue may be exacerbated by a lack of a vehicle for central job postings utilized by candidates, professional associations, recruiters, and hiring authorities. Thomas Scott, Executive Director of MASS, shared in a recent interview:

There is no one place the superintendents' jobs are posted. The Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) has a site where they do a pretty good job of listing their searches they have been contracted to conduct, and a variety of others. We ask the search groups to provide us info on openings. We always send a posting of these to our members. There is no question some jobs do not get posted by us, or MASC, on our respective websites. Since more districts are doing their own search, they do not consider the best options for posting (personal communication, December 14, 2011).

Alternative methods used to communicate postings include classified advertisements in the Sunday newspapers, periodicals, professional journals, recruitment firm's websites, and word of mouth through professional and personal networks. The prevalence of women and minority candidates is on the rise. In *The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study*, Kowalski et al. (2011) concluded that nationally "the percentage of female superintendents has increased substantially since 1992. In this 2010 national study, nearly one in four respondents (24.1%) was a woman. (In 2000, the percentage was 13.2.)" (p. 111). A review of the *MASS School District, Superintendent Directory* revealed the percentage of Massachusetts female superintendents to be 37%

(Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, 2011). While the percentages of female superintendents is on the rise, women and racial/ethnic minorities may not be active or aware of existing formal and informal networks where word of position openings travels. Our study will explore the perception of the different access opportunities that may exist for males and females in the candidate pool.

Currently, little is known about the thought process of individuals considering the superintendency (Pounder & Young, 1996; Winter et al., 2005; Winter et al., 2007). The work of vocational psychologists provides much needed insight. Phillips and Jome (2005) addressed the importance of this work, noting: “the literature on vocational choices over the past few decades indicates that there has been considerable interest in theorizing and learning about occupational choices, in studying how rewarding those choices are, and in deciphering how the decisions were made” (p. 127). Chapman et al. (2005) also wrote about the need for understanding, stating: “The knowledge gained through research in these related areas has helped to guide human resource practitioners regarding ways to attract and influence the job choices of top applicants” (p. 928).

Consequently, much can be learned by investigating the nexus of human preferences relative to potential jobs in any employment setting and actual behaviors that manifest themselves in decisions to pursue, or not to pursue, an educational leadership position such as the superintendency. New knowledge and understanding could place school districts in a better position to attract and to retain excellent leaders, to identify and to mentor candidates who hold promise, and to consider structural or advertising changes that may result in deeper applicant pools (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001; Newton, 2006; Winter et al., 2005). Professional associations and executive

recruiters who help facilitate the search and selection process, as well as colleges and universities that prepare superintendents, would similarly benefit, as would licensed men and women eligible to apply for an available superintendency.

In summary, a clarion call for outstanding leaders of public school districts is evident. An intricate mix of motivators and inhibitors exists around which individuals frame their thoughts, and ultimately their decision to pursue a superintendency or not. As such, it was the goal of this study to help fill a void in the knowledge base first identified by Pounder and Young (1996), who wrote: “Given the importance of recruitment, it is disappointing that few, if any, empirical studies exist which bear specifically on the attraction of individuals to public school administrator positions” (p. 288). Subsequent results from the study will inform various stakeholders, including qualified candidates, school district hiring authorities, professional associations, executive search agencies, and institutions of higher education. By creating a heightened awareness and understanding of the thought process that those in a position to assume the role of superintendent undertake in making their decision to pursue or not to pursue the job, the study will enhance knowledge and illuminate practice.

Literature Review

In order to better understand the process that shapes a prospective candidate's interest, readiness, and inclination to apply for the position of superintendent of schools, the literature review incorporates several theories grounded in the field of vocational psychology, as well as information about the superintendency from the widespread literature that exists about the position. In this way, the reader can establish a concrete link between what job and career development theorists have identified as predictors of applicant attraction to any position, and what educational researchers have identified as factors that either motivate or deter qualified individuals who might consider applying for a position as a school superintendent. This knowledge is important because the decisions of qualified candidates to apply or not to apply for a job can have critical consequences for organizations of all types, including school districts (Barber & Roehling, 1993). A broad and rich pool of applicants can have a tremendously positive impact for years to come on the trajectory of student learning in a school district. Illustrating this,

As more superintendents reach retirement age, and fewer young educators seek to replace them, the job of finding new school leaders has become an enormous challenge. Search firms that once relied on advertising to bring in most of their candidates now must doggedly recruit people through networks of consultants across the country (Riede, 2003).

Clearly then, it is imperative to understand the thought process of individuals qualified to consider the superintendency.

After providing a brief overview of what vocational psychologists have theorized about workplace attraction, including career-related decisions focused on pursuing a particular job or workplace, subsequent sections of our literature review will be framed around two constructs of interest, the desirability of the superintendency and accessibility to the superintendency.

Workplace Attraction

A review of some of the recruitment and career-oriented literature on the guiding forces behind vocational decision-making reveals much about how individuals approach career-related decisions. Chapman et al. (2005) postulated that recruitment outcomes are affected by job and organizational characteristics such as pay, benefits, and company size and location. Barber (1998) wrote, “Recruitment performs the essential function of drawing an important resource - human capital - into the organization. The success of later human resource efforts...depends in part on the quality and quantity of new employees identified and attracted through the recruitment process” (p. 1). As such, an understanding of the impact that organizations have on potential employees is needed. Rynes (1991) defined *recruitment* as “encompass(ing) all organizational practices and decisions that affect either the number, or types, of individuals who are willing to apply for, or to accept, a given vacancy” (p. 429). Similarly, Breaugh (1992) wrote, “Employee recruitment involves those organizational activities that (1) influence the number and/or types of applicants who apply for a position and/or (2) affect whether a job offer is accepted” (p. 4).

Miller and Brown (2005) noted that, “Despite the cumulative wisdom that has been generated through some 50 years of research...there are still serious gaps in our

knowledge base. Foremost among these has been the tendency to treat all clients...as if they are alike” (p. 441). More pointedly, Barber (1998) asserted that “we know little about how...or under what circumstances potential applicants are more or less likely to exclude a large proportion of potential opportunities” (p. 46). These characterizations are consistent with the literature that focuses specifically on eligible individuals who might choose to become a superintendent. Hence, it is worth emphasizing the relevance of a generic question posed by Jome and Phillips (2005) in understanding applicant attraction: “How do individuals approach the task of identifying – or creating – career and job related opportunities?” (p. 466).

The expression *applicant attraction* is found in recruitment literature. It was defined by Rau and Hyland (2002) as “an applicant’s interest in pursuing employment opportunities” (p. 123). However, a unified understanding of what attracts individuals to certain jobs or organizations, and research that supports that understanding, is lacking, as noted by numerous researchers (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005). One frequently-cited reason for this comes from Young, Rinehart, and Heineman (1993), who pointed out that most published research addressing recruitment is based on the perspective of college students as applicants. Hence, findings cannot be generalized across vocations, including the superintendency. Barber and Roehling (1993) made the point that, “most existing research has focused on decisions that occur either after interviews or after job offers have been extended” (p. 845). Consequently, it is not surprising that some researchers striving to better understand what motivates people to pursue, or not to pursue, career options have voiced frustration.

Our inquiry into numerous studies within the growing body of literature on recruitment and vocational decision-making from the perspective of the prospective applicant pointed to a variety of theories outlining different sources of motivation for individuals considering whether to pursue, or not to pursue, positions of interest. According to Schwab, Rynes, and Aldag (1987), “The earliest theorizing about the content of job choice was proposed over two hundred years ago by classical economist Adam Smith. He hypothesized that the relevant choice attributes consisted of: (1) pay, (2) working conditions, (3) necessary training, (4) responsibility, and (5) probability of success in the position” (p. 140). More recently, and in an effort to expand knowledge, as well as to adequately and comprehensively capture the way in which humans go about making job-related decisions, researchers have coined several different theories. Born in the 1960s, all are still prevalent in the literature today. One prominent example comes from Behling, Labovitz, and Gainer (1968), who named and described three career selection theories cited frequently such as by Chapman et al., (2005) and Pounder & Merrill (2001). These were: objective factor theory, subjective factor theory, and critical contact theory. They can be summarized in the following manners. According to objective factor theory “selection...is basically a process of objective weighting and evaluation of a limited number of measurable characteristics...such as pay, benefits, location, opportunity for advancement, nature of work to be performed and educational opportunities” (Behling et al., 1968, p. 15). According to subjective factor theory “selection...is the result of a perceived high degree of congruence between deeply seated and poorly understood emotional needs, and the ability of the firm, or more accurately its image, to satisfy those needs for the individual candidate” (Behling et al., 1968, p. 17).

And, according to critical contact theory “selection...is generally the result of...[an] evaluation of the recruiter and of...[the candidate’s] treatment” (Behling et al., 1968, p. 18). These theories suggest that individuals considering pursuit of the superintendency are likely to have a set of objective, subjective, and critical contact factors rooted in the education profession that guide their thought process.

In a recently conducted meta-analysis of the literature on applicant attraction and job-choice processes, Chapman et al. (2005) confirmed the earlier thinking of Behling et al. (1968) about the importance of objective, subjective, and critical contact factors. Chapman et al. (2005) applied coding techniques to seventy-one related studies. Their work resulted in three important conclusions about predictors of applicant attraction. They were as follows:

- what is being offered by the organization is related to applicant attraction. Characteristics of both the job and organization...were important determinants of recruiting outcomes.
- perceptions of fit proved to be one of the strongest predictors of the attitudinal applicant attraction outcomes...For certain key positions or for positions that are difficult to fill, it may still be beneficial to engage in highly targeted recruitment processes to maximize fit.
- how the recruiting is conducted...is also important; however, who does the recruiting appears not to be important.... Furthermore, recruiter behaviors and organizational characteristics that enhance applicants’ expectations of receiving an offer were also related to applicant attraction (p. 938).

In addition to these three conclusions, Chapman et al. (2005) identified three additional predictors of applicant attraction that may be relevant to the superintendency. These included perceptions of the characteristics of recruiters, the available job alternatives, and the perceived likelihood of getting the job.

Researchers have studied additional predictors of applicant attraction, including job postings in print advertisements (Barber & Roehling, 1993), internet-based recruitment strategies (Allen, Mahto, & Otondo, 2007), organizational brochures (Herriot & Rothwell, 1981), and an organization's image and reputation (Gatewood, Gowan, & Lautenschlager, 1993). In writing about the array of factors that may attract or deter prospective candidates to specific positions or organizations, Highhouse, Lievens, and Sinar (2003) stated: "Along with...increased interest has come a widened range of dependent variables aimed at assessing attraction to organizations" (p. 987). Boswell, Roehling, LePine, and Moynihan (2003) captured the importance of recognizing the existence of these kinds of findings. They commented, "Critical to an organization's ability to efficiently and effectively address this concern is an understanding of how job-choice decisions are made...that are most likely to attract desirable applicants" (p. 23).

In summary, when applying what vocational psychologists have theorized about workplace attraction to the superintendency, it is important to be attentive to those factors that may have the most impact on the thought process. It is also important to consider how these factors intersect with each other. Chapman et al. (2005) noted that "The relative strength of predictors...may vary somewhat depending on what other factors are being considered by the applicant" (p. 941).

Job Desirability

With the vocational psychology literature as a backdrop, a review of literature on education and the superintendency itself provides further context.

A variety of factors play into the thought process of a qualified candidate to pursue or not to pursue the superintendency. The job itself has become more and more difficult, and possibly less appealing with the passage of time (Cooper et al., 2000). Examination of the typical responsibilities of a superintendent of schools is necessary in order to shed light on a factor that bears great influence on the pursuit intentions of qualified candidates who may well ask themselves: what does the job look like and do I even want it?

Responsibilities. *The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study* concluded that the face of America's school superintendency is changing with the addition of increasingly numerous and complex responsibilities (Kowalski et al., 2011, p. xiii). Short and Scribner (2000) described the responsibilities of the position as "staggering", noting that districts with vacancies are looking for a candidate who "is dynamic, confident, visionary, experienced, proactive, articulate, and skilled in interpersonal relationships, aggressive, highly motivated, collaborative, effective at problem solving, knowledgeable about instruction, long range planning, and finance, and able to move districts and schools to the next level of achievement" (p. v). It is worth noting that some of the desired qualities appear to be contradictory, adding to the trepidation candidates may experience as they consider their pursuit intentions. This sentiment was confirmed by research on the pool of superintendent's license holders who were weighing pursuit of the position (Wolverton, 2004). Bearing in mind that applicants

for any job “place a lot of weight on what they imagine their future job environment will be like when forming their acceptance intentions” (Chapman et al., 2005, p. 935), it is not surprising that the formidable and growing responsibilities of the superintendency have a strong impact on the decisions by qualified candidates on whether or not to apply for a position.

There are numerous essential functions identified as crucial to the role of today’s superintendent: visioning, planning, capacity building, facilitating, and representing (Kowalski, 2006). A major responsibility of the superintendent is to create shared vision among constituent groups (p. 206). Superintendents succeed when they make wise investments in human capital. That is, they recruit, hire, and support new teachers and instructional leaders committed to instructional improvement (Kowalski, 2006). Superintendents assess and support community capacity in order to ensure support for school improvement. This need to have a superintendent who can serve as the face of the public school system, building leadership capacity from within, and confidence in the system in the community over a significant duration of time, was supported by Hargreaves and Fink (2006). They focused on the existing and emerging need for quality school leaders who understand the importance of succession and have the ability to build capacity among their teams. They asserted, “Better quality education and leadership that will benefit students and last over time require that we address their basic sustainability.” (p. 2). Therefore, the construction of the position as a daunting and indeed almost unmanageable job has broad implications, both for its potential lack of desirability and affect on the potential applicant pool, and for the resulting impact on school and district leadership quality and student learning.

The confluence of the functions identified by education scholars presents a formidable picture of the role of a twenty-first century superintendent and helps to respond to the research question: “What factors including job desirability and accessibility, influence the pursuit intentions of individuals qualified to be superintendent of schools?” This is echoed in the responses of sitting superintendents across the country as they described their responsibilities in construction and bond issues, human relations, labor relations, race relations, curriculum design, staff development, community relations, finance and budget, and technology (Cooper et al., 2000). The range of responsibilities defining the role of superintendent, when coupled with escalating pressures emanating from federal, state, and local mandates and declining resources, may influence the thought process of qualified candidates as they consider the implications of becoming a superintendent. The landmark study, *Career Crisis in the Superintendency*, sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), recommended that one important step toward resolving the perceived superintendent shortage would be to “reorganize the superintendency” and make the job more manageable by building in support structures for superintendents (Cooper et al., 2000, p. 34). While leaders may be schooled in the previously mentioned skill sets, responding to the added pressures that come from local school boards may be a deterrent in their willingness to take on the superintendency. Coupled with anxiety about the public recruitment and selection process, many worthy qualified and certified principals and central office administrators may opt not to apply for what they perceive to be an almost impossible job.

Compensation. A potential attraction for applicants to the superintendency may be the prospect of a higher salary and a healthy benefits package. Compensation may indeed counterbalance the risk that potential superintendents incur when leaving a lower-ranking position in which they have demonstrated success and hold secure standing. Superintendents generally have more lucrative packages than principals or assistant superintendents, including: base salary, annuities, vacation buy-back, use of a vehicle, tuition reimbursement, life insurance, disability insurance, and expense reimbursements. According to Konnert & Augenstein (1990), the reason for the higher remuneration is “in reality, the superintendent is on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The superintendent is always viewed as representing the school system, and is held to a higher standard of conduct than others within the community” (p. 215-216). Unlimited access to information provided by a media sector hungry for controversial stories involving school leaders would certainly make a potential candidate for the superintendency consider the impact of the public nature of the job on his or her privacy and that of his or her family. This drawback to the position may be outweighed by compensation in the consideration of some potential applicants. Once hired as a superintendent, the individual becomes somewhat of a celebrity in the school district, increasing the pressure on the superintendent’s professional performance and personal life, as described by scholars of vocational psychology:

The objective theory of job choice views candidates as economic beings. The theory presumes the position selection process is based on a weighing of the advantages and disadvantages of each offer in terms of objectively measurable factors. Thus, the candidate is most likely to choose a school district that offers

the most economic advantages such as salary and benefit packages. Each of these items is weighted in terms of its relative importance to the individual, and the results are combined into some over-all index of desirability (Behling et al., 1968, p. 14-15).

Although compensation is a serious consideration, researchers believe candidates for the superintendency hold the primary goal and intention of aspiring to make a positive contribution in the lives of students. Chapman et al. (2005) found “pay, compensation and advancement predicted job pursuit intentions to a much lesser extent than most other job and organization characteristics” (p. 935). According to Wolverton (2004), “applicants for the superintendency must want to be superintendents and believe that they can be effective in the position if they expend the energy necessary to do the job; and they must believe that the reward...justifies the effort” (p. 9). Furthermore, “The American school superintendent is being called upon to take up the challenge of totally rethinking and fundamentally improving education” (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p. 242). In short, the position of superintendent of schools is ever more public and challenging, and while that is weighed alongside incentives such as compensation and the potential to do great good for student learning in a school district, the heft of the job itself is likely to impact the pursuit intentions of many qualified individuals considering the superintendency. When deciding whether or not to take the leap and pursue the superintendency, potential applicants must consider organizational issues, as well as compensation considerations. Even the most well-intentioned and prepared candidates must give careful and thoughtful consideration to the political trappings which have become inextricably linked to the job of school superintendent.

Governance structure. Massachusetts General Laws, c. 71, § 59 states, “The school committee of a town shall employ a superintendent of schools and fix his compensation.” Astute candidates consider the governance environment that exists within prospective hiring districts before applying for a superintendency. Candidates may desire to stay in their current positions as principals and central office administrators in part because the superintendent protects them from political interference. Indeed, the risk of moving from a position, such as principal or assistant superintendent, holding considerable predictability and stability, to a position as superintendent of schools that serves at the good will of a constantly changing board of elected officials, may be a factor that counterbalances the lure of higher compensation. People are generally reluctant to leave a safe harbor to navigate turbulent waters. Sharp and Walter (1997) commented, “if the job of superintendent had a wrapper, it might be marked ‘Hazardous to Your Health’ or at least ‘Dangerous to Your Career.’ And, everyone in education knows this. People who become superintendents know there is risk” (p. 17). Wolverton (2004) spoke to the negative aspects of the superintendency citing, “poor media image, politics, and so forth coupled with a low pay differential from their current positions, may suggest that the rewards do not justify the effort they would have to expend in doing the job” (p. 11). Petersen and Fusarelli (2001) found, “Few people question the difficulty of providing leadership for our nation's schools. Boards of education and superintendents are often targets of criticism and live in a permanent state of turbulence and pressure” (p. 3). If there is such widespread attention to the risks and headaches of working in a position subject to the whims of locally elected school boards, this governance model may indeed serve as an inhibitor to those contemplating the superintendency.

However, a more thorough review of the literature may reveal significant hope for improved cooperation between superintendents and school boards working together to move a district forward. The *MASS Member Snapshot Survey: Results and Analysis* reported that 80% of responding superintendents felt supported by their school committees (Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, 2011). Glass (2001) wrote “school reformers are beginning to take notice that superintendents and school boards are important participants in improving school performance” (p. 3). He held that “the majority of superintendents believe they were hired based on their personal characteristics and ability to be an agent of change” (p. 6). Bjork et al. (2003) pointed out, “although many reformers claim that school boards are making the job of the superintendent impossible and contributing to high turnover rates, data suggests that, on the whole, most superintendents and boards work together” (p. 457). These researchers consider the real issue to be a few rancorous school boards creating hostile work environments. It may well be the case that the most egregious examples of unfortunate school board-superintendent relations get broad attention in the popular press, influencing the pursuit intentions of prospective candidates to the superintendency and obscuring the cooperative relationships between school boards and superintendents that may in fact be the norm across the country.

Seasoned educators understand that media attention tends to focus on the districts in turmoil. While it may be perceived that governance and politics is a factor negatively influencing applicants, opportunistic candidates may be seen as attractive to a district by framing themselves as transformational leaders. Petersen and Fusarelli (2001) pointed to research focused on district leadership that “indicates that the relationship between the

superintendent and board of education has a significant impact on the quality of a district's educational program” (p. 2). Candidates may ask themselves if the relationship skills they employed in a lesser role are transferable to the superintendency. Sharp and Walter (1997) held that “the relationship between the board of education and the superintendent is crucial, not only for the job security of the superintendent, but also for the efficient management of the school district” (p. 89). Do they believe their abilities are sufficient to succeed on the very public stage of scrutiny a superintendent has to navigate? Are they willing to sacrifice their current level of security to enter an arena of potential career landmines?

Often an applicant has a mentor in their district with whom they feel comfortable discussing their career aspirations. This person may be a superintendent, a school board member, a professor, or a peer. Applicants may view this person as a seasoned professional in the field, possessing a level of wisdom which may enlighten them as to what may lie ahead. Just as applicants seek advice and information, individuals with hiring authority may seek counsel as well. A board member might consider the work of Harris et al. (2004) who advised, “when considering inhibiting factors to the superintendency...school boards should dialogue with active superintendents, as well as aspiring superintendents, to improve understandings, and thus minimize the negative factors of the job” (p. 118). Lashway (2002) believed “board relationships are a continuing issue for district leaders. Despite theoretical clarity in the division of labor (the board sets policy and the superintendent executes it), the practical application is much more ambiguous” (p. 2). Glass and Francescini (2001) understood “superintendent leaders are clearly displeased with the current board governance model. A large majority,

however, also believe their boards are working effectively” (p. 5). A confident and qualified individual may not view the governance structure as an insurmountable obstacle, counting on interpersonal skills developed over the years as an antidote to the challenge.

A school district operates within a culture of collaboration on many levels beyond the office of the superintendent. Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) recommended taking steps to “ensure superintendents and school boards function as collaborative teams, with appropriate community, administrative, and political support, including executive compensation tied to the demands and scope of the job” (p. 9). Action steps such as this could improve the perception that the governance model structurally supports school leaders to make a positive impact for students, thereby brightening the prospect of job satisfaction for applicants.

Konnert and Augenstein cautioned applicants, “viewing the chief executive officer’s (CEO) position from other positions within the organization is a difficult task. In most instances, individuals (applicants) occupying other positions in the organization have never experienced the responsibilities and pressures of being a CEO” (p. 49). Principals and central office administrators may observe what they may well perceive as perilous job dynamics as they are frequently called upon to attend school committee and district leadership meetings. They witness firsthand the positive and negative aspects of the position as they often work closely with the superintendent. A survey completed by the American Association of School Administrators revealed that the majority of superintendents transition from central office by way of the principalship (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Wolverton (2004) postulated that the direct access and frequent

contact with the superintendent inherent in the role of a principal may, in fact, be a deterrent to ascendancy. After observing superintendents in action, principals may have decided that the job was not as attractive as it first seemed and not worth the added effort on their part that doing it well would require. Similarly, they could have anticipated problems and how they, as superintendents, might deal with them and drawn the conclusion that they were not prepared to deal with the daily tension and stress of the position. Wolverton (2004) opined, “The truth is that the superintendency itself may provide little incentive for certificate holders to move beyond their current positions” (p. 11). The implications for the field are significant. If school boards and current superintendents want to ensure that the next generation of superintendents draws from the broadest and deepest possible pool, they need to be mindful of the perspective of those observing the job from close range, and to make sure that the benefits, as well as the drawbacks, are evident.

Job satisfaction. If talented principals and central office leaders could objectively view the superintendency devoid of academic and popular press accounts of the difficult nature of the job and its often frustrating governance structure, the potential to make an impact from the position could prove to be more of a motivator than an inhibitor. Thus, more attention to data regarding the job satisfaction of current superintendents could be a motivating factor for qualified individuals contemplating the superintendency. According to the *MASS Member Snapshot Survey: Results and Analysis*, “the incentive to apply was equally influenced by a desire for greater challenges and to have a greater influence on children” (Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, 2011, p. 35). This

desire to make a difference appears to be the lure as well as the source of professional pride and satisfaction associated with the top job.

The question becomes, will a new role as top educator afford an opportunity for the administrator to achieve greater satisfaction in employment, such as a significant impact on the lives of students? That impact could foster job satisfaction. Carter and Cunningham (1997) suggested “a person who desires to move up to the next rung of the ladder leading to the position of the superintendent wants to have a broader, more positive impact on the lives of children” (p. 123). Newton and Witherspoon (2007) held that “for both male and female prospective applicants, the most appealing position announcements emphasized the instructional leadership role and the least appealing position announcements emphasized either the managerial role in small districts or the political leadership role in large districts” (p. 40). Hopson and Marshall (2004) concurred, stating that “the two strongest motivators for remaining in the superintendency were intrinsic; specifically, the desire to make a difference and to have a positive influence on people” (p. 116). In response to the research question regarding what factors, including job desirability and accessibility, influence the pursuit intentions of individuals qualified to be superintendent, job satisfaction of current superintendents plays an often overlooked role, one with public policy implications for broadening and strengthening the pool of tomorrow’s superintendents. The encouragement of current superintendents who potential applicants hold in high regard, and the clearly communicated message that most current superintendents find their position as superintendent of schools rewarding and worth the tremendous effort, could combine to sway the weighing of factors by potential applicants.

Perhaps the authority that underpins the superintendency could provide some impetus for school administrators to take the leap, and this authority may be very compelling to individuals who have had success as building principals or central office administrators. Wolverton (2004) stated, “Many studies suggest that individuals seek the superintendency because it affords them the opportunity to exercise leadership” (p. 8). Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) discussed impediments to the superintendency, reporting, “most superintendents take on their roles because they are dedicated to improving the education of children” (p. 10). An authentic passion to educate may be the overriding influence on an applicant’s decision.

However, it is no surprise to anyone in the field of public education that, “The breadth and complexity of the responsibilities that go with the superintendency, along with the fact that the superintendent has the ultimate responsibility for the performance of all aspects of the system, make the superintendency an awesome, and at times, an overwhelming position” (Konnert & Augenstien, 1990, p. 56). This paradigm may be impacting the size of the applicant pool significantly. Jacqueline Roy, a search consultant in Massachusetts for more than 20 years, stated, “We have to do an enormous amount of networking and recruiting” (Riede, 2003). Throughout the Northeast, where a search used to yield 50-80 applicants, Roy noted that a new applicant search might net 10 viable candidates out of a pool of no more than 20 or 25 applicants. “Even a once envied job like the leadership of a high achieving 3,000 student district at a salary approaching \$200,000 drew fewer than two dozen applicants in a recent search” (Riede, 2003). Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) argued that incentivizing the job and its potential broad impact and benefits is crucial, commenting that as the demands for accountability

are heightened, and the expectations are more and more unrealistic, people may be less interested in becoming superintendents or staying in this role if they already have it (p. 14).

Along with consideration of the many implications of the leadership responsibilities of the position of superintendent of schools, there is a plethora of negative attention to outside influences. Carter and Cunningham (1997) described “problems that can develop...through no fault of a superintendent. School board members can use their position to damage that of the superintendent to gain power at the superintendent’s expense. Political forces aligned against the superintendent can be substantial. As a result of their efforts, superintendents feel their own work is compromised and less than complete” (p. 127).

Superintendents exercising the greatest of caution in meeting the needs of the board and the community may fail through no fault of their own. Van Shura (2011) wrote, “Unfortunately, despite their moral judgment and gift of speech for issues of academics, our school leaders too often fail to speak to... the political environment in which they operate, and more importantly, in which their elected school boards roam and feed” (p. 21). Brown, Swenson, and Hertz (2007) added:

The role of superintendent of schools has become a hotbed of political focus in recent years. No longer is it sufficient for the designated leader of a school district to be an accomplished educator and respected person. In a climate of high expectations and blame placing, superintendents are expected to be all things to all populations. From adept politicians to visionaries, superintendents are asked to quell the confusion of the here-and-now, while focusing on a future vision of

sweeping success for all. Further, school leaders are expected to perform these functions in the context of institutional hierarchies that allow blame for failure to be placed squarely at the doorstep of the superintendent's office. In short, the role of the superintendent is at once complex, difficult, and fraught with potential for failure (p. 5).

When contemplating the level of job satisfaction gleaned by becoming a superintendent, applicants contend with the reality that they will succeed or fail in a fishbowl. They must decide if the benefits of ascending the career ladder outweigh the risks as they assume their lonely perch at the top. School boards and stakeholders need to come to terms with the importance of perceptions of job satisfaction by potential superintendent candidates as either motivators or deterrents.

Accessibility to the Superintendency

The recruitment and selection process as a potential motivator or deterrent.

As already discussed, vocational psychology literature defines recruitment as the organizational factors that influence the decision of potential applicants to seek and accept a position, and the purposeful actions taken by an employer to yield applicants and acceptances (Chapman et al., 2005). Recruitment for the public school district superintendency, likewise involves purposeful and targeted efforts as well as informal networking by district leaders, school boards, or agencies they employ.

The prevalent practice of relying on networking can impact the decision of potential candidates to pursue the position. A survey of New York superintendents indicated that increasingly, superintendents are being hired as internal candidates. In 2006, 36% of candidates had worked in their district previously, up from 32% in 2000

and 35% in 2003 (Terranova & Volp, 2006). Research by Carlson (1972) described internal candidates as “place-bound” and external candidates as “career-bound” and discussed the implications and situations in which either is advantageous. Place-bound candidates for the superintendency tend to seek the position in their current school system. These candidates are likely to prioritize place above career. Career-bound candidates tend to leave their home systems to pursue a superintendency elsewhere. These candidates are bound, not to a place, but rather to a career. These two groups of applicants may perceive and experience the recruitment and selection process differently, thus shedding light on the factors that inhibit or motivate certain qualified candidates considering the superintendency.

The perception that the majority of superintendents are recruited by personal invitation from a variety of search firms or district contacts was confirmed in a study of New York superintendents. *Snapshot 2009: The 7th Triennial Study of the Superintendency in New York* indicated that well over half of school superintendents received a personal invitation to apply for the superintendency from a search consultant, a district superintendent, or a school board member (Terranova, Ike, & Fale, 2009). A comparative study of Long Island, NY districts concluded that districts are using search consultants with increased frequency. Search firms, often staffed by retired superintendents, were found to play the major gatekeeper role in superintendent searches (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Kamler, 2009). The search firms tend to rely on networks for their identification of viable candidates. This practice likely impacts how potential candidates perceive the recruitment process. Even with strong encouragement by a headhunter, candidates may remain uneasy about joining the candidate pool due in part to

the public scrutiny of all aspects of the application and interview process. Conversely, an individual well-suited to the superintendency who has not garnered the attention of search consultants may be overlooked and not invited or encouraged to apply at all.

Other studies have identified inhibitors such as the public nature of searches, added exposure to the media, and increased stress associated with performing the job (Kenney, 2006). Wolverton (2004) used expectancy, motivational, equity, and environment theories to explain why principals and central administrators may not be motivated to pursue the superintendency. Specifically, she indicated that:

applicants for the superintendency must want to be superintendents and believe that they can be effective in the position if they expend the energy necessary to do the job; and they must believe that the reward, in terms of salary, prestige, respect, or self-development, justifies the effort. If any aspects of the process are looked upon as undesirable, then individuals may become disinclined to apply (p. 9).

Many principals and central office administrators are quite satisfied and fulfilled in their current roles and hold great misgivings about whether the stress and unfamiliarity of navigating a recruitment process and public selection process is worth potential humiliation or risk. Pre-emptive contact by skilled search consultants encouraging a qualified candidate to apply may be both flattering and comforting enough to serve as a motivator to an individual contemplating the superintendency. Conversely, an “on-the-fence” qualified individual who does not receive this nudge may interpret it as evidence that she or he is not a candidate who would be seriously considered, and may opt not to apply. Additionally, the impact of current recruitment practices and use of search consultants or “headhunters” may have an effect on the prospects of women and

racial/ethnic minorities as they pursue the superintendency. This is also worth considering as it may, in turn, impact the thought process of qualified female and racially/ethnically diverse school and district leaders contemplating applying for a position (Wolverton, 2004).

Gender as a factor in the pursuit process. The much talked about superintendency shortage leads to a number of related inquiries about whether the pool of candidates is in fact as small as perceived, and why more qualified and licensed candidates opt not to apply for superintendent openings. One factor worth studying is the impact of gender-based discrimination, or the impact of gender on the decision of qualified principals and central administrators to seek or not to seek the superintendency. Perceptions around gender and access of women to the superintendency may indeed impact the pursuit intentions of women who are qualified to be superintendent of schools.

Wolverton (2004) surveyed over 1,900 superintendent certificate holders in the states of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Oregon. The survey and accompanying research yielded illuminating results in many areas, among them the impact of gender on the equity of superintendent searches. From her study sample, she eliminated current superintendents, retired superintendents, and certificate holders who indicated that they were about to retire, yielding 371 viable candidates for the superintendency. Sixty-eight percent of these potential superintendent candidates were men, and only 7% identified themselves as racial minorities. While Wolverton's intention was not to uncover gender discrimination, but rather to look broadly at the pool of superintendency license holders who had not applied for or attained the superintendency, a close look at the data from her study does point to implications related to gender. The

vast majority of the pool was comprised of current school principals, assistant superintendents, or other central office administrators. A striking data point emerged from the 181 respondents who reported having applied for a superintendency. Of this group, 73% reported being interviewed for the position; 90% of the men who applied and were interviewed reported having been offered the position, while only 41% of women who applied and were interviewed were offered the position. Wolverson offered little analysis of this significant discrepancy and did not claim that it proved gender discrimination towards female candidates for the superintendency. However, it is a statistic that catches the eye of the reader and points to the need for more examination of gender equity.

Wolverson's research (2004) delves deeper into the multitude of factors that dissuade many qualified applicants from applying, but this striking data points to significant possible implications, including that some qualified women may decide not to apply because they perceive that they will not be given equal consideration, or that the perception of the pool is viewed smaller than it really is if qualified women are not perceived as viable candidates. This perception, if and where it exists, would be truly misguided, as recent data showed that female superintendents are in fact better prepared than their male counterparts, with 10% more female superintendents holding doctorate degrees than male superintendents, female superintendents possessing longer tenures as teachers than men, and female superintendents being twice as likely to participate in professional development offered by associations such as ASCD, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005, p. 230). It may be the case that highly qualified female candidates fear that their credentials may not be

given due weight by recruiters, search committees, and school boards, and that this may negatively impact their pursuit intentions.

Indeed, a qualitative study of the ascent of 150 selected females into administrative positions including the superintendency within school districts concluded that “the main impediment to women’s career advancement seems to be the unstated but understood requirements that aspiring candidates must look and act like those already in power” (Gupton & Slick, 1996, p. xxix). A thorough review of the literature does not present any evidence that female candidates for the superintendency are scarce or less qualified than their male counterparts, and in fact they may, as a group, be more qualified (Gupton, 2009). However, lacking the ability to look, act, or sound like a male, some skilled and capable female holders of superintendency licenses may opt not to apply. Further, they may not be recruited for positions because they do not look like the male headhunters or male-dominated school boards who make hiring decisions. Evidence garnered by Brunner and Grogan (2007), who surveyed female central office administrators and superintendents, indicated that the following barriers present themselves: role conflict between one’s professional identity and one’s identity as a wife and/or mother, gender specific attitudes such as lack of self-confidence that create internal barriers to aspiration, lack of sponsorship and role models, family responsibilities, external biased perceptions of female characteristics, and resentment by others. Awareness of the interwoven internal and external barriers that a highly competent female administrator must overcome in order to make the decision to pursue the superintendency may offer insight into the experiences of women.

Even if the inequity highlighted in Wolverton's (2004) study of superintendent certificate-holders in the Pacific Northwest was to be addressed and rectified, the perception that women do not have equal access to the superintendency may linger and influence the pursuit intentions of some qualified applicants. There is consensus in the realm of workplace psychology that historic discrimination against a group may make members of that group more sensitive to prejudice (Chapman et al., 2005). It is therefore a potential consequence that "women, then, may be more sensitive than men to certain characteristics of selection systems, such as their perceived fairness" (p. 930). The unspoken preference of school boards for a male superintendent (Newton, 2006), or sometimes the spoken preference for someone with a "warrior" presence and a high school rather than elementary school principalship on their résumé (Tallerico, 2000, p. 30), or the perception of recruitment agencies or networks as "old boys' clubs" (Glenn & Hickey, 2010, p. 6), may deter qualified and capable female applicants from seeking the superintendency. While the conversations by school board members that question a female applicants' ability to be a strong leader occur largely behind the scenes (Winter et al., 2005), it is possible that female educational leaders suspect that these conversations still take place in the twenty-first century. Consequently, they may be hesitant to throw their application into a very public ring if they think they will not be given a fair shot at the job. Some of the same concerns regarding physical and cultural similarity to the recruiters, as well as embedded stereotypes within school boards and entire communities, may also influence the pursuit intentions of potential candidates of color.

Race/ethnicity as a factor in the pursuit process. The perception that many school boards seek an older white male to fill an opening for the superintendency may

discourage female and racial/ethnic minority applicants from applying. Sadly, the research shows that this perception is, largely, not wrong. *The 6th Triennial Study of the Superintendency in New York*, a comprehensive study of the superintendent recruitment process, found that school district efforts to diversify staff certainly did not extend to recruiting candidates of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Terranova & Volp, 2006). Tallerico (2000) noted a recurring sentiment voiced by search consultants, “I won’t just put minorities into the finalist pool. I’m always going to go with the best qualified” (p. 33). While on its face, that statement might not amount to gatekeeping, the fact that search consultants prefer superintendent candidates who are currently “superintendents in smaller districts, high school principals, or assistants superintendents” (p. 34), coupled with a reluctance to broaden the field to include candidates of color, makes it very difficult for educational leaders who are racial/ethnic minorities to rise to the superintendency.

Even if a minority candidate does rise to the finalist stage, where he or she will encounter a series of interviews with school board members, community leaders, and parent and staff constituencies, the candidate is again disadvantaged by an overwhelming sentiment of the hiring authorities to “go with their gut” above all other factors in selection (p. 35). Tallerico (2000) described how this tacit discrimination takes place:

This hyper valuing of ‘how we connected with the candidate’ and ‘who we could relate to best’ is more likely to disadvantage people of color and females than white male applicants. Why? First, it is important to note that the majority of headhunters and school board members are non-minority males in both this case study and state- and nationwide (p. 36).

It is possible that the overwhelmingly white older male search consultant professionals may also be inclined, towards candidates who look like them and share similar life experiences, particularly since the ascendancy of potential candidates of color is limited according to Juanita Cleaver Simmons by “the lack of being accepted into social and political power arenas” (qtd. in Bjork & Kowalski, 2005, p. 268) where candidates for the superintendency are often identified and recruited. An in-depth survey of 61 superintendent search consultant professionals in Texas indicated that of this sample, 87% were white, 92% were male, and 89% were over the age of 50 (Glenn & Hickey, 2010, p. 3). While these individual search consultants may hold no internal biases against non-white, female, or younger applicants, the perception by potential applicants of them as gatekeepers to a predominantly white, male club may discourage minority candidates from applying, particularly in districts that do not have a largely minority student population of the same race as the potential applicant (Harris et al., 2004; Scott, 1980). These structures led Kamler (2006) to conclude that unless the “power brokers” who control the search and selection processes for superintendents expand their networking activities to include and actively recruit people of color, it is unlikely that the American superintendency will become significantly more racially diverse in the foreseeable future. This includes expanding the pipeline by providing mentoring to talented minority principals and district leaders by current superintendents (p. 301). In the absence of a concerted effort, it is, sadly, understandable why the perception of the superintendency as a white, and, to a lesser extent, male, club may discourage qualified educational leaders of color from pursuing the superintendency.

Conclusion

The literature paints a complex portrait of how many factors coalesce to push and pull a highly qualified candidate to pursue or not to pursue the superintendency.

Attraction to a particular open position, personal ambition, or potential to impact the quality and direction of educational experiences for a great number of students can entice a prospective applicant. Conversely, the highly public nature of the position, and fears about being able to manage an increasingly demanding superintendency, may influence the pursuit intentions of qualified principals and central office administrators for the superintendency. Applicants deciding whether to pursue or not to pursue the position of superintendent have access to information relative to compensation, governance structure, and the potential job satisfaction associated with the role of superintendent. Additionally, a potential candidate who is a female or a racial/ethnic minority may allow reservations about his or her ability to receive a “fair shot” at the job to impact the decision to pursue, particularly in light of the use of network-driven, largely white older male headhunters as gatekeepers in the application process.

Given the challenging realities of the superintendency and the importance of attracting a diverse and qualified pool of candidates, contributing to the limited empirical data related to the thought process and decision to pursue or not to pursue the superintendency is all the more important. This study seeks to address that void and contribute to knowledge in the field by focusing on the thought process of individuals qualified for the superintendency as they contemplate whether or not the job of superintendent is attractive, and how they might see themselves working in particular districts. By studying how the mix of motivators and inhibitors impacts the decision to

pursue or not to pursue the job, the research was designed to better inform the educational community about the pool of potential candidates for the superintendency and inspire dialogue about how to broaden that pool. The stakes are high as there is an existing and emerging need for increasing numbers of high quality, visionary leaders operating with an ethical and moral lens who are willing to take the leap and improve education for our children.

Methodology

Research Using the Qualitative Approach

This study used qualitative methods to shed light on the thought process involved in the pursuit intentions of qualified candidates who may pursue the position of superintendent of schools. Qualitative methodology is an appropriate way “to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process...of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). In this investigation, qualitative methods proved to be an appropriate method for uncovering the complexity of the thought process of potential candidates. The research was designed to answer two questions:

- What factors, including job desirability and accessibility, influence the pursuit intentions of individuals qualified to be superintendent?
- How does the mix of motivators and inhibitors impact the decision to pursue or not to pursue the position?

The six investigators conducted in-person interviews with twelve graduates of a doctoral program in educational leadership at a prestigious New England institution of higher education, re-named Anywhere College of Education (ACE) for purposes of this study. The interviews included graduates within the last eight years and were designed to gain insight into the ways in which potential superintendent candidates construct their career plans and development, and what factors may contribute to a decision to pursue or not to pursue the superintendency.

Accessible population. ACE offered an appropriate accessible population for the study for a variety of reasons. ACE uses a cohort model and is designed to integrate

theory and practice with skill development, resulting in both a superintendent license and a doctorate degree in educational leadership. ACE is part of a larger university structure and has a strong reputation for preparing superintendents. The recruiting materials and program description for ACE list applied experience, research, and mentoring as key values. In addition, according to the ACE website and application materials, entrance to the program is competitive and requires a Master's degree, nomination by the applicant's current superintendent or headmaster, and previous educational leadership experience, generally at the central administrator, K-12 director, principal, or assistant principal level. Diversity, urban experience and potential for exemplary leadership are also considerations. Also according to the recruitment materials, completion of the three-year program requires rigorous and time-consuming commitment to research and learning, and exposure to current theory and practice about the superintendency. Current and former sitting superintendents interface with students through coursework, as well as a mentorship model in which a practicing superintendent is assigned as a mentor and a third dissertation reader. Thus, as a result of the entrance requirements, program coursework, and exposure to practicing superintendents, all graduates are theoretically prepared and qualified to be superintendents.

The accessible population was limited to graduates in the last eight years (since 2003) to insure that all participants had received a similar educational experience, with many of the same professors, coursework, and degree requirements. This delimitation also helped insure that participants could still remember and reflect on their career thinking, an important part of the design of the inquiry. Delimiting the population to a

single decade also assured that all participants responded within a similar political, economic, and social context.

In summary, ACE offered a cohort of highly qualified potential superintendents who have shown interest in career advancement and growth in the field of educational administration, are theoretically prepared, have received similar experiences, and may or may not have pursued the superintendency.

Criterion-based sample selection. From the accessible population, the investigators selected participants by identifying attributes essential to the study and selecting participants who fit those criteria. A number of criteria were applied.

The first set of criteria identified those graduates who most closely matched the study's target population. Only those who worked in a public school setting, had not been a superintendent prior to entering the doctoral program, and had completed the degree of Doctor of Education since 2003 were considered. This narrowed the accessible population to fifty-four alumni who were emailed an electronic survey in August 2011. The electronic survey asked demographic questions and willingness to participate in a one-hour interview. Twenty-one graduates responded.

A second set of criteria was applied to the twenty-one potential participants to identify the twelve participants who offered maximum variability. The criterion-based approach allowed the investigators to identify attributes essential to the study and to select participants who fit those criteria (Creswell, 2007). This allowed the investigators to illuminate the thought process among participants who differ in their demographics and characteristics, thereby increasing confidence in the common patterns that were revealed in the interviews and improving validity and transferability (Merriam, 2009;

Patton, 1980). It also helped to illuminate the differences in experience and career thinking of participants (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 29) and offered the widest possibility for readers to connect to the study. It is important to note, however, that this process does not permit generalizations to all potential qualified, credentialed, superintendent candidates, who may or may not have attended ACE.

Varying criteria included current position, age, gender, and race/ethnicity. The participants included five alumni who have become superintendents since graduating, two assistant superintendents, three principals, one assistant principal, and one department head. Participants ranged in age from about 35 to 60. Five were women, and seven were men. Of these, nine were white, and there was one Asian, one Latino, and one African-American. Table 1 identifies each of the participants by their assigned pseudonym and includes their demographic information. Table 2 illustrates the pursuit history of our participants separated by gender. It is apparent that female participants were less likely to be contacted by a recruiter, recruited internally, or encouraged to pursue the position. All participants signed a Consent to Participate which outlined the nature and purpose of the study and methods of insuring confidentiality. The study was conducted under the policies of the university's Institutional Review Board.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Gender	Pseudonym	Racial/ Ethnic Minority	Current Superintendent	Marital Status	# Children Total	# Children <18	# Children >18
Female	Beatrice			Single	0	0	0
	Gayle		Y	Single	0	0	0
	Laura	Y		Married	1	1	0
	Melissa	Y		Married	3	1	2
	Patricia		Y	Married	2	2	0
Male	Barry		Y	Married	3	1	2
	Chuck			Married	2	0	2
	Jay		Y	Married	3	3	0
	Paul		Y	Married	3	3	0
	Robert	Y		Married	2	2	0
	Simon			Married	3	3	0
	Stanley			Married	2	0	2

Table 2

Participant Pursuit History

Gender	Pseudonym	Racial/ Ethnic Minority	Applied for Superintendency	Contacted by Recruiter	Recruited Internally	Formal or Informal Mentor who Encouraged Pursuit
Female	Beatrice					
	Gayle		Y	Y	Y	Y
	Laura	Y	Y			Y
	Melissa	Y				
	Patricia		Y			
Male	Barry		Y	Y	Y	Y
	Chuck		Y	Y	Y	Y
	Jay		Y	Y	Y	Y
	Paul		Y	Y	Y	Y
	Robert	Y				
	Simon			Y	Y	
	Stanley			Y	Y	Y

Data set. Transcriptions of the twelve interviews, field notes from each interview, demographic data from the electronic survey, and a group analytic memo constitute the data set. An interview protocol and script guided the semi-structured interview process (see Appendix for Interview Questions). The interview method was selected to reveal

what participants are thinking – information that is not easily gathered in other ways such as surveying, observing, or discussing in a group (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). The interview used in-depth, open-ended exploratory questions. According to Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte (1999), “exploratory interviewing is intended to expand the researcher’s knowledge of areas about which little is known” (p. 122). Its main purposes are to explore known domains, identify new domains, break down domains into component factors and sub-factors, and provide context for the participants’ responses (Schensul et al., 1999).

All six investigators conducted the twelve 1-2 hour interviews either individually or in pairs from August 22 through October 6, 2011. Investigators had the flexibility to ask questions in a different order, skip questions if a topic had already been covered, or most importantly, to ask probing follow-up questions to elicit richer, more thoughtful answers, or to ask about topics the interviewee had not yet voluntarily identified. The interview guide helped generate consistency among interviews and interviewers, kept the conversation focused, but also allowed individual perspectives and experiences to emerge (Patton, 1989). The interview guide suggested a conversational tone “requiring active asking and listening” by the interviewer. The “process (was) a meaning-making endeavor embarked on as a partnership between the interviewer and his or her respondent” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 94).

The questions were organized topically, with each topic representing a line of inquiry (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The topics represented the domains of inquiry suggested by the literature review. These included: career aspirations; job desirability; perception of accessibility (including the effect of gender, race/ethnicity, and the

recruitment and selection process); decision factors; and the influence of mentors, colleagues and family. Some questions involved hypothetical scenarios. For example, participants were asked to imagine that a recruiter called the next day encouraging the interviewee to apply for an opening for the position of superintendent because their name had been mentioned as someone who might be a great fit. Participants were queried about what immediately comes to mind, what questions they might ask, and what they might discuss with family or friends. Participants were also asked, for example, whether or not gender or race/ethnicity has been a factor in their career and whether they perceive it might be a factor in attaining the position of superintendent.

Each interviewer documented field notes as soon as possible after each interview. The field notes added relevant information such as attitudes, presentation style, non-verbal cues, and reactions of the interviewer to the interviewee that might add description and richness to the verbatim transcripts.

A group analytic memo was maintained throughout the process. The memo included reflections and thoughts at any time during the entire research, data analysis, and research process. Periodically reflecting on the data and contributing to the group analytic memo pushed the research team to be thinking critically about the research, challenging assumptions, and developing thematic hypotheses throughout the process (Mason, 2002).

Coding and analysis. The data were coded and analyzed using an initial set of codes informed by the literature review and initial interview results, and modified or expanded throughout the process as suggested by the data and emerging themes.

The coding process was conducted by all six investigators as a team using NVivo, a qualitative research software tool. The decision to remain as a whole group throughout the first three phases of coding was predicated upon the groups desire to familiarize itself with all the interviews in an environment that allowed for candor and inclusivity. The team scheduled a series of full-day workshop sessions to code, discuss and analyze the data concurrently by all six team members. During the workshop sessions, the interview transcripts and field notes which had been uploaded into NVivo, were projected onto a screen and read aloud with periodic pauses for discussion and coding. The team used a consensus method for applying codes to text in all twelve transcripts and field notes. This process, though time-consuming, led to a common understanding and familiarity with the data, as well as exceptional inter-rater reliability in the coding process, system, terminology, and ongoing discussion. Following the coding of each transcript or field note, all investigators shared thoughts and collaboratively contributed to the group analytic memo. The single analytic memo recorded a range of thoughts, hypotheses, ideas for further coding and analysis, and allowed the team to collaboratively progress from categorical coding, to the development of hypotheses, and back to additional coding to test hypotheses.

As suggested by Saldana (2009), a series of coding schemes was utilized. The investigators initially applied attribute coding, provisional coding, and value coding as different prisms for viewing the data. The approach “develops connections that lead to flashes of insight” (p. 47). Attribute coding assigned specific attributes, such as demographics, about participants. Descriptive coding summarized the basic topic of a passage within the transcript. Provisional coding used themes generated from the

literature review, conceptual framework, or research questions. Value coding documented participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs revealed through the interviews.

Identification of themes, findings, recommendations and implications. As the coding process evolved, the six investigators together identified emerging themes in answer to the research questions. These were extensively discussed and recorded using lists, charts, visual representations, and the team's ongoing group analytic memo. Hypotheses and emerging themes were tested by returning to the data for illumination or confirmation. This allowed the team to progressively apply analytical themes to the data, reveal patterns in the data, and progress from the initial stages of topical labeling to analytical categories (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In addition, each team member developed a formal data display (Miles & Huberman, 1994) such as code utilization by participant, frequency of codes in the entire data set, interrelationships of codes suggested by the data sets, and maps of typical career paths suggested by the data. These data displays were then shared with the entire team, helping to reveal the what, how and why embedded within the data, and prompting rich discussions. Analysis of the interrelationships among the themes led to hypotheses which formed the foundation of the studies' findings, discussion, recommendations, identified limitations, and suggestions for further study.

Validity and reliability. A number of protocols were employed to address validity and reliability. First, the interview script and questions were piloted with three participants. Those transcripts were then reviewed to assess how well the questions were addressing the areas of inquiry suggested by the literature review.

Second, at the conclusion of each interview, every participant was asked if they were willing to review the transcript for accuracy. Those that agreed to this member check procedure were emailed a copy of the transcript for review; no participants responded with any changes.

Third, the workshop format of coding and analysis resulted in consensus and inter-rater reliability at each step of the process using NVivo. The workshop was designed to have one group member operate the software with use of an LCD projector to share the transcripts within the NVivo system to analyze for group coding and member check. All six team members together developed evolving definitions of codes, made meaning of the data, and identified patterns, themes and findings. This coding process was conducted as a complete team, continually analyzing the data from the participants and repeatedly gaining consensus consistently. Since qualitative research depends upon the recognition of sometimes-subtle patterns in data, the ongoing collective analysis by six researchers proved advantageous in uncovering multiple perspectives and theories, which could be presented, discussed and defended in the moment. The process supported all three elements of qualitative research defined by Mason (2002): it helped make meaning of “elements in a complex -- possibly multi-layered and textured -- social world”; it used data methods which are both flexible and sensitive to the real-life social context in which the data is produced; and the analysis uncovered rounded complexity, detail and context, based on rich, nuanced and detailed data (p. 3-4). The final audit revealed that the analysis had successfully moved from charting surface patterns to identifying holistic interpretations of the data.

During this process, however, the investigative team was aware of the concept known as *groupthink* that has been defined as the propensity of a group to be more “concerned with gaining the approval of the fellow members of their work group than with coming up with good solutions to the tasks at hand” (Janis, 1982, p. vii). This tends to happen when groups are highly cohesive and are under pressure to make high quality decisions. When there is a demand of agreement, the individual is less likely to clearly evaluate the options and more likely to be irrational and slightly imprudent in their decisions due to their greater concern of unity. In order to check or challenge groupthink, the team appointed one member of the group to serve as the evaluator and the only member to conduct the fourth and final coding phase.

Fourth, once the five major findings and accompanying subfindings were articulated, and in order to audit for accuracy, to confirm attribution, and to uncover alternative hypotheses that may have been overlooked, the assigned evaluative member completed an additional round of transcript review. Through the audit, findings were tabulated by interviewee for frequency and magnitude. The process revealed continued support for the study’s findings and prompted the team to revise the findings with greater fidelity and accuracy to the participants. Upon completion of this fourth and final round of coding, the team continued over the course of several work sessions to define and refine the specific language to properly articulate the participant’s voice. Once agreed upon, the team subdivided into two groups charged with writing findings, discussion or recommendations. All members of the group were responsible for ensuring that discussion grew from findings and translated into recommendations.

Limitations

The research team recognizes there are limitations to the study that should be acknowledged. The study was framed on the assumption that ACE doctoral program graduates with superintendent licensure are qualified for the superintendency. While they are licensed to hold the position of superintendent, they expressed different levels of readiness and preparation to execute the job responsibilities. The participants in the study included both aspiring and current superintendents, and inclusion of current superintendents proved to be problematic at times. After only a few years in the position, some interview participants found it difficult to elaborate on the thought process as their recollection of the job pursuit had faded. At times, participants spoke at length about the challenges of their position, digressing from the interview questions.

Selection of the participants imposed some limitations on our study. Three of the twelve participants were racial/ethnic minorities, one was African-American, one was Latino, and one was Asian. This was not by design, but rather a result of the limited number of ACE graduates who are people of color. Regretfully, this limitation impeded the construction of broad findings concerning the impact of race/ethnicity on pursuit intentions. Similarly, nine of the twelve participants were working in suburban districts. This may limit the applicability of our study to urban, impoverished, and rural districts.

Our proximity and familiarity to the interview participants may have also contributed to subtle limitations in our study. As doctoral program students in a close-knit community of educators, practitioners, and professors, there were small degrees of separation among its members. Astute participants would undoubtedly recognize that the

interviewer likely had professional and personal contacts in participants' network of colleagues, potentially limiting their willingness to divulge sensitive information.

As doctoral program students following similar career trajectories to participants, the research team needed to be mindful not to overlay personal impressions or to project experiences into the findings. This tendency was kept in check by the group workshop process. The team of six investigators included men and women of varying ages and experiences. Any comments or inferences that veered from the facts were challenged by other members of the team as a regular part of the data analysis.

The proximity of the researchers to the participants, and the mentors and colleagues they referred to in their interviews, at times, made the research team concerned. The team recognized its responsibility to present the data objectively and to preserve the fidelity of the participants' voice.

When interviewers shared the same gender, age range, racial/ethnic characteristics, or professional position with the interviewee, participants appeared to be at ease. Other participants seemed to be less willing to fully divulge their thought process.

An analysis of the transcripts revealed a lack of information about participants' age, years in current position, and career trajectory. This data may have helped us to build greater understanding of their pursuit chronology.

Choosing depth over breadth, the team deliberately delimited the boundaries of the study. The study included twelve participants. The limited size of the sample allowed the team time to add layers of data coding and analysis to the process. A larger sample might have improved generalizability, but at the expense of exploring the complexity of the thought process.

Findings

Conventional wisdom would say that the pursuit for the superintendency should be a rational process both in thought and in action. An individual gains the qualifications, and then pursues the position. If he or she is the most qualified and best candidate for the position, that person is offered the job. However, through our research, we have found that our participants experienced a process of pursuit for the superintendency that is best described as a complex personalized journey through a myriad of internal and external factors. Relationships and access to the superintendent network, including recruiters and other resources, shaped the opportunity itself and the perceptions of the participants. This was illustrated through the participants' thought process that relied on a fairly constant, predetermined mental checklist of considerations. Participants cycled through a repeated process of weighing various factors influencing their decision in an attempt to clarify and determine the risks and the rewards. This process assisted in determining the point at which risks began to outweigh the rewards or the rewards began to outweigh the risks through a recurring process that continued until the individual obtained a superintendency, deferred the pursuit, or discontinued the pursuit.

Specifically, the research team identified five findings that shed light on the participants' thought process as reflected through their experiences of contemplating the pursuit of the superintendency. Perceived fit is the framework around which candidates develop their thought process. Candidates have a predetermined mental checklist to assess fit that is relatively constant and consistent for all potential candidates. When evaluating the questions on their checklist, candidates use a process of applying weight depending on individual circumstances and stages in life. Women and racial/ethnic

minority candidates experience the pursuit process differently as they contemplate and seek access to the job of superintendent of schools. Candidates pursue the superintendency using a network of formal and informal contacts.

“Fit” for our participants was an appraisal of their likelihood of pursuing the superintendency, in general, and of pursuing specific available openings and districts in particular. Current literature on fit perceptions tends to be studied in two forms: person-job (P-J) fit and person-organization (P-O) fit. The former (P-J) has been defined as the “overall match between the individual’s strengths and weaknesses and the job requirements” (Caldwell & O’Reilly, 1990, p. 654). The latter has been defined as the “compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both” (Kristof, 1996, p. 4-5).

Using different lenses, all participants developed perceptions of the degree to which they believed that their own values, skills, and experiences aligned with those that are inherent within or expected by the job and the organization (Breugh, 1992). This exploration of the pursuit of the superintendency appeared to be connected to their motivation and drive for self-actualization, their ability to actuate their values in a district that shares their values, and the ability to make a difference to a larger pool of students through the increased impact they could have with expanded authority. The following reporting of the participants’ interviews illustrates the five findings.

Perceived fit is the framework around which candidates develop their thought process. One participant named Paul commented,

I kind of think that when I went into the superintendency, I wanted to work with adults as well, not just directly with kids, but I think that the position allows you to make important decisions that affect the lives of thousands of kids. I think to me that's what motivates me, that's what energizes me that not only you're working with adults, which as we know, can be very challenging, the decisions and the energy you put in are really geared toward many more kids than you could do on a different level.

All twelve participants discussed their values and beliefs, as well as their desire to seek alignment with those of the community they serve when searching for a superintendency. As stated by Stanley, "I was fairly selective...did they want the type of leader that will come in with a vision, but, also develop a vision suited to the community that reflected my values and the community?" All participants self-reflected on their skill set to see if their experiences would support their ability to carry out the job responsibilities. As Laura said:

I don't think I am ready for it right now, I think I still have so much to learn and so many more experiences to gain, but, I can see it being a potential fit in the future. I went through a doctoral program, so on one hand I've got sort of the education background, but, I think there are so many experiences that I still need to have in order to feel internally like I am qualified or prepared for it.

All twelve participants would or did explore various aspects about the job within the context of the community, district, and what information and insight could be garnered about the culture. Melissa wanted to be in an urban area, "Given my passion, I would definitely have to stay in an urban community" in contrast to Paul who stated, "I

think I really want to spend my time working in suburban areas.” Chuck wanted to know, “what’s the morale of the teachers in town, are they motivated, are they enthusiastic, are they...do they get in their cars at 2:30 p.m.?” All participants grappled with both the elusive and constant issues around fit. Their efforts to analyze and to synthesize resulted in evolving cognitive exercises around which they framed their thinking.

Candidates have a predetermined mental checklist to assess fit that is relatively constant and consistent for all potential candidates. Central to the mental checklist is the participants’ subjective assessment of their suitability to the job of superintendent itself, as well as their match to a particular school district. As participants answered interview questions about their careers, their experiences considering job changes and their thoughts about whether or not to pursue the superintendency, it became clear that participants had a mental checklist for determining whether they were a viable candidate for the superintendency in general, and for specific available openings and districts in particular. In other words, it appeared that they use a checklist of personal and self-imposed questions to assess fit in some fashion. All twelve participants used the word fit when describing how they have or would determine whether or not to pursue the position. They often referred to this mental checklist as characteristics of fit or questions that they would ask themselves, a recruiter, colleague, friend or family member. While participants never used the phrase “checklist” most participants responded with a matrix of considerations that were similar from person to person as summed up by Laura,

Well a match would be, can I raise my child and have this job? What are the skills that you need from me? Are they a match? Because if they are not, if they need

something that I'm not, I wouldn't take the job...it would have to be mutual, so it would have to be a fit, and that matters more than the actual position.

Robert also spoke to the personalization of the fit, expressing,

It would have to be a school system that shares my core values and my beliefs about education as well and it would definitely have to be a school district that really values education...having the same priorities because it is never an issue about money. It is always an issue about priorities, so it would have to be a good fit in those regards.

In analyzing the transcripts, it became apparent that there was considerable overlap in the factors, or items on their mental checklist. These items included academic preparation, fiduciary responsibilities, political acumen, career trajectory, stability and behavior of school committee, interview and public nature of the process, impact on student achievement, support system, compensation, demographics, and work life balance.

Participants felt prepared and equipped with the requisite skill set for the job, with the exception of fiduciary responsibilities and politics. All twelve participants questioned their skill set through use of mental checklist indicating varying degrees of confidence in their preparedness for the position. This sense of preparedness was attributed to ACE by Simon, Stanley, Chuck, Jay, Melissa, Paul, Beatrice, Gayle, and Barry, with only Patricia noting specifically that she did not find the program to be helpful, with the exception of one female professor at ACE. Two participants, Robert and Melissa, didn't mention ACE at all, but the majority agreed with Chuck who said, "after I graduated [from ACE], I definitely felt like I wanted to pursue the superintendency because I felt like I wanted to

run my own school system. I felt I had the skills and ability and the knowledge to do it.” All twelve participants thought their current career path and opportunities contributed to their feeling of being prepared, while Robert, Chuck, Melissa, and Laura felt they needed continued experience prior to any pursuit. Melissa captured this cautionary lens, “The fact that I am a qualified candidate doesn’t fit with my future career plans at this time because I need more experience... I have every intention [in my] ten year plan of acquiring a superintendency.”

When discussing limitations impacting their readiness, all twelve participants mentioned a lack of fiduciary and political acumen to successfully execute the requirements of being the chief executive of a school system. Simon, Stanley, Chuck, Patricia, Paul, Barry, and Jay attributed their deficiencies in these areas to their academic coursework in ACE, and criticized the program for their lack of understanding finances. For example, Barry stated, “[I was lacking] the financial acumen and background and skill set. I’m constantly, even now, playing catch up.” Chuck, as part of a follow up conversation with the recruiter for a superintendency position he did not receive, was told he was not selected because of his lack of knowledge around financial aspects of the job. Robert, Gayle, and Beatrice concurred, noting a lack of on the job experience and academic focus on the operational aspects of the job of superintendent. In addition to their reflections on potential deficits in the business aspect of school leadership, participants wondered if they wanted to deal with the politics surrounding the responsibilities of the superintendency. This concern about politics was a question on all twelve participants’ mental checklists. For Jay, Paul, Patricia, and Stanley, it was a mild concern as Jay stated, “Clearly it’s an intense role. It’s a very time consuming role. It’s a

very high profile role. You have to be comfortable with being in the public eye and making decisions in the spotlight, and that's not for everybody.”

Jay further mentioned the added pressure of “social media and online and anonymous criticism” as adding an additional dimension of political vulnerability and pressure. For Barry, Laura, Melissa, and Gayle, the political framework was a moderate concern. For Chuck, Robert, Beatrice, and Simon, it was a major concern. In fact, politics was one of three factors as to why Chuck discontinued his search. Politics was cited as a reason by Robert, Beatrice, and Simon for not currently seeking the position. Simon said he would apply if he could, “get rid of unions and get rid of school boards.” Beatrice said, “If I was in a district, I would want to be able to have somebody who would be more business minded with finances because my expertise is really around curriculum.” Laura and Melissa recognized that the typical career track for superintendent simply does not include financial or political experience.

Participants reflected upon their career experiences to determine if their career trajectory was suitable for the superintendency. Participants questioned whether their career experiences would be suitable for the job, and what the school committee would consider their candidacy. When asked about what the next step would be in her career path, Melissa stated, “I see most superintendent candidates need to be a principal.” Of the five participants who had already become superintendents, all but one had followed traditional career trajectories. These five participants all believed that whatever path they had taken was a good and viable path. Barry, who was a high school principal prior to becoming a superintendent said:

I think being a principal is a key ingredient, now if you go from being a building principal to the central office and you kind of muck around for awhile, that's one trajectory. But I think a high school principalship is well positioned [as well] because [there] you also deal with different segments of the community.

Barry's remarks were in contrast to those of Gayle, another sitting superintendent, who said, "I looked for an opportunity to be an assistant superintendent and was able to find one that took me one step away from the superintendency." All seven non-superintendents conveyed a perception that they would not be strong candidates without completing a typical path. There was a belief among participants that a traditional path included some variation of teacher, to principal, to superintendent or principal to central office, to superintendent. It was recognized that the field and the progression had an expectation that potential candidates should follow these prescribed paths as echoed by Laura who stated, "I assumed that I would need a traditional route [including principal]." Chuck, who applied for multiple positions and ultimately discontinued his search, said, "I wasn't considered [by search firms] because I didn't have any central office experience." Regardless of their career paths and varying proximity to central office, participants were well aware of the challenges inherent in the governance model.

Central to their preparation for a specific candidacy, participants researched the stability and behavior of the respective school committee. All twelve participants mentioned being concerned about working with a school committee that was difficult or perceived as dysfunctional. Their mental checklist included a consideration of the stability and character of the current school committee. Simon, Chuck, Beatrice, Paul, Jay, Laura, and Robert all strongly stated they would not go into a district that had a

history of misconduct or mistreatment. Paul said, “Quite frankly, what I saw in terms of that school committee and the way they operated, it would never be a group of people I’d ever want to work for.” Laura agreed, “I want to feel that the school committee is a collaborative group, not ‘you know do what I say or you’re out’ group.” Only one, Stanley, commented that while he would be concerned about a difficult school committee, it was something he could tackle. The remaining participants would seriously consider the presence or absence of a dysfunctional school committee as a major factor in determining where to apply.

Participants were concerned with the interview and the public nature of the selection process. Eight of the twelve participants mentioned, with varying levels of emphasis, their concern regarding the public nature of the process. Jay, Gayle, Simon, and Robert did not mention this as a concern. Jay, a current superintendent, was fairly confident that he would receive the position and used the public interview process to solidify why he would be a good superintendent. Patricia, Beatrice, and Melissa were concerned about the interview itself and their feeling that it may assist in perpetuating the notion that a superintendent should be male and/or white male. Beatrice stated, “in terms of job interviews...it might be a perception I have that there are certain expectations for certain roles and there might be some qualities or characteristics that are expected and men exhibit them more frequently.” Melissa thought the process was “biased”, and Patricia said, “It’s a reality...men often get the job because they look the part, he’s male, a white male.”

Laura, Chuck, Stanley, and Barry were also concerned about the public nature of the process due to the level of exposure and impact on their current reputation and/or

continued ability to function in their current role if rejected. Barry did not tell anyone beyond his wife that he was applying. Stanley only applied in limited districts, and Laura was not sure she would “want her name out there.” It was Chuck who articulated this when he said:

It definitely hurt me here [in my current job] in terms of my credibility because people think I’m just out looking for a job...they [current colleagues] have a different opinion of you...it just felt like it [the process] was undermining what I was trying to do here, and we were doing some good things.

Finally, Paul, a current superintendent, was initially concerned but received significant coaching from a male ACE professor, re-named Professor X. Paul credited Professor X, saying, “he mentored me throughout the whole process that goes along with applying for the superintendency and told me about how it all works; he worked closely with me during that process.”

Participants compared the impact and authority level they could have as a superintendent to that of other positions. A frequently cited attraction to the superintendency was making a difference for students. All participants spoke to the type of influence they would have as a superintendent. There was a mix of motivators pushing participants seeking that level of influence. Gayle and Laura punctuated their desire to have widespread ability to impact student achievement as a heavily weighted motivating factor for pursuing the position. Gayle said, “it put me in a place to really impact what students are experiencing in the classroom in a dramatic way.” Patricia, Barry, Chuck, Beatrice, and Paul also mentioned student impact, but additionally were looking for the opportunity to mentor and or work with other administrators. Beatrice said, “I think the

job would be largely focused on working with other administrative leaders to complete the work. That's really your team that you need to cultivate, develop, and support, setting the vision, setting the goals, doing it collaboratively." Jay and Stanley also wanted to have a greater impact as they were clearly seeking the opportunity to be the top executive. Jay said:

The opportunity to be in a position where you can be even more influential...that's a CEO role. I think that both in terms of professional clarification and professional prestige to a degree, certainly I think you need a healthy ego...your ego's really for making the organization better.

Robert and Melissa did not mention the potential positive impact of the superintendency at all. However, they were the two participants who were most removed from the position given that they were at earlier stages in their careers. Conversely, Simon felt that the greatest impact he would have was in his current position as principal. He said, "So, I think that certainly a school principal has, it just is an incredible lever in terms of how to impact or influence school culture." While all twelve participants fondly recalled their previous positions, eleven felt the greater level of opportunity was within the superintendency. Impact and influence were among the many topics participants discussed with critical friends, colleagues, and mentors.

Participants all turned to someone to assist with answering questions relative to their pursuit intentions. All participants have or would contact someone to discuss items on their checklist, to confer with on their expected answers, and to gain another's perspective. While all participants mentioned discussing their thoughts with friends or family, not all would access a familial resource to review a majority of the specific items

on the checklist. Instead, they relied on other sources for consultation. This divide was largely driven by gender. Of the seven male participants, five mentioned contacting or calling Professor X. Jay, Paul, Barry, and Stanley reported having a strong connection with Professor X, on whom they relied to provide ongoing advice and assistance. Chuck mentioned his assigned ACE mentor, a former superintendent. All the males, with the exception of Robert, indicated they would or have contacted other current and/or former superintendents. Beatrice, Patricia and Melissa mentioned only friends or family. Melissa said “I might call [my mentor] but I know what he’s going to say so I discussed it with my husband and daughters.” Gayle mentioned her former boss, a female superintendent who also was a good friend. Laura made a deliberate call to a superintendent. In addition, Laura discussed having many conversations with her family, saying, “I mean I really would be talking to my family, which would basically be... here is an opportunity, what do you think?”

Participants thought about what the district would likely pay. While compensation, for most participants, was not a major factor in determining if they would pursue the superintendency, it was typically a consideration. Barry, Robert, Beatrice, and Melissa did not mention compensation in any capacity. Gayle, Stanley, Patricia, and Paul stated it was not much of a consideration. Gayle said, “the other place would have been larger and probably more impressive and higher pay but it wouldn’t have been worth it to me.” However for Jay and Chuck, compensation was a significant motivating factor as Chuck said, “the amount of money that a superintendent makes more than a principal is significant. That means it was definitely a consideration.” Simon mentioned greater

compensation benefits and a more lucrative retirement package as positive aspects, but compensation did not emerge as a primary driver.

Participants considered the district's location and characteristics. Demographics and its associated influence on participants' perceived fit in a particular district was brought up repeatedly and highlighted as a major factor by the participants. These included type of district (urban, suburban) size of district (number of schools and students), student outcomes, the district's political climate, financial stability, and location of the district in relation to the potential commuting distance. Stanley, Barry, Jay, and Chuck all described a medium sized, high performing, upper middle class to affluent, suburban district, while Beatrice, Paul, and Gayle preferred a small suburban district. Simon, as well as all three racial and ethnic participants wanted to work with a diverse population or urban district. Only Patricia was desirous of a rural district.

Just as participants considered seeking professional harmony with a district, they were also quite specific about what district characteristics would constitute a good fit for them personally. Beatrice said:

Knowing myself, I would want a smaller district but one that would be large enough where I would be able to have a central office administrative team to work with and to rely on because if the district's too small and it's just you, you are wearing a lot of hats, and my expertise is really around curriculum.

Within this context, commute and location were cited as considerations by Paul, Laura, Robert, Melissa, and Chuck in terms of travel time and potential time away from the family. Simon, Gayle, and Patricia relocated for their current position, while Jay, Beatrice, and Barry did not mention commute at all.

All participants cited, with varying degrees of emphasis, the fiscal, political, and other characteristics of a potential district as a consideration, as outlined by Chuck:

I'd want to know the fiscal condition of the town. I'd be looking at standardized test scores. I'd want to know where they are in their contract situation with their teachers...I would want to work in a place where there's a sense of making things better – not a place that's stagnant.

While all participants were confident about their skill set to do the job, nine of the twelve participants cited consideration of work life balance. The impact on the family in relation to the time commitment was a significant concern, as stated by Patricia, “The job is a 24/7 job, and you have to accept that. They own you lock, stock, and barrel.” Laura added, “although I've heard superintendents say that you can make the job. You can create the job. I don't know if that's true...at least not in the current climate.” Of the non-superintendents, Laura, Simon, Robert, and Melissa said work life balance was the single reason they were not seeking the position, one that trumped all other factors combined. However, several participants who were parents stated they would pursue the position once their children were out of high school. Of the remaining two non-superintendents, Beatrice does not have children and did not mention the impact on family. Chuck, who discontinued his pursuit, did not begin that search until his children were out of high school. Of the five current superintendents, Stanley waited to pursue the position until his children were in college, Paul intentionally selected a very small district to minimize impact on family and intends to remain in a small district. Paul shared:

There was a superintendency very close to here that opened up last year. Many of my colleagues assumed I would apply, and I didn't. That was driven by family. I

think I would have been a strong candidate and I would probably have made \$35,000 more than I am now. But...my kids are only nine, seven, and one. I don't want to do that now.

Patricia strongly felt the demands of the job impacted work life balance and thus made significant adjustments in her home life to accommodate her career. Jay, who has young children, made minor mention of family impact. However, the concern was significantly less than other participants in similar situations. Gayle and Barry did not mention family impact. Like Beatrice, Gayle does not have children, and Barry's children are older. Juxtaposition of career and family goals created a recursive dynamic influencing the participants' thought process.

When evaluating the questions on their mental checklist, candidates use a process of applying weight depending on individual circumstances and stages in life.

As individuals consider pursuing the superintendency in general, or the superintendency in a particular district, the weight given to the answer of any one-question changes in relationship to their perception of the risks and rewards which is largely based on their search for work life balance. During the research study, all twelve participants discussed weighing their thoughts in a way that resulted in continuing the pursuit, waiting to apply, or discontinuing the pursuit. Melissa, Robert, Chuck, Simon, Laura, and Stanley considered all items on their mental checklist but gave an enormous amount of weight to work life balance, to the extent that it closed down opportunities until their children were in college. As Melissa stated, "I didn't have a child just to be an absent mother, and I feel like with the urban superintendency and the politics and what not that there is an expectation that your life belongs to the city." Chuck had difficulty with the public nature

of the process such that the risk of pursuit outweighed the rewards and resulted in his discontinuation of the process. He said, "Going through the process was just a complete grind. Going through at the initial interview with twenty people, then the public interview with the school committee on cable television is grueling." For Patricia, the job responsibilities of superintendent outweighed all other factors and received the most weight in her decision. This resulted in her need to make significant life and family compromises in order to continue the pursuit. Jay was seeking the prestige and authority associated with the position, which outweighed the time commitment and impact that it would have on the family. Beatrice felt although she had the skills, she put weight on the fact that she felt she did not have the experience to be successful in the position. It became clear that the recurrent cycle of weighing risks and rewards included additional consideration for women and minority participants as their checklist included explicit attention to race/ethnicity and gender.

Women and racial/ethnic minority candidates experience the pursuit process differently as they contemplate and seek access to the job of superintendent of schools. All women and minority participants were aware that they do not fit the typical profile of a superintendent and questioning whether the district would consider a woman or a racial or ethnic minority candidate. When asked if her race or gender would prevent her from applying in certain districts, Melissa replied, "I would apply but not expect to get a response; it's already happened." Jay, Simon, and Stanley recognized they were at an advantage. Simon stated, "I have had every advantage that goes with backpack or the belt theory of racial privilege, and gender privilege, so absolutely I've been advantaged all my life." Paul and Chuck thought it was not a factor or a consideration that played into

the process, and Barry did not mention gender or race at all. Women and minorities felt their gender or race/ethnicity was a substantial factor that impacted and influenced the pursuit process.

Of the five women, all but Melissa thought that gender was a substantial factor that impacted their pursuit, perceiving that some districts would not consider a female superintendent. This was confirmed by Paul who pointed out, “I don’t think there has ever been a superintendent in this community who has not been a white male.” Patricia shared, “I was beaten out of the job...[many] times, it was down to me and a male, and the male got it every time...I feel being a female entering into the superintendency is a burden women have to cross.”

Women felt that in order to be considered for the superintendency they needed to build their credentials and work experience more fully than men. The female participants felt they did not have encouragement to pursue advancement at a young age, and being a young female compounded the difficulty of gaining their first administrative position. Thus, the window of advancement to achieve the superintendent position tightened.

Gayle recalled:

I think there is no question that [being a female] was a factor in taking as long as I did to get where I have gotten and I don’t think there’s any question that right from the classroom men were encouraged to be administrators and women weren’t.

Jay echoed the same sentiment:

I think there is a bias that has played in my favor over time...When I was a young elementary teacher, I remember the principal of the school talking to me about

becoming a principal.... I fit a cultural model of a male in an elementary school as someone who would be an administrator eventually.

Unlike Jay, who spoke of his internalized destiny to become a school leader, females considered more external variables such as appearance, age, and family status as factors relative to job pursuit. Most concerns relating to age, appearance, having children, and marital status as factors for consideration by hiring authorities came from females. However, male applicants also commented about age. Paul and Jay both mentioned being young in their current positions and in past administrative positions, but did so in a positive light. Paul said, “the first article that came out put in there that I was only thirty-five.” In contrast to Beatrice who thought, “being younger, there is automatically an assumption that I don’t have certain knowledge or experiences. So I’m trying to prove myself to make it more visible to people that I have a lot to bring to the table.” In addition, Beatrice, Gayle, and Patricia, to varying degrees, mentioned a concern about their appearance and the perception others formed of them as a candidate. Patricia, who felt this with the greatest magnitude, stated, “There’s a perception that a superintendent typically is a male in his late fifties...a superintendent is typically not a woman, a large woman...I don’t look like a superintendent or at least what people think a superintendent should look like.” Distinctly different are Stanley’s remarks, “All right, I am a middle-class white male. Yeah, over six feet, which is another factor, let’s not kid ourselves, they look [and say] whoa.”

Minorities felt their race/ethnicity was a significant factor, one that is part of their everyday life. For the three minority participants, ethnicity and race was a significant factor at play during the pursuit process. All three felt it was a dynamic outside their

control conveying it was a part of their personal and professional reality. Melissa said, “My name alone will tell you [I’m a racial minority]. So you look at the name and the resume and you know. You may not look any further than that. I know that does happen. It’s my reality.” Robert repeated this response when he said, “This is what I believe. I have learned that. I have stopped looking at, this is going to sound weird, I have stopped looking or thinking about race.” Laura recognized that a district might not consider her candidacy, saying, “It’s a non-factor for me. I’ve been a minority all my life. It’s a factor for you [hiring committee], but it isn’t for me...it’s really not my problem because obviously it’s not going to be a match.”

Racial minorities considered whether they were being used to fill a quota and were not likely to be considered a serious candidate. Minority participants felt that they may be in a pool for the purposes of the district’s desire to appear inclusive. All three wondered if they were being taken seriously. They identified this concern as a reality of the process. Melissa stated, “I don’t think [my racial status] has ever been discussed in an open forum. That would be completely illegal. They could find reasons, play around giving other reasons why [I wasn’t selected]. The screening process is what it is.” Robert questioned, “You know it’s interesting, if they were to say to me, we need a person of color, I would say ‘why?’ If they say we don’t need a person of color, I would still say ‘why?’ ” While the quest for a mentor or guide was universal, crossing all lines of race/ethnicity and gender, participants’ experiences finding and connecting with a professional network varied widely.

Candidates pursue the superintendency using a network of formal and informal contacts. Most participants indicated that the network of sitting

superintendents, retired superintendents, and recruiters is powerful. This was particularly evident among the male participants. For those male participants who had advanced to the superintendency, connections to the network of influential current and former superintendents appeared to be key determinants. This was noted through stark differences between the responses the six Caucasian male participants when they explained how they got to their current position, how they were mentored, and how they decided to become a superintendent, versus those made by the one male minority. The differences in the responses among the participants were influenced by race/ethnicity. Throughout the Caucasian male responses, it was evident they were aware of and part of the superintendent “network” while these men did not explicitly express this phrase, it was articulated through their answers.

Jay discussed being groomed for administrative positions from the time he was a teacher. He recalled, “I remember the principal of the school talking to me about becoming a principal...people perceived I was on the fast track towards higher and higher levels of responsibility.” Jay noted that he was specifically asked by his superintendent to become his assistant, and subsequently accepted the position. He continued to be encouraged and promoted and currently is serving the position of superintendent. Jay discussed being mentored by his former superintendent and friends who are superintendents in other districts. Jay commented:

I think that [my] network is getting stronger...I look forward to doing some more of that informal networking...so I think that networking today...is sort of a general way of trying the best I can to keep up...look at who is effective and what effective leadership looks like.

Paul had a similar career path to Jay, starting out at a young age being “tapped” for advancement and described being able to contact other superintendents for advice, and to reaching out to the state association for school superintendents. He relayed a story where he contacted the head of the organization for advice. He also mentioned the ACE doctoral program, stating “I still get together with the guys that were in the cohort.” Stanley mentioned multiple current and former superintendents who have mentored and assisted him along the way to his current position. He mentioned knowing “high powered superintendents” and speaking with the president of the superintendent organization. Stanley described being able to call the president of the organization even when looking for principal positions. Chuck and Barry also discussed the state organization other superintendents who were their friends or who encouraged them along and suggested they move into the superintendent role. Simon mentioned other superintendents and his former superintendents.

Gayle, Patricia, Beatrice, Melissa, Laura, and Robert either didn’t use any language that would suggest a network, or they actually stated they were not a part of the network. Laura stated:

I haven’t been putting my name out there. I didn’t know there was a process for doing it. Well is there a process? Because people have been doing it right? I am not a part of the old boys’ network, so I wouldn’t, I didn’t know that’s what happened.

Patricia mentioned the “old boys’ network” and being assigned a mentor who was “a good old boy.” She noted, “I was the only woman in a room of men. I was like, oh, boy, there is a glass ceiling.” Melissa described a time where she tried to network with an

ACE male with the hopes that he could bring her name forward as a candidate. Initiating contact with this colleague was to no avail, as she was not selected for an interview. Gayle specifically mentioned that the males were mentored to pursue administrative positions and only mentioned one other female superintendent who was also her friend. Beatrice, who had been exposed to the current network of retired and current superintendents, was also very aware of a gender defined club. She illustrated this by describing her impressions of her former superintendent's retirement party, stating, "all the toast-makers were older white males and the superintendent told lots of stories about golf outings, and he and his buddies wearing their superintendent's uniform; khaki pants and white shirts and ties and blue blazers." Beatrice noted that the social gathering prompted her to think that women would not wear this inform and are not included in the superintendent club.

Barry, Stanley, Jay, and Paul all mentioned Professor X who assisted and mentored them. They fondly recollected and recalled their access to Professor X who supported them through the process, provided insight into the position, and promoted their candidacy. Paul reflected, "When I got to ACE, Dr. ...[X] and I connected a lot. He mentored me along that way to the process of applying for superintendency." Barry stated:

I did have the formalized assistance of Professor...[X]. He was kind enough to work with my school committee. We had a workshop; it was great. That continued throughout the year when he helped with the leadership team and sat in on some meetings and sat down with me...it was really helpful.

Jay also mentioned Professor X, saying, “he was a role model for me...I learned about the role of the superintendent from him... and when someone you admire says, ‘I think that you would be a good superintendent’, that’s a motivating factor.” Robert and Simon mentioned Professor X as well, but said they would contact him for advice if needed. Laura mentioned that she wondered what he would think of her applying or not applying for a position. Patricia said that this professor was highly connected to the state school committee and superintendent associations and that he “favored the males in the program” who “all got jobs [superintendent jobs] before any of the women in the program did.”

Interestingly, male participants were more likely than female and minority participants to be made aware of an opportunity through contact with a person of importance. Barry, Jay, Paul, and Stanley described being recruited or tapped by individuals such as one or more of the ACE professors, a colleague, a school committee member, or others in a position of influence. Jay reported, “I was informally recruited in the sense that the chair of the school committee took me out to dinner, and expressed really certainly that he would be interested in my candidacy, and that he hoped that I would apply.” These informal mentors suggested the participants consider the superintendency or tapped them for a specific position. This prompted the participants’ pursuit of a specific opportunity and greatly contributed to their activation of the checklist in relation to the opportunity. When Patricia was asked if she was contacted by recruiters, she replied, “No, actually I call recruiters.” Female participants’ checklist activation appears to have been self-prompted through a deliberate activity to make them aware of potential opportunities. Laura, a female and racial/ethnic minority, who is

currently a principal, was unaware of the existence of a recruiting network at all. While more men than women reported being recruited, some men self-initiated pursuit intentions.

Participants described two distinct paths to checklist activation: pursuing the job themselves or being recruited. Awareness of a position, completing a milestone such as the earning of a doctorate degree, or experiencing a change of circumstances personally or professionally prompted them to activate the checklist and consider pursuing the job. They often initiated a deliberate job-seeking strategy of responding to posted or advertised openings with an application package or calling recruiters themselves.

The five major findings related to fit, the mental checklist, the weighing of risk and reward, issues specific to women and minority candidates, and networking, provide a framework for the ensuing discussion. Information and insight gleaned from the responses of our twelve participants contribute to the existing knowledge around issues of objective and subjective job fit (Piasentin & Chapman, 2005) while informing practice of the mix of motivators and inhibitors impacting the decision of qualified candidates to pursue or not to pursue the superintendency.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of the thought process of educational leaders as they contemplate whether or not to pursue the position of superintendent of schools. As previously stated, we sought to help fill a knowledge gap first identified in the literature by Pounder and Young (1996). Others have since brought attention to the acute need for greater knowledge about the thought process of potential applicants for the superintendency (Winter et al., 2005; Winter et al., 2007). This is particularly needed since school districts across the country often cite difficulties searching for a new leader, claiming that many candidates fail to meet the school district's expectations for one reason or another. Consequently, a perception about a shallow or less-talented pool of qualified individuals plagues the superintendency and questions about the appeal, or lack thereof, of the profession remain prevalent. As noted in a piece from *The Detroit News*:

The stress of budget cutting is one of the reasons James Edoff, 57, decided to retire this summer after 13 years as leader of Fitzgerald Public Schools in Warren [Michigan]. 'I cannot continue to go through another year of reducing staff and cutting programs for kids,' Edoff said. He had to lay off 53 staffers last year to help trim \$2.7 million from the district's \$30 million budget and had to cut another \$1.8 million this year. Some of his employees who lost their jobs had to take their children out of college, he said. 'It takes a personal toll,' Edoff said. Experts say more school leaders are reaching retirement age and deciding not to stay on or are quitting as districts face critical funding cuts and intense scrutiny on improving student achievement. Those issues also are discouraging others from

moving up into the position. In years past, job openings for superintendents attracted 40 to 50 candidates but now are drawing around 15, according to search groups (MacDonald, 2004, p. 1).

Given stories like this, one cannot help but wonder, what attracts qualified candidates to the job?

Public education sits at a crossroads right now and needs to do right by students or risk the end of a national imperative for public schooling that began in the era of Thomas Jefferson. A renewed focus on the superintendency is paramount, as there is a proven correlation between quality leadership and student performance (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Hargreaves (2006) also wrote compellingly of the value of sustainable leadership on student learning. Preparing, identifying, hiring, and then supporting quality superintendents will in turn lead to low turnover and highly stable learning environments for students where needed reform can take place and be sustained over time. Hence, it is appropriate and timely that this study responds to the calls of educational researchers. It was our intent to bring attention to the ways in which potential candidates for the superintendency consider pursuit of the job. We looked at motivating forces that prompt them to pursue a position, or any variables that inhibit their willingness to pursue one. We believe that much can be learned and acted upon in a way that ultimately can both improve and preserve public education in the United States. The following discussion highlights what we learned.

Perceived fit is the framework around which candidates develop their thought process. The fact that every participant mentioned the concept of fit when they thought about pursuing the superintendency was the subject of much discussion among

the members of the research team. Despite the simple nature of the word, we did not have an in-depth understanding of the concept and how it manifested itself in the thoughts and actions of our participants. Their responses made it clear that we needed to return to the literature and learn more.

At the outset of the study, we incorporated tenets from the field of applied psychology. We explored what vocational psychologists have concluded and theorized about human preference as it relates to career decision-making (Miller & Brown, 2005; Phillips & Jome, 2005). To that end, much of what we originally learned was rooted in recruitment literature. For instance, a concept such as “applicant attraction” (Rau & Hyland, 2002), which is common in recruitment literature, proved helpful.

The catalyst for a more focused examination of the literature, however, was the use of the word “fit” by each of our participants – a term that is mostly absent from our literature review. Despite this omission, the attention in the literature review given to subjective factors (Behling et al., 1968) made the study’s findings about fit less surprising than first thought. A definition of fit helped synthesize our thinking. Williams (2001) characterized fit as having two elements:

1) how closely your identity characteristics match those of the predominant membership group(s) of the organization; and 2) how well your style aligns with the organization’s cultural norms. The specific mix of these two dimensions affects the pathways of mobility to the upper levels of the organization (p. 189).

Although conceptions of fit differed among individuals, all participants were united in their perception of the importance of fit in determining their career trajectory and pursuit of the superintendency. Personal and individual in many respects, this more

sophisticated understanding of fit then gave us a framework to organize and analyze the motivating and inhibiting factors that prompted our participants to pursue or not to pursue the superintendency.

Candidates have a predetermined mental checklist to assess fit that is relatively constant and consistent for all potential candidates. The analogy of the mental checklist referenced in our findings was borne when we began to notice similarities in the ways all of our participants, regardless of gender, age, race, or ethnicity talked about how they would think about their pursuit of the superintendency. Their thoughts, concerns, and questions all contributed to their perception of fit. As previously mentioned, fit tends to be studied in two ways: person-job (P-J) fit and person-organization (P-O) fit (Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1990). This led the research team to think about the structure of the mental checklist using these two categories.

From the perspective of P-J fit, our participants considered whether they were destined to be a superintendent at all. They contemplated if and how their skills and experiences put them in a likely position to be successful in the job. Typically, they characterized success in the position as impacting student learning, but they also explored many practical considerations. For example, they thought about the time requirements, the pressures and high profile nature of the position, and whether or not their career and educational preparation had sufficiently readied them for the job, particularly with respect to fiduciary and political matters.

Once our participants could foresee themselves as a superintendent, they also considered where they might enjoy being employed. This examination of P-O fit focused on aspects of the community, such as the district's demographics, values, and educational

priorities. It also revolved around what the district could offer them, such as compensation, a favorable commute from home, and opportunities to positively impact the district. Further, participants considered the kind of relationship that they were likely to develop with the school committee. They also considered whether the district was likely to consider someone with their profile, skill set, background, and beliefs to be an attractive candidate.

Taken together, P-J fit and P-O fit constituted an overall perception of fit for our participants. The mental checklist included a number of factors in both categories. In order to demonstrate how we believed the checklist operated in the minds and hearts of our participants, we constructed an actual checklist to guide our analysis. Testing this checklist against our interview transcripts only strengthened our belief that the mental checklist is a useful construct for understanding the thought process of potential candidates for the superintendency. The bulleted list below, which was developed by the research team, summarizes the two dimensions of fit, P-O and P-J. The questions were developed for the purpose of mirroring the presumed and likely intent of our participants.

Am I a good fit for the superintendency? [Person-Job Fit]

- Do I have the skills?
- Are my career experiences suitable for the superintendency?
- Can I commit the necessary time to the superintendency?
- What will the impact be on my family?
- Do I want to put myself through the public process associated with becoming a superintendent?

- Do I want to deal with the politics surrounding the responsibilities of the superintendency?
- Can I have a bigger impact on education as a superintendent than I do in my current position?
- If I were to become a superintendent, whom could I turn to for support? Can any of these individuals help me get a position?

Am I a good fit for the school district? [Person-Organization Fit]

- Do I match the superintendent profile that is held by the district I would like to work in?
- What is the district likely to pay me?
- What are the district's demographics?
- Is the commute to the district tenable?
- Is the district politically and/or financially stable? How has the press portrayed the district? Has the superintendency or school committee experienced a lot of turnover or conflict?

The rich and varied responses by the participants left the team with additional questions about the factors they identified. The team questioned if there really is an ideal path to the superintendency that generates the most qualified superintendents. We also pondered how the expectations of the job could be re-shaped in a way that might allow sustainability in the position and a healthy work life balance. We wondered how superintendent school committee relationships (and the selection process) could be improved to make the position more attractive. If we were able to return to our participants and ask more questions, we would be interested in exploring the idea of a

mental checklist in greater depth. Future studies might want to explore how this concept may evolve over time, as well as the degree to which it differs given the stakes in a particular situation.

When evaluating the questions on their mental checklist, candidates use a process of applying weight depending on individual circumstances and stages in life.

We noticed that participants considered some factors differently depending upon where they were in their careers and stages in life. While the factors stayed the same, participants gave weight to certain ones differently as their personal situation, age, view of work life balance, and timing evolved. We also noticed that participants evaluated the risks and rewards associated with the pursuit process more intensely as they got closer to actually becoming a superintendent. In other words, there seemed to be a relationship between how the mental checklist was used, and the personal or professional stakes in a given situation. We hypothesize that as the risk intensifies, and candidates move forward into the public aspect of the selection process, participants cycle through the checklist again, this time from a lens of higher scrutiny. This area may be deserving of further study.

Women and racial/ethnic minority candidates experience the pursuit process differently as they contemplate and seek access to the job of superintendent of schools.

As our female and racial and ethnic minority participants developed perceptions of fit, it was apparent that they had additional considerations. Women seemingly asked themselves whether a particular district would even consider hiring a female superintendent, and racial/ethnic minorities seemingly asked themselves if this was a community that would be open to a non-Caucasian superintendent. Both women and

ethnic and racial minorities questioned whether their candidacies would be genuinely considered on their own merits, or if they might be included merely to diversify the pool of applicants or fill a quota. Interestingly, all of these considerations came from the P-O fit perspective. At first blush this is obvious but deeper examination led to an even more interesting observation. All participants, regardless of gender or race/ethnicity, examined P-J fit similarly. These additional items on the mental checklist for women and racial and ethnic minorities added heft to an already imposing list of factors to ponder with respect to the pursuit of the superintendency. The following questions were developed to mirror the presumed intent of our female participants.

Am I a good fit for the school district? [Person-Organization Fit]

- Will the district consider a female as the superintendent?
- Does my age, appearance, child, or marital status matter?

Similarly, the following questions reflect the likely intent of our racial and ethnic minority participants.

Am I a good fit for the school district? [Person-Organization Fit]

- Will the district seriously consider someone of my racial/ethnic background as the superintendent?
- Am I being invited to satisfy a quota?

As investigators, we noticed differences between the interviews of our female and male, and Caucasian and non-Caucasian participants early in the process. Our initial interview data (see Table 1) illustrates the striking reality that six of the seven male interview participants had been contacted by a recruiter, with the exception being the lone male of color, and only one of our five female interview participants reported being

contacted by a recruiter. However, we set aside any temptations to jump to conclusions, instead we methodically moved through our coding and analysis process. It was in the last round of coding that the magnitude of the findings became apparent and led to the prominence of the experiences of our female and racial/ethnic minority participants in our findings.

What our participants revealed about the impact of gender and race/ethnicity on pursuit and accessibility to the superintendency was consistent, and possibly more pronounced, than the studies cited in our literature review. We heard our female participants talk about feeling the need to look and act like those already in power, consistent with Gupton and Slick (1996). We also heard about the unspoken preference by school boards for a male superintendent, consistent with Newton (2006). Racial and ethnic minority participants, as well as female participants, also held a perception that recruitment agencies or networks are “old boys” clubs, consistent with Glenn and Hickey (2010).

As an investigative team, we had numerous rich discussions about gender and race/ethnicity, particularly about how female and racial and ethnic minority candidates are impacted by the unfortunate realities of the world around them. We hypothesized a variety of explanations for the existing barriers, such as the fact that women often leave the field to raise families, and racial/ethnic minority candidates tend to gravitate toward urban districts. But we found no substantial explanations, so these issues and their impact on access to the superintendency may warrant further research. It was our conclusion that gender and racial discrimination is still a reality for our participants. In fact, they were

almost pragmatic about a second set of unstated rules that shapes their reality. At one point we asked ourselves, “Is this 2011?”

A very recent study shed some light on our findings by linking this concept of fit that permeated our interviews with perceptions of gender and racial discrimination. Tooms et al. (2010) argued that in the selection of education leaders today, there exists a politics of fit that is code for unspoken empty measures, stereotypes, and prejudices. In practice, common uses of the word fit have both, “blurred the important distinctions among persons, roles, and communities [and] also hindered the capacity of public school officials to recruit, select, and support leaders who might better serve us in facilitating school reforms” (p. 101). In other words, by perpetuating a narrow view of who a school leader should be, it is important to ask if we are depriving the field and our students of a range of leaders who may be in a better position to transform schools.

As previously mentioned, Williams (2001) defined fit as identity with the predominant membership group, and alignment of style with cultural norms. These two elements, identity and style, combined with a third element, competence, provide the basics of most hiring decisions. However, he posited that the more senior the position, the more identity and style become the deciding factors over competence. Hidden criteria dominate.

These ideas resonated with us as investigators. The stories that our women and racial/ethnic minority participants shared were poignant and distressing to us as researchers. We became witness and custodians to a possibility of bias in the selection process of superintendents of schools that needed to be brought to light. We realize, as a research team, that solutions are not simple. On the one hand, schools need to be

authentic islands of fairness and social justice. On the other hand, the social and political realities of elected school boards, public selection processes, and other systemic practices prevent communities from breaking away from the preferences of powerful and dominant constituencies and long established social structures.

Candidates pursue the superintendency using a network of formal and informal contacts. As participants constructed perceptions of job and organizational fit relative to the superintendency using their mental checklist, a network of colleagues, friends, professors, and former and current superintendents often played a pivotal role. At different times and under different circumstances, these individuals served in a variety of capacities, often prodding, encouraging, or advising our participants.

Our findings about this network of formal and informal personal contacts provided the research team with some of the most energetic discussions during the study. Listening to our participants made it clear that what others had to say shaped their pursuit intentions. However, the degree to which the influence of each party persuaded the thoughts and actions of our participants differed. We were particularly struck by the power of the network of former and current superintendents. They often served as conduits to other influential individuals who functioned as gatekeepers to available positions. The apparent lack of uniformity and consistency with which vacant superintendent positions are advertised may contribute to the clout of these gatekeepers. It is possible that the process may have prevented the fair consideration of some individuals for the job, particularly women, as evidenced by some of the experiences that our participants shared. This may have been true for minorities as well, but further study would be required to reach this conclusion.

This context in mind, there were several items that resonated with the research team that suggest unfair and systematic barriers. These included the references to the old boy network, the degree to which some qualified participants were seemingly removed from the network, the existence of unspoken recruitment and hiring practices, and the apparent perception of favoritism in some corners of the field. These issues made it clear that the highest levels of access and transparency were not always practiced. This made us wonder if professional associations, as well as colleges and universities, should make an intentional effort to promote equity of opportunity for all potential superintendent candidates. It also made us wonder about the obligation that school districts have, or do not have, to engage in a public process to replace an outgoing superintendent when there is a viable internal candidate. Ultimately, it also made us wonder if school districts were hiring the best individuals, as it is likely that some potential candidates operate with naïveté or without fair guidance.

The research team felt it was important to bring these issues to light. By doing so, we hope to create an awareness so educators who potentially aspire to become superintendents are nurtured, and also provided with every opportunity to acquire the necessary skills and requisite access to be the educational leader of a school district.

Recommendations

Informed by the literature and research findings, we offer the following recommendations for several audience groups, including: professional associations of educational leaders, search firms focused on school executive searches, institutions of higher education such as Anywhere College of Education (ACE), and districts seeking to fill the job of superintendent, as well as prospective candidates.

Recommendations for Professional Associations of Educational Leaders

Offer formal and informal professional development for aspiring superintendents to demystify the application and interview process for aspiring superintendents. Professional associations of educational leaders, such as the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS), Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC), Massachusetts Secondary School Administrators' Association (MSSAA), and Massachusetts Elementary Schools Principals Association (MESPA) should consider taking action that would broaden and diversify the pool of potential superintendents. The application and selection process for the superintendency can be grueling, daunting, and unfamiliar to new applicants to the position (Kenney, 2003). Qualified candidates may benefit from guidance and support in the interview, application, and all other aspects of the superintendent search process.

Encourage districts to identify and to cultivate aspiring administrators at an early juncture in their careers. Professional associations should encourage districts to identify and to groom a diverse group of young professionals for administrative positions. Once districts respond with the early identification of a potential talent pool for the superintendency, MASS and other professional associations could provide support and

professional development focused on reinforcing a sense of positive expectancy among aspiring administrators. Workshops or sessions at conferences focused on pathways to, and questions about, the superintendency would help to identify and to support aspiring candidates.

Initiate or expand programs to identify and to address the needs of women and racial/ethnic minorities. As professional associations plan mentoring programs and interest groups similar to the women’s professional group in place at MASS, they need to identify strategies to respond to the sense that females find the world of superintendents to be male-dominated. Creating opportunities for honest and mutually supportive dialogue among females and seasoned superintendents could ameliorate the concerns about feeling excluded communicated by some women and racial/ethnic minorities in our study.

Address the perceived barriers. Several participants, both male and female, referred or alluded to an “old boys’ network” – one they perceived as limiting access to the superintendency. While the effect of networking on candidates’ access to positions demands further study (Glenn & Hickey, 2010), the perception, or possibly the reality (Tallerico, 2000), that the job can only be accessed by insiders who know key people in the field may indeed be causing quality potential candidates for the superintendency to decide not to apply. Providing “open to all” networking opportunities to broaden access to district leaders could help combat the perception that the position is not open to those without established connections.

Explore ways to reduce the risks associated with the application process. The selection process itself may be deterring excellent candidates who are reluctant to

jeopardize their good standing in their current jobs by applying (Wolverton, 2004).

Further study of ways to make the application process less risky for candidates who are not ultimately selected could have a positive impact on the candidate pool. Advocating with local legislatures and public policy makers with the goal of modifying open meeting laws may protect the privacy of candidates in the early stages of the selection process.

Examine the job expectations of the superintendency as currently defined.

Governing bodies should investigate the potential of adjusting expectations and responsibilities of the superintendency to mitigate the impact on work life balance.

Participants commented on the demands of the position and the potential impact on their quality of life. Changes in the job expectations may result in more candidates entering the position at earlier stages in their career. Perhaps if professional associations openly recognize the untenable nature of the job as it is presently construed, districts could consider building or expanding central office teams. Deputy superintendents could be charged with managing operational issues allowing the superintendent to be primarily defined as the instructional leader of the school district.

Look for ways to build harmonious, supportive relationships between superintendents and school committees. Professional associations such as MASS and MASC could work together in offering joint professional development for superintendents and school committees to build consonance while reducing dissonance.

Our research indicated that participants were concerned about governance responsibilities and were savvy in finding out about the behavior of school committees. Potential candidates made active decisions not to pursue positions in communities where school committees were perceived as lacking in civility, cooperation, and communication.

Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) recommended taking steps to “ensure superintendents and school boards function as collaborative teams, with appropriate community, administrative, and political support” (p. 9). School committees whose members escalate conflict during public meetings perpetuate the sense that serving as a superintendent could be fraught with difficult and potentially distracting dynamics.

Expand accessibility to trainings and workshops on school governance to include aspiring candidates. Many participants expressed personal concerns about insufficient empirical knowledge of governance issues. Implied in their observations was a concern that a lack of pragmatic understanding of the fundamentals of school governance could impair their ability to construct a productive relationship with the school board. In designing trainings and workshops, it would be important for professional associations such as MASS and MASC to share examples of communities where positive and productive relationships between the school boards and their respective superintendents already exist. Such insight could brighten the prospect of job satisfaction for applicants and expand the pool of applicants eager to work in a wider variety of districts.

Support the establishment of a central database of qualified candidates to coordinate applicant preparation, opportunities, and access. Professional associations could serve as catalysts in encouraging the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and other states’ departments of education, in cooperation with professional associations, to facilitate the creation and management of a database of qualified candidates for the job of superintendent. Together, they could encourage hiring authorities to post superintendent job openings publicly on the DESE

website, or other central location, for a period of time.

Recommendations for Executive Search Agencies and School Districts

Broaden access to the superintendency. Research indicates that more than half of superintendents are invited to apply by recruiters (Terranova et al., 2009), and that recruiters do serve an important function as gatekeepers to the superintendency (Kamler, 2009). Broadening access to the network, making it more inclusive, and creating alternative networking opportunities could serve to remedy perceptions of exclusivity held by potential candidates. Specifically, organizations that conduct executive searches could provide deliberate, targeted networking opportunities for qualified individuals who are considering the profession. More widespread posting and marketing of positions could dispel the notion that candidates need to know someone powerful to be considered.

Address race-based equity issues by helping school districts to create and uphold diversity policies specifically for the recruiting and hiring of superintendents. Working together, school districts and search consultants could more deliberately and widely advertise open positions to improve recruitment of racial/ethnic minority candidates for the superintendency. MASC could assist districts in crafting or improving diversity policies to ensure that concerted efforts are made to diversify the workforce, especially amongst district leadership positions.

Recommendations for Higher Education Programs in Educational Leadership

Organize alumni networking and career placement services within the school of education. In order to improve employment prospects for all students who seek access to the superintendency, ACE and other institutions of higher education can enlist the support of program graduates who have become superintendents. In addition, ACE

professors could deliberately and equitably provide support to all students. They could bring in working district leaders as guest presenters and instructors, providing natural networking opportunities for students, as well as current and relevant advice in a quickly changing field.

Provide career coaching with the goal of preparing candidates for the search process. In response to the finding regarding lack of confidence in job seeking accompanied by a need for networking among its graduates, particularly racial/ethnic minorities, ACE and other university programs could provide deliberate instruction to prepare potential candidates for all aspects of the application and interview process. This effort could commence at the beginning of the doctoral program allowing students to develop the requisite skill sets such as public speaking, designing presentations, and facilitating groups of people. Building on the positive feedback gleaned from male participants, higher education programs could establish an expectation that professors guide students through the applicant process, providing support and encouragement to both male and female graduates.

Revise coursework to better prepare students in the areas of school finance and governance. In light of our finding regarding fit, which included evidence that prospective superintendents worried that their expertise in fiscal management and navigating governmental responsibilities was insufficient, ACE and other doctoral and preparatory programs might carefully study the design of educational leadership programs. Many of our participants felt ill prepared for the fiduciary and operational responsibilities of the superintendency. Adding more university instruction in this area would provide otherwise qualified candidates enhanced competency in these critical skill

sets. Specifically, ACE students would benefit from a credit-granting course in public school finance. Similarly, ACE might consider providing explicit instruction in state and local governance, the role and responsibilities of the school committee, collective bargaining, and strategies for developing mutually productive partnerships with municipal and school boards.

Present the role of the superintendent in a positive light citing and reinforcing the high rate of satisfaction among existing superintendents. Curricula could present a fair and multi-dimensional representation of the roles and responsibilities of a superintendent at the undergraduate and at the master's level. Instructors could place emphasis on the ability of a superintendent to have a positive impact on students' experiences. Programs should embed shadowing a sitting superintendent into the course work. Required internships should be structured to include experience in budget deliberations, collective bargaining, and public presentations to the school board, parents, and community groups. Institutions of higher education should work in conjunction with MASS and other professional associations to create and to support opportunities for doctoral program students to interact with and to learn from skilled and successful superintendents who are eager and willing to encourage new talent.

Conclusion

The stories of the twelve participants in our study provided a lens through which we were able to explore our two research questions:

- What factors, including job desirability and accessibility, influence the pursuit intentions of individuals qualified to be superintendent?
- How does the mix of motivators and inhibitors impact the decision to pursue or not to pursue the position?

The recent discussion in the literature and among professional associations coupled with a steady commentary in the popular press about a perceived shortage of superintendents gave impetus to our research. A recent headline stating “Town is not alone in seeking school chief” calls attention to the annual and often elongated quest for school superintendents. This article goes on to describe a community undertaking its second attempt to fill the job since September 2011, after the initial search failed, in the context of more than thirty towns in Massachusetts seeking applicants for superintendents concurrently (Schiavone, 2012). In the same article, Thomas Scott, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS), referenced the same search, “Their competition is going to be pretty stiff. There are much smaller pools of candidates than there have been in the past” (p. 8). According to Scott, the interest in school superintendent jobs has dwindled over the past decade because of the demanding nature of the job with the increased demands of state mandated performance standards (Schiavone, 2012). The much publicized pressures of the job, from dysfunctional school boards to impossible budget crunches to a myriad of new government mandates, have scared off many potential candidates (Riede, 2003).

As practitioners and doctoral program students of educational leadership, we were cognizant of the growing awareness of the untenable nature of the job itself (Fuller et al., 2003). Yet in spite of all the attention called to the negative aspects of the job, the research team learned of a high satisfaction rate among existing superintendents (Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, 2011). The paradox of seemingly insurmountable challenges created by budgets, politics, and heightened accountability in contrast to the sincere desire of the chief executives of school districts to impact the lives of children created an intriguing dynamic. Amidst the cacophony around the challenges of the job, the conflicting demands presented by escalating accountability and de-escalating resources, volatile and capricious school boards, recruiters and districts continue to launch deliberate efforts to find leaders prepared and eager to pursue the superintendency. Guided by the social science literature on vocational decision-making (Chapman et al., 2005; Miller & Brown, 2005; Phillips & Jome, 2005), we set out to create knowledge and understanding of the thought process that impedes or propels candidates to consider taking the leap.

Our findings emerged around five areas: perceived fit, creation of a mental checklist, a recursive examination of risk and reward, variables around access unique to women and racial/ethnic minority candidates, and the impact of influential people and networking. Central to the mental checklist of the participants was their subjective assessment of their suitability to the job of superintendent itself as well as their perceived match to a particular school district. Studies (Barber 1998; Breaugh, 1992; Kristof, 1996) provided a lens on fit through which we gleaned insight into our participants' journeys. The story line in each of our interviews was woven around the participants'

conceptualization of person-job (P-J) fit and person-organization (P-O) fit. Candidates are cautious and thoughtful as they seek to uncover and weigh the nuances around fit.

This careful consideration of risk and reward is done against a backdrop of rapid turnover (Kowalski et al., 2011). *The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study* noted that only half (51%) of the 13,000 respondents who were serving as superintendents plan to be superintendents in the year 2015 (p. xv). The effects of a potential leadership vacuum are part of a broader public concern about the future of American public education. It has become clear that those candidates whose pursuit intentions signal their willingness to take the leap will have to maintain a diagnostic mindset on the ever-changing realities of the position, and must have the courage and determination to “interrogate [that] reality” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 65).

The goal of this study is to inform practice and to contribute to the knowledge base for multiple audiences including professional associations, executive search firms, districts, prospective candidates, and institutions of higher education. In so doing, it is our hope that the study will illuminate each of these constituent groups and thus create a sense of urgency around the issues brought forth. The confluence of the shared goals of the stakeholders must eventuate into attracting and retaining school superintendents whose professional efficacy is predicated upon a commitment to serving the needs of children who depend on public schools throughout the country.

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Appendix

Interview Guide Including Tips and Questions

Notes to Interviewer

This interview guide is intended to provide consistency among interviewers using an exploratory format. Our goal is to explore the domains revealed in the literature to review (job attraction, desirability and accessibility), and also to identify new domains. Further, the goal is to break those domains down into component factors and subfactors, within the context of each individual participants' situation. The tone of the interview should be conversational with you as the interviewer practicing active asking and listening, alert to pacing, prompts, and probes. Tips for using the guide:

- be responsive to the cues of the participant and be flexible about asking questions in a different order,
- skip questions if the topic has already been covered,
- ask probing follow-up questions to elicit richer, more thoughtful answers, and ask about topics the interviewee has not yet voluntarily identified,

Schensul et al. further suggest that effective exploratory interviewing “calls for an alert mind, logical thinking, and excellent communication skills” (1999, p. 122). A variation on their tips include:

- Keep in mind how the topic relates to and illuminates the two research questions:
 1. What factors relative to job desirability and accessibility influence the pursuit intentions of individuals qualified to be superintendent?
 2. How does the mix of motivators and inhibitors impact the decision to apply or not to apply for the position?
- Be alert to whether or not the interview is moving off topic, and have ready ways to reintroduce the topic
- Look for logical connections the interviewee is making in the discussion, especially when those are unexpected
- Decide whether or not to pursue new ideas and directions; constantly be thinking about which prompts and probes might be most appropriate to elicit rich, in-depth discussion
- Probe for the meaning of terms or thoughts if they are unclear
- Recognize when the interviewee's ideas are clearly expressed, and when they need elaboration to be understood by the other team members reading and coding the transcripts

As the interviewer, it's also important to diminish intrusion and protect the participants and their participation in the process. Tips to enhance the protection of subjects include:

- respond to signals of reluctance if the participant seems to want to skip questions or end the interview;
- do not solicit private information that is not related to the research question, and will dissuade revelation of irrelevant personal information if it happens spontaneously
- if participants continue to talk after the recording device is turned off, ask permission to continue to record or to take notes to include the additional pertinent information

Interview Questions

[Note to interviewer: You have flexibility in asking the following questions. The probing questions are meant to draw out the thought process of interviewees in the areas of 1. applicant attraction (predictors of applicant attraction, job and organizational attributes, perceived fit/self-efficacy, recruitment process/hiring expectancies); 2. job desirability (compensation,

demographics, role and responsibilities, governance model); 3. job accessibility (sex and gender, career paths/mentoring, recruitment/selection/hiring process).]

1. [Aspirations for Superintendency] You are a graduate of a doctoral degree program in educational leadership. As a result you would be considered a qualified candidate for the superintendency. How does a superintendency fit into your career plans?

Probes:

a. If Superintendent since program:

Tell me about when you decided to apply for the superintendency. Were you recruited? Did you know going into the doctoral program that you definitely wanted to be a superintendent? What made you think that? What experiences led up to that realization? What did you see as attractive about the superintendency? What was less attractive?

b. If not a Superintendent since program:

Is the superintendency a position you aspire to? What factors can you imagine converging to make you decide to apply? What would prevent you from applying?

2. [Career Trajectory] If I could make the perfect career path available to you, what would that look like? And why would that be the perfect path?

Probes:

Values?

3. [Job Desirability] Talk to me about the job of superintendent.

Probes

Is the job attractive to you? Do you think you would be a good candidate for a superintendency? Why or why not?

Responsibilities? Governance Model? Compensation? Demands? Era of accountability? Politics? Job Satisfaction? Ability to make a difference in lives of children?

4. [Recruitment/Selection Process] If you have ever applied for a Superintendency, tell me about your experience (jump to a). If you have not applied for a Superintendency, tell me why not (jump to b).

Probes

a. What made you decide to apply? Were you recruited? What was the recruiter like? What happened?

Did you apply for other superintendent positions? How many times did you apply? How many times were you a finalist? How did that impact future decisions to apply?

b. Why have you not taken the leap?

Expectancy of getting position? Gender? Ethnic minority status?

Untenable nature of the job? Salary differential from current job? Public nature of recruiting process? Satisfaction with current job?

Risk due to the instability of local governance and the public nature of superintendents' contracts? Greater demand for accountability coupled with increasing politicization of the superintendency?

Family demands? Commute?

Not been encouraged by recruiter or mentor? Don't feel qualified?

5. [Decision Factors] (Note to interviewer -- if participant is already a superintendent, amend the

questions and ask them to think back to when this happened for their first superintendency)
Imagine that tomorrow you receive a call from a recruiter. “Hi, this is Bill from Superintendent Executive Search Firm and I would like to talk with you about an opening for a Superintendent. Your name was suggested as someone who might be a great fit.”

- **What immediately comes to mind?**
- **What questions might you ask?**
- **What would you discuss with your family or close friends?**

Probes

Have you ever been called by a recruiter for a superintendent position? If yes, tell me about the experience. If no, why do you think that is?

6. [Mentoring] Since you became an educational leader, have you had specific people in your career who have functioned as formal or informal mentors? If so, what role did they play in your career?

Probes:

How has that mentoring relationship changed your career choices and how you think about yourself?

7. [Access - Race/Gender] How has your ethnicity, race or gender been a factor in your career? How do you perceive it might be a factor in attaining the position of superintendent?

8. Is there anything else that you would like to add?