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Gregg Garn
University of Oklahoma, garn@ou.edu

Casey Brown
Texas A&M University- Commerce, Casey_Brown@tamu-commerce.edu

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Women and the Superintendency: Perceptions of Gender Bias

Gregg Garn and Casey Brown

This research explored how 15 female superintendents from a southwestern state experienced issues of gender bias. Participants came from a mix of urban, rural, and suburban districts that varied in size from 150 to 25,000 students. Using in-depth interviews and a transcendental phenomenological qualitative approach, the researchers examined how these women perceived that gender bias affected their accession to and work in the school superintendency. Three major themes emerged from their experiences: overcoming obstacles in the career path, the importance of mentoring, and surmounting gender-related stereotypes of leadership.

The lack of female superintendents leading American public school districts highlights the question: What role does gender inequality play in this phenomenon? Historically, little attention has been given to the experiences and perceptions of women superintendents in the educational administration literature (Bell, 1988; Brunner, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000). However, an emerging body of research on women and educational administration examines the under representation of women in building and district leadership positions. A theme in this literature is associated with gender inequities or biases and stereotypes associated with women and leadership (Brunner, 2000; Young & McLeod, 2001). Attention to these issues is continually examined to gain more insight and explore factors to reduce these barriers.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to discern how 15 women leaders in southwestern state school districts perceived gender bias affected their progress toward and work in the superintendency. Three key themes emerged from the data: overcoming obstacles in the career path, the importance of mentoring, and surmounting gender-related stereotypes of leadership.

Background Literature

Although the volume of literature on women and the superintendency is limited, it has grown steadily during the last two decades. Shakeshaft (1995) stated that "research on men is mainstream and central, while research on women and/or gender issues is often considered a special topic

About the Authors

Gregg Garn is the Associate Dean for Professional Education in the College of Education at the University of Oklahoma. His research interests include the superintendency, school choice, and the politics of education. He has authored articles in *Educational Administration Quarterly, Education and Urban Society, Education Policy Analysis Archives, and Educational Leadership.* Email: *garn@ou.edu.*

   Casey G. Brown is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and coordinates the Master's Degree and Principal Certification Program and the Meadows Principal Improvement Program at Texas A&M University-Commerce. Her research interests include alternative certification, student evaluation of teaching, and program evaluation. Email: *Casey_Brown@tamu-commerce.edu.*

and not central to the understanding of organizational behavior" (p. 141). It is encouraging that gender in educational organizations research is receiving more attention, as demonstrated by an increase in the late 1990s and early 2000s (e.g., Bjork, 2000; Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1999, 2000, 2001; Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000; Tallerico, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Young & McLeod, 2001). Despite the impetus for scholarly activity in this area, few women have reached the superintendency in public school districts. As of 2004, women served as superintendents in only 18% of United States school districts (Grogan & Brunner, 2003).

   With a few prominent exceptions such as Ella Flagg Young in Chicago and Grace Strachan in New York City, historically men have dominated the district superintendency (Smith, 1979). Shakeshaft (1989) observed that women have assumed leadership roles as county and state superintendents or established their own specialized schools, but men have traditionally dominated district superintendencies. Blount (1998) provided a comprehensive historical account of female superintendents in the United States. In the early 1900s, the percentage of female superintendents fluctuated from 9% in 1910, up to 11% in 1930, back to 9% in 1950, hit a low of 3% in 1970, and rose in 1990 to 5% (Blount, 1998, p. 5). In *The Study of the American School Superintendency,* Glass (1992) documented a slight female superintendent increase to 6.6% in 1992 (p. 9). Glass, Bjork, and Brunner's (2000) *The Study of the American School Superintendency* showed that women continued to increase their presence in the district superintendency and made up 13.2% of the total pool of superintendents (p. 17). Grogan and Brunner (2003) documented a continued expansion up to 18% of women leading school districts.

   Although the most recent data indicate the highest percentage of female district school superintendents in history, public education continues to lag

behind other professions in the number of female executives (Young & McLeod, 2001). The lack of female superintendents is more striking when one considers data from the 2003–2004 School and Staffing Survey that indicate 75% of teachers were women (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). In the most recent census, the "United States Census Bureau has characterized the superintendency as being the most male dominated executive position of any profession in the United States" (as cited in Bjork, 2000b, p. 17).

A variety of theories has attempted to explain the dearth of women superintendents. Some have argued that stereotypes fostered by school boards, gatekeepers, and recruiters have been the obstacle (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Tallerico, 2000a; Tallerico, 2000b; Wolverton, Rawls, Macdonald, & Nelson, 2000). Other studies have investigated how the typical career path limits the experiences and consequently the marketability of female superintendent candidates (Konrad & Pfeffer, 1991; Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 1999; Tallerico, 2000a; Wolverton & Macdonald, 2001). Embedded in the career path research, some scholars have explored the professional aspirations of women who are potential candidates for the superintendency (Edson, 1995; McCreight, 1999; Sherr, 1995; Wolverton & Macdonald, 2001; Young & McLeod, 2001). Another line of research examined the importance of mentoring and the quality of professional guidance (Bizzari, 1995; Edson, 1988; Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000; Hall & Sandler, 1983; Marshall, 1984; Mendez-Morse, 2004; Schmidt & Wolfe, 1980). One dimension of the mentoring research revealed that professional networking can work to the disadvantage of women (Jones-Mitchell, 1993), and networks differ for men and women (Edson, 1981). Whatever the explanation, the trend continues in the United States and internationally (see Reynolds, 2002) in the twenty-first century. The literature presents a clear picture that although women are active in many school roles, they are underrepresented in the district superintendency.

Methodology

The purpose of this exploratory study was to describe and understand, from the perspective of 15 female superintendents, how gender bias affected their accession to and work as superintendents. We utilized the transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994), a research design focused on describing the life experiences of participants. Valle and King (1978) stated that "phenomenologically oriented psychological research seeks to answer two related questions: what is the phenomenon that is experienced and lived, and how does it show itself?" (as cited in Creswell, 1998, p. 276).

Participant Selection and Data Collection

Phenomenological research typically involves in-depth interviews with

5–20 people (see Creswell, 1998; Dukes, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1989; Tesch, 1988). We identified potential participants through the state department of education's list of public school superintendents. We mailed an introductory letter that described the research and solicited participation to all 48 female superintendents in the state. Twelve women responded to the initial letter. We scheduled interviews during a four-week period. During the course of the interviews, three additional participants were identified by the snowball technique (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The three individuals were contacted by telephone, agreed to participate, and were interviewed, providing 15 participants.

Most of the interviews were conducted in the superintendent's district office; however, two were completed in vacant conference rooms at a statewide professional meeting, and one was held at a restaurant. Each interview began with a description of the research project and written consent to participate and to tape record the interview. We then asked participants to describe a gender-related professional experience. This introductory question sparked conversations that lasted between one and two hours. All interviews were audiotaped.

Eleven of the superintendents were born in state and the four born elsewhere had spent a minimum of 10 years living in this southwestern state. Participants ranged in age from 37 to 64 years. Four identified themselves as minorities, most frequently identifying an American Indian background. Twelve of the superintendents began as elementary educators. The districts they led enrolled from 150 to 25,000 students; six administered districts that enrolled 300 or fewer students. Participants represented various geographic regions of the state and led primarily rural school systems. Several of the participants were new to their current job (and the superintendency); others had much more experience, working in the superintendency up to 15 years.[1]

Data Analysis

Relying on Moustakas's (1994) description of data analysis, we followed four steps: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Epoche is the process of recognizing presupposed ideas about the phenomenon studied, bracketing or setting phenomenon aside, and then revisiting the phenomenon. Phenomenological reduction required the authors to examine the data for statements about how participants experienced gender bias in their profession. Each author independently identified statements from the interview transcripts that reflected how participants experienced the phenomenon and developed a list of those statements. Imaginative variation allowed the authors to identify all possible meanings or divergent perspectives related to the phenomenon. We then

[1]Because there were so few female superintendents working in this state we were disinclined to provide additional demographic data for fear of compromising confidentiality. Additionally, we used pseudonyms for all participants and masked the interview dates.

looked for clusters of meanings in the data by grouping key phrases to al-
low for the emergence of themes. From these clustered meanings, we devel-
oped a textual and structural description of the phenomenon. We selected
verbatim quotes from the transcripts that captured the meaning for partici-
pants. Finally, we synthesized the experiences to capture the essence and
present themes, which transcended all 15 participants. This composite de-
scription is organized around themes that emerged from the data.

   To ensure we captured their experiences accurately rather than projected
our own ideas about gender bias, we took three specific steps. First, we pro-
vided participants the opportunity to comment on the raw transcript follow-
ing the transcription of the interview. Second, we presented the list of
emergent themes and textual examples and asked each participant to iden-
tify all possible meanings. Finally, participants were asked to comment on
various drafts of the manuscript to ensure our synthesis was accurate. Three
themes, identified by the authors and confirmed by the participants, were:
(1) obstacles in the career path, (2) the importance of mentoring, and (3)
overcoming female leadership stereotypes. All are presented in the
collective account that follows.

Findings and Discussion

The Career Path
When participants described their career path to the superintendency, we
discovered that most began in elementary school settings and did not aspire
to administrative leadership roles until later in their careers. A common
theme in the career path included extensive experience in elementary
schools. Twelve of these women started out as elementary teachers. One
began as a junior high home economics teacher and two taught secondary
English. For all but two of the women, their first and most extensive admin-
istrative experience was as elementary principal. This confirmed Glass's
(1992) finding that men and women have alternative career paths. Women
are more likely to begin administrative careers in elementary rather than
secondary settings. Moreover, Brunner (2000a) argued "elementary teach-
ers have less access to administrative positions than secondary teachers.
There are usually no department chair positions and very few assistant
principalships" (p. 83). Likewise, 50% of the school districts in the state
studied have fewer than 500 pupils and typically do not employ central of-
fice staff beyond the superintendent. Additional research by Kamler and
Shakeshaft (1999), Logan, (1999), Sharp, Malone, Walter, and Supley
(1999), and Tallerico (2000a) confirmed that the lack of visibility and ad-
ministrative experience provided by elementary settings works against ad-
ministrative candidates.

Expanding Leadership Experience
A common strategy for gaining leadership experience among participants

was volunteering for many school and district-wide committees. One participant stated, "I am a high challenge person. I kept taking on additional responsibilities and I just loved it. I would come back and say, 'what's next? Let's do something else.'" In addition to the common elementary background and informal leadership roles, participants also had an extensive range of additional formal leadership experiences which included employment as a state department of education director, school counselor, athletic director, assistant or associate superintendent, and college basketball coach. One participant had extensive experience outside education, running a small business. The depth of these participants' formal leadership experiences, prior to their entrance to the superintendency, supports Young and McLeod's (2001) claim that female administrators' years of professional preparation are often more than that of males (p. 464).

Professional Aspirations

Participants in our study were able to overcome limitations embedded in an elementary school career path by taking on additional informal and formal leadership roles. It is important to note that they were motivated by specific task goals: improving school safety or student performance, and not long-term professional goals. In fact, it was quite the opposite; the women repeatedly stated that they did not aspire to administrative roles when they first entered the education profession. They frequently articulated professional goals related to being the best teacher in the building or district; however, they did not consider taking on additional responsibilities to serve as a launching board for administrative roles.

> I just think some women, who would be great, keep themselves from doing it [getting into administration]. They don't imagine themselves in that job. [Laughing] Sometimes I can't imagine why anyone would want this job! I mean this is just a personal opinion from people that I've talked to; many women will say, they get their teaching degree and fall into more of a traditional role, they just don't consider building or district leadership.

> I don't actually believe that any of us, at that point in time ever felt that we were capable. I don't think that it ever entered our minds being superintendent. You know, if we were federal programs director or counselor, we thought that was the pinnacle of what we could be. I don't think we ever entertained the fact of being superintendent ... Now I think young women today have seen role models go before them and are more assertive and feel they can do something like this. But back in my time, it was not even something that ever even entered my mind.

These findings align with previous research (see Edson, 1995; Gardiner, Grogan, & Enomoto, 1999; Grogan, 1996; Sherr, 1995; Young & McLeod, 2001), which found that many women do not aspire to administrative leadership positions early in their careers.

> I worked for a couple of principals that were not real outstanding and I did lots of

their work for them. They got the credit, but I did the work. I mean, it just struck me. I kind of thought, "hey, I can do this, I've been doing it for years, so, I mean, getting into administration, it really wasn't a shock or anything."

Participants shared numerous stories where they experienced success in various educational roles. The women also frequently mentioned that someone recognized their leadership potential. One superintendent responded, "I think it takes someone, a mentor, or someone encouraging you to say, 'I think you can do this,' back in those days at least, before the idea of becoming a superintendent ever occurred to us [women]." According to another superintendent, "I never even contemplated it until one superintendent said, 'You have been successful everywhere you've been, I think you can do this.' And then I thought, I think I can too." Based on accomplishments, coupled with support from others, they began to consider the superintendency as a viable career path. One overriding theme, articulated by every one of the participants, was an emergent career path. When they began their career, they did not plan to become superintendents, or even administrators; it just happened (see Young & McLeod, 2001).

The common career path for the women interviewed included experiences as elementary teachers and principals. They overcame the lack of leadership visibility (in the district and community) associated with elementary schools by being extraordinarily active in pursuing formal and informal leadership opportunities. However, they were not motivated by pursuing administrative careers. They did not plan to become building or district leaders, but over time, they built confidence from formal leadership experiences and adapted their professional goals. Ultimately, they all overcame these obstacles and reached the top leadership position in a district.

Mentoring
Another theme that emerged from conversations with the participants related to mentoring and being mentored by other superintendents. Frequently, participants reported that the outgoing superintendent, or another superintendent in the same county, recognized their potential for district leadership. They perceived formal and informal mentoring relationships to play an important role in their accession into the superintendency. This support was important because most participants expressed they "were unsure about what they were getting into with their first superintendency." Encouragement from other superintendents forced them to reflect on their own record of past successes. This process imparted the confidence that they could do the job and served as the catalyst for pursuing a superintendency position.

Interviewing for the Superintendency
A dimension of mentoring frequently overlooked is preparation for the formal interview. It is a key element of attaining the superintendent's job and also an area that deserves additional focus in the literature. Preparing for

the interview process was a common topic in the course of conversations with participants. Many spoke of their own extensive preparation and learning to anticipate types of questions through multiple interview experiences rather than from advice from mentors. However, there was also a commonly held belief among participants that other female candidates were not as prepared for the interview process and that partially explained the small number of female superintendents.

> I think that they [other women] don't do their homework on the school. Before I'm ever interviewed, I go up to the state department of education and I pull their financial records so I can talk about their finances this last year. I always try to throw out amounts that they got for different programs, things of that nature. I do some homework about the school. A lot of times, I'll call the present superintendent and I'll say, tell me about the school and why are you leaving. I don't think they do that. I don't think they know to do their homework about the school. They just go in. You've got to be able to sell yourself a little bit. I always mix; I try to mix business with a little bit of humor. I try to make them feel comfortable so that I can kind of find out their feelings on different things. And I think that's one of the things that women don't do.

This quote seemed to denote female superintendents' negative stereotypes about other female leaders. Dana and Bourisaw (2006) concurred, citing that "Not all the gender bias comes from men. . . . Strong evidence exists that women do not support other women in getting and keeping a superintendency. The reasons are directly aligned with endemic cultural biases regarding men's and women's roles" (p. 29).

The perception of poor preparation by other candidates may be accounted for by the lack of peer advice received when going through the hiring process. However, we found no evidence that the women interviewed were denied peer advice. It was clear in the data that these women were pioneers. A common quote from the participants was, "I was the first female administrator, assistant principal, principal, and superintendent in the district and the only female superintendent in the county." One of the superintendents stated frankly, "Everywhere I go I'm always the first woman. I've never not been the first woman." Many of the mentoring experiences they reported occurred after they were hired as superintendents. As a result, the majority learned how to succeed in the interview process through trial and error. Without any guidance from mentors on questions to anticipate or strategies for difficult questions, participants often interviewed multiple times before gaining their first superintendency.

Another dimension of mentoring to consider when examining female superintendents' entry into administration is administrative role models who have had an impact on their decision to pursue this career path. For some, it meant working with a variety of administrators who exhibited diverse leadership styles (traditional versus nontraditional approaches). According to Young and McLeod (2001), "These administrative leadership styles were key determinants in whether building- and district-level administrators be-

came positive, negative or neutral role models for our participants" (p. 477). Thus, the mentoring of female candidates on the interview process, before formal mentoring programs are typically implemented, might play an important role in strengthening this perceived weakness.

Formal Mentoring Programs

Participants in this study all identified a professional mentor who they believed played a role in their accession to the superintendency. However, they were divided among those who identified mentors via formal mentor programs and those who found mentors on their own.

Formal mentoring programs, provided through the state superintendent's association and state department of education, began after the women were hired as superintendents. The state department of education required all first-year superintendents to attend a series of orientation sessions over the course of the school year. One of the first assignments was to find a mentor currently working in the state as a superintendent. Several participants reported this gave them justification to contact a superintendent they respected to ask if he or she would serve as a mentor. The state administrators' organization also had a mentoring program where practicing superintendents were paired with new superintendents in an attempt to foster positive professional relationships. Eight of the women interviewed developed a strong relationship through one or both of these formalized programs.

> I took over in March and my first full year I had to attend first-year superintendents' classes and the first requirement for that was to find a mentor. And there was an administrator at Big Creek and I knew he was a good administrator so I went to him that summer and asked him if he would serve as my mentor. He was very knowledgeable about finances, number one; very knowledgeable about legislation, you know, he was just pretty outstanding in most areas and so he was just a phone call away.
>
> We go through the first year as a superintendent; we go through a staff development-training thing. We go through like 12 different meetings and the state department does an excellent job to get you a network of people that you can call. That was very beneficial to me. I met some people that, you know of course some make you feel more comfortable than others, but I met some people that I didn't mind picking up the phone and calling. They brought in a lot of superintendents to come in and visit with us about a lot of problems.

Superintendents they met outside of the formal mentor programs mentored the other participants. Frequently, a superintendent in the same county in which they received their job or a superintendent they worked for in another administrative capacity served as a mentor. Several women sought advice from former supervisors who became friends over time.

> So I called a friend of mine and I said, "I've not only not ever done a board

agenda but I've never even been to a board meeting, so you've got to help me."
And so he said, "Meet ya' half way." He went to our church; we were friends
with him and his family . . . and so we met and he helped me and we got a board
agenda going.

In their influential study of 51 women administrators, Gardiner,
Enomoto, and Grogan (2000) found that mentors could take many forms
from boss, advisor, teacher, or guide, to parent, spiritual guru, gatekeeper,
public role model, friend, or peer. The women superintendents we inter-
viewed described many of these different mentoring relationships. Regard-
less of the type of mentor relationship or how they identified the mentor
(through a formal program or more informally), all 15 superintendents had
a professional mentor relationship with one or more individuals in the
state.

Gender of the Mentor
The gender of the mentor was not a particularly significant issue for partici-
pants; only two women identified that they had female mentors. Gardiner
and colleagues (2000) explored the issue of how the gender of mentors af-
fects relationships. Participants identified advantages and disadvantages
associated with male and female mentors. One superintendent offered
some pointed advice.

Find you a good, strong male superintendent who can mentor you and open
doors for you, because the men will open them, women won't. I know for exam-
ple of three really top quality women who have good experience, who now have
their administrator certificates, and who would make great administrators. And
when openings would come open, I would call the superintendents, who are
women, and say, "Would you please take a look at these," and most of the time
they don't even get an interview. And even when they do, and they are . . . proba-
bly the most qualified, they don't get hired. They'll hire a man who is less quali-
fied first.

Another superintendent felt she was successful because of her positive
connections with male mentors.

There were only three women administrators in the state when I first started, so
all my life I've pretty well interacted with males; in fact, I was a basketball
coach, and they were predominantly male also. So most of my career has been
spent working with males and I've been pretty fortunate to have some men who
encouraged me and mentored me who I still call on for help. Occasionally, I call
on women superintendents, but there are not enough of us around and they're not
close enough to really get involved with, so it's mainly been male contacts.

Although all of the female superintendents we spoke with identified
male mentors, there was serious discussion and disagreement about ways
to promote more female mentors in the state. The most common idea was a

female superintendents' group. There was little consensus, however. One point of view expressed identified it as a positive step.

> I think it would be helpful if there were an organization for female administrators. I know that we have many of the same issues as the male administrator, but I think there are areas probably where the female can be a little weaker in. Maybe not all, but some of us could share those areas. I think we would be more open with another female administrator than we would be in a meeting with male administrators. Simply because I think a big part of this gender issue is that for so many years men have been 'considered to be the leaders,' particularly in schools. So it's been difficult to get away from that stereotype I guess. And I think if there were some type of organization and there may be but I'm not aware of it, where female administrators could actually have the time to just sit down and share. I think that would be something that would be very helpful. I would certainly participate.

However, other participants felt a separate female superintendents' organization would do more damage than good in developing increased female leadership.

> At one time, years ago there was actually a separate organization called WEA, Women in Education and Administration . . . there was some ambivalence back then on some of us on some feelings about the organization. I joined the organization; I didn't feel that we should form a separate organization. I felt, and I still feel that we should be part of the mainstream and not section ourselves off and say we are the Women Administrators. I think that we are administrators and I think that we need to be part of [state organization], and I don't think we need to section ourselves out.

While there was disagreement about the ways to improve the quality of mentoring for female superintendents, most thought that additional steps should be taken by the state department and administrators' organization to evaluate the effectiveness of the current mentoring programs for women. Currently no evaluations of formal mentoring programs have been done and a female superintendents' organization has yet to develop. Bjork (2000a) identified that mentors and coaches were "of central importance in building the capacity of aspiring superintendents and meeting the specific needs of women and minorities entering the profession" (p. 157). Determining to what degree the needs of women administrators were met offered an important first step to address the relationship of gender in the mentoring process.

The women reflected on their experiences and provided insights from their own practice. We found consensus related to the need for mentoring and leadership development prior to the superintendency. We found disagreement in the ways in which to increase the number of female mentors and quality of mentoring once on the job. Developing capacity through

mentoring was particularly important because of the gender-related stereo-
types the superintendents faced on the job.

Leadership and Gender Stereotypes
Participants frequently described an initial test or challenge by community
members, faculty or staff, other administrators (often who wanted and did
not get the job), and especially coaches. Participants perceived that these
challenges were gender-related and would not have been an issue for male
superintendents. They also believed that sharing strategies to overcome
these challenges would be beneficial.

In an important study of leadership styles, Bornstein (1979) concluded
that the "four personal characteristics most important for managerial jobs
are emotional stability, aggressiveness, leadership ability and self-reli-
ance; characteristics that are nurtured in men . . . however, when women
display the same characteristics, they are considered pushy, brash, aggres-
sive, abrasive and masculine" (p. 332). Dana and Bourisaw (2006) con-
curred that "women's roles as nurturers and collaborators may more
effectively result in improved student performance in a school district, but
those roles are not typically viewed as being as valuable as the more tradi-
tional leadership roles demonstrated by men superintendents" (p. 29).
Shakeshaft (1995) examined how supervision of school employees was af-
fected by gender and found that it had a tremendous impact on behavior,
perceptions and effectiveness. The female superintendents we interviewed
confirmed that view. "I think a big part of this gender issue is that for so
many years men have been considered to be the leaders, particularly in
schools. Females were the teachers and men were the administrators."

Faculty and Staff
Sadker and Sadker (1986) examined communication differences between
males and females and concluded that, in group meetings, males are more
likely to dominate discussions. Accordingly, many of the female superin-
tendents related stories of male faculty and staff members who openly
questioned or challenged their authority and female faculty who were un-
comfortable with the power dynamics of a woman in charge.

One superintendent described the difficulty she had working with a
maintenance employee. Several times he went directly to the school board
with items without discussing them with her. "He would never have done
that with a male administrator. I really think that it has to do with I'm a fe-
male. I don't think he would be doing that so much if there were a male sit-
ting in this chair."

Another participant chuckled slightly and said her school staff "doesn't
know what to do with a woman who's the boss." She clarified,

> They're not used to having to relate in that sort of a way. But I think probably the
> biggest problem is the things that I do, I've been taught by men and I've been
> taught well. And I do those things that men do and I get blamed for it because

that's not what they expect out of me. If a man were to do what things I do, oh, oh, he's wonderful, he does everything, by gosh, he's got what it takes to get the job done. But when I do it, oh, she's just a pushy old broad. And it's not anything that hasn't been done before, but they have a problem, particularly men and particularly coaches. They have a real tough time with it.

One superintendent described her relationship with a male principal. "I think he had some apprehensions about working for a female and I think he came from sort of an authoritative philosophy and . . . encountered mine as being participatory and so forth." The two school leaders eventually became accustomed to each other, ". . . but it took time to overcome his initial stereotypes about women leaders." Another described her relationship with a female principal in the district.

Power for her seems to be more of an issue than it does with either of the guys. I think they are comfortable where they are, I'm comfortable with where I am. I think maybe with her it's more of an issue than with the men. She's always concerned about who's in charge with this or that and making sure that people know she has the control and sometimes when you try to establish that you are in charge, you're not really in charge, or you're not as much in charge as you make them think you are.

Several participants believed their gender was an advantage in some ways, because staff members "feel less intimidated about asking questions or inquiring about things than they would if I were a male." All of the 15 superintendents interviewed described professional situations in which they perceived gender based stereotypes to have been the common cause for these incidents.

Coaches
Eleven of the superintendents described an incident or encounter with a coach or athletic director during their tenure as superintendent that was gender-related. One superintendent said,

Usually, in my jobs, coaches look at me in the beginning with skepticism. When I went to Southville, we had a baseball coach come in, and he was in his shorts. I guess this was about my first day there and he leaned back, he had his hat on, which I think is rude, but he leaned back in his chair and said, 'Now I need some paint for this here dugout I've got.' He leaned over and he said, 'You do know what a dugout is don't you?' And I said, 'Coach, are you tenured?' And his chin dropped and then I started laughing. They all have to test me a little bit.

Another participant shared,

I think probably the biggest impact that it has is when I deal with the athletic department, especially the athletic director who has been here forever, I guess ever since he began teaching. And sometimes I think it's hard for them to come in and

sit down and talk about issues. They've never had a budget, they've never had anybody tell them no, that there's no money. . . . So, that's where the big issue is and I think that's the concern, in athletics. And I think that was the concern before I was hired 'Is a woman going to care enough about athletics?' And yes, I do. But, that's not my only concern.

Beyond these incidents, stereotypes about female knowledge of athletics played a more sinister role and limited some women from getting superintendencies in some communities. One participant related a story of a previous job search where she was not selected for the superintendent position. During the course of the interview, a member of the board confided to her, "You're the best candidate we've had, by far . . . but we don't think you know sports enough, so we're not going to hire you." One participant enjoyed defying the stereotype, "I happen to be able to talk sports with the best of them. So that's something that's a problem with males, they think a female knows nothing about sports."

In this particular state, sporting events are taken very seriously. Superintendents related stories that the football or basketball game on Friday night was a time for the entire community to come together and support the school. There was a very real concern from the superintendents we interviewed that stereotypes by athletic directors and coaches regarding women's knowledge and support of athletics were leading to discrimination against female superintendents.

Gender and School Board Relations

Nationally, Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) found that female superintendents reported a slightly higher percentage of female board members. That was not the case with these 15 districts. Of the 15 superintendents, only three had school boards with a majority of women. Participants provided a variety of examples of how gender has affected their relationships with board members.

One participant stated, "When I was hired, one of the board members just sort of blurted out, 'I can't really believe we hired a woman!' And I'm just kind of sitting there looking at this person saying well, okay, if you feel that way, why did you hire me?" Another spoke of building credibility with the board.

Early on, I think there was some credibility building that had to occur, you know, what's she going to know about a coaching position, what's she going to know about finance, what's she going to do the first time some 300 pound daddy comes in ranting and raving?

My secretary would say to me, very honestly, that board members called her and said 'What do you think about working for a woman?' and it was like 'What's up with that, what's she going to do that's any different?' So, it was an issue in board members' minds and that's what was funny . . . But, the perception from others,

and I continue to be surprised by that, so when I bump up against it, and it doesn't happen every day, but when I do, it's like 'what?'

Four of the most experienced superintendents interviewed focused on setting a strong leadership tone during the interview process with the board members to dispel unfounded expectations. We also found gender stereotypes were not only made by male board members.

I have to be able to take control of it [the interview]. . . . I say things to the board when I'm being interviewed like, 'I want to set a couple of things straight with y'all. I have to be able to run my own district. I cannot have a board that comes in and tries to run it and I will keep you informed. If you don't like the way that I run it then I need to go on down the road. But I will keep you informed. I don't like surprises and I won't give you surprises and if we can't work that way, then this interview just needs to be over and you need to get on with the next person.'

Men are just real surprised a woman has that much balls to say that. But the women usually don't like it. Isn't that interesting? Women board members don't like that type of aggressiveness. But a man, it just surprises them. I think they all can see that I'm intent on doing a good job. . . . A lot of times they have a feeling that a woman is weak. So up front I have to show them a little more aggressiveness, and not in an ugly way, but just kind of in a firm, definite way.

Other participants spoke of developing and strengthening relationships with board members and issues related to gender.

We were addressed by a superintendent today [at a professional conference] who said that it would be a good idea to take your board members to meetings, this, that and the other, and we were just saying that we wouldn't feel comfortable taking male board members unless they were accompanied by their wife or we with our husbands, because we have to deal with that differently than a male does.

Magretta (1997) proposed a theory that male superintendent candidates have an edge over female candidates because people are more comfortable working with others like themselves. Because men comprise the majority of administrative positions and school boards, they often hire other men (as cited in Tallerico, 2000a). Not only did most of these women have school boards with a majority of men, several had boards with a single female member. However, participants provided examples of both male and female board members with gender stereotypes they were forced to confront, analogous to findings by Dana and Bourisaw (2006) and Tallerico (2000a; 2000b).

Community Members
Participants related various accounts of community members who often

tested the limits of new superintendents. Again the perception among participants was that gender was a causal factor. One superintendent provided some particularly insightful observations.

> I think it's very interesting when I go to the ballgames. You know how the men always go to the men and stand and talk to them, and do whatever? I don't, I go to the women and the men don't know how to handle that. I mean, not that I don't speak to the men, not that I don't stop and talk to them or seek them out in the bleachers or whatever and discuss things with them, but I gravitate toward the women, particularly the older women in the community, because I know who really has the pull. And the men don't know how to act. The women didn't either at first, because they never had anybody actively seek them out and ask for their opinion or stand and talk to them. You know I've got little preschoolers and babies in the crowd who'll hold their arms out to me when I come in the audience and want me to take them, because I come and talk to them and play with them. I'm a grandmother, I've got kids and grandkids and it's such a different look. They're really taken aback and they don't know and maybe that's not very superintendent-like, but that's just the way I am.

> They need to see that even though you are the superintendent, or principal or teacher, or whoever, that you really are a person and what your personality is like. It's been a struggle to get even anybody in the community to talk to me. And basically I'm a shy person, I know that's hard to believe, but basically I'm a shy person and if people don't want me around, I'll be nice and say hello and speak, but I don't intrude, I'll walk on by and do my own thing, so it's been a struggle with some of the men in the community particularly, because they don't know what to do with a woman and they sure don't know what to do with a woman who might know something.

One mitigating factor as to community perception was internal versus external promotions into the superintendency. Frequently, female administrators obtain leadership positions in districts in which they have already worked as teachers (Young & McLeod, 2001). Those with professional or life experiences in the community they served as superintendent felt like they had fewer negative community perceptions.

> The community has been very supportive. They seem to have a confidence in me. I really think a lot of that, I think that coming in here as a female superintendent and if they didn't know me would've been a lot more difficult. Being at the elementary school for eight years people knew the kind of person I was and I think that really helped me make that transition easier.

Conversely, those women who were new to the community often reported taking time to get to know people in the community and overcome any stereotypes. Even with much effort put into community relations, several women who were hired from outside the district reported especially challenging experiences.

I had a lady who came to me when I was first there and threw a Bible down on my desk and said, 'You're a woman, you have no right to be in a place of authority.' That was really interesting. And I said, 'Let me tell you, I'm a Christian and I believe the Lord gives us different talents and I want to help the school, and I want to be of service. . . .' And so I got by with that one, but she was after me the whole time. I could take up our whole entire time telling you stories like that one.

One day I had a guy, my secretary said, 'Oh my gosh here comes . . .' I forgot his name, Dennis or something. He'd just got out of [state] prison and he was put up for manslaughter. I said, 'Okay, do we have his kid in our school?' And she said, 'Yeah' and I said, 'okay.' So he was a big old burly guy, he came in just lumberin' in like a lumberjack, into the school. My secretary got up and said, 'Just a minute, let me see if Ms. Martinez can see you.' And so he came in there and I was there and I knew to immediately stand up and try to get on his level as much as I could; I'm 5′3″. So anyway, he beat the desk and said, 'My kid's being mistreated' and he said, 'I want you to know I just got out of Big Pac!' I said, 'You did?! I have a cousin up there, what cell block?!' And he said, 'I was in number so and so.' 'Well [my cousin] Stanley is in number so and so.' I tell you by the end we were best friends. Of course it spread quickly, this is a pretty small town and I think that helped to change people's minds about my ability to handle a difficult situation.

Regardless of the individual or group presenting a challenge, these women all spoke of rising to an initial test, defying a gender stereotype, and clarifying their leadership role. In fact, the superintendents with experience in more than one district spoke of anticipating these challenges by scheduling proactive meetings with faculty, staff, coaches, board members, and/or community members to "get off on the right foot."

Conclusions and Implications
for Future Research

If perception is reality, gender bias is a fact for female superintendents who participated in this study. This research provided insight into the experiences of 15 women who perceived that gender inequity was a factor in their work as school superintendents. Participants recounted their experiences that supported the idea that gender bias comes from men and women working in the school district and those living in the surrounding community. Overcoming a challenge grounded in a gender-based stereotype from faculty, coaches, the community, or board members was a common experience shared by all of the women. The superintendents believed they were tested not because they lacked education, experience, or professional preparation, but because of their gender. Through the process of attaining a superintendent position and working in the field, these leaders developed a leadership skill set that defied gender based stereotypes. They became adept at utilizing both stereotypical male and female characteristics and reactions to combat difficult situations. Simply put, they were tough or

compassionate, collaborative or dictatorial, depending on what the situation required. They learned to react in neither exclusively traditional male or female ways, but rather with the tools they needed to accomplish the task or challenge at hand.

Most of the participants interviewed are the first women in the history of the school district to be superintendent. Several of the same superintendents who recounted being challenged based solely upon gender revealed traces of their own gender biases. They were surprised at how their own comments in the interview transcripts reflected fragments of gender biases, as evidenced by talking about women not being as prepared as men during interviews and by not mentoring other women. Thus, gender bias was not completely overcome even by those against whom it was initially aimed.

The findings illustrate that the women perceived gender stereotypes to be embedded in the career path to the superintendency and work experiences on the job. The superintendents interviewed had numerous professional experiences, but most had similar career paths that included experience as elementary teachers and elementary principals. Previous research indicated the ways in which elementary principalships (and elementary teaching positions) limit future administrative jobs (see Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Ortiz, 1982; or Ortiz & Marshall, 1988), but the participants overcame these obstacles on the way to the superintendency.

In a profession where many women's career paths lead to central office administration via the sometimes-invisible elementary principalship, the participants showed an ability to make themselves visible in their respective communities. They were heavily involved in both informal committee activities at the building level and formal leadership experiences at the district and state levels to confound gender stereotypes and cope with the lack of highly visible leadership experiences associated with elementary school settings.

Future research might explore the career paths of women superintendents working in states with large numbers of small districts. How do they cope with the lack of central office leadership positions? Similarly, one could compare the experiences of female executives outside education, specifically the parallel issues in the career path and strategies to cope with gender bias. It was clear in the study that participants were motivated by short-term task goals rather than long-term professional goals. Rather than aspire to top administrative roles early in their career, participants said that they built confidence and changed their professional aspirations over time.

As a result, career aspirations evolved later in the participants' professional experiences. The women changed their professional goals based on highly successful experiences as teachers and school principals, coupled with encouragement from others. In addition to internal confidence built over time, external recognition frequently sparked an interest in pursuing the superintendency. Being identified, encouraged, and recruited piqued

their interest in the executive position. The intersection of gender and professional aspirations is a topic worthy of more extensive research.

This research also identified a gap in the formal mentoring framework that ignored the needs of aspirants in favor of those who have been hired. In most states, formal administrative mentoring programs start after candidates secure jobs. Much of the mentoring research has focused on an experienced superintendent providing support and guidance for a first-year superintendent, but it is important to explore states and even districts with formal mentoring plans targeted at administrative aspirants. Identifying women with leadership skills and starting the mentoring process before they assume their first superintendencies would seem a reasonable request for districts, state professional associations, and university preparation programs. The women were unclear about specific roles associated with the superintendency, beginning with the interview process. They compensated by preparing extensively prior to their interviews. Mentors might alleviate many of the ambiguities that prevent other qualified female candidates from applying for and attaining superintendencies.

Mentors served an equally important role in providing advice on specific management issues such as developing a school board agenda and answering specific financial questions. However, we would also suggest research which evaluates formal mentoring programs. How well are the needs of administrators (and more specifically female administrators) served in the current system? Finally, exploring the needs of minority women would be a strong addition to the existing body of literature.

Dispelling gender stereotypes was a fact of life for these women. They recounted ample experiences with coaches, faculty, staff, school board, or community members where they were forced to confront an oversimplified conception of female leadership. Their experiences as superintendents provide insight for women who seek a career in educational administration. Despite the numerous challenges they have addressed, their commitment to confront and overcome deeply embedded biases created more opportunities for the generation of women who will follow their lead.

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