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A STUDY OF WOMEN'S ACCESS TO THE SUPERINTENDENCY:  
PATHWAYS FROM THE ELEMENTARY RANKS

by

Julie M. Powell

Dissertation

Submitted to the Department of Leadership and Counseling

Eastern Michigan University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Ypsilanti, Michigan

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Barbara Bleyaert, Chairperson

Dr. Gary Marx, Committee Member

Dr. Diane Parfitt, Committee Member

Dr. Michael Stearns, Committee Member

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mom and dad, Al and Barb Powell, who always believed in me and instilled in me the value of education from the time I was a little girl. They laid the foundation for who I am today.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher received the support of many in conducting this study. There are, however, several individuals and groups who stand out by their level of support that I must acknowledge.

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Thank you to the six courageous female superintendents whom I had the pleasure of talking with during interviews. You were all strong, determined, resilient women who worked really hard to be successful along many differing career paths. You provide hope and inspiration to future leaders.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to the mentors in my own life who have helped shape me as a person and a leader along this journey of lifelong learning. These are those special people who have been instrumental by sharing their talents and insights, engaging in authentic conversations, knowing me well enough to help me think things through in a collegial fashion, or supporting me in a caring

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Finally, and most importantly, I had the support of loving and supportive family and friends who stood by me throughout this journey. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of six women superintendents who began their careers as elementary principals. The central question was: What can we learn from the lived experience of women who came from a background as elementary educators and advanced to the superintendency in a variety of district contexts within Michigan's traditional public school system?

The research design was a qualitative, interpretive, multiple case study approach using the data collection method of interviewing. Two conceptual frameworks – expectations states theory and feminist poststructuralism – provided the context for this research. Portraits of each of the six participants were shared to provide detailed descriptions.

Four emergent themes common across all six participants were revealed. Those findings were: 1. All subjects got initiated to the idea of obtaining administrative positions through an external event and/or person of influence who instilled in them a belief about their potential as an administrator; 2. Most considered their elementary backgrounds as an advantage to their beliefs and strengths as a leader, which developed into understanding how the K-12 system works for students; 3. All participants raised the issue of the challenge of relating to secondary teachers - the steep learning curve around scheduling and staffing and also learning about a secondary climate and culture – as needed to be successful as superintendents coming from an elementary background; 4. In seeking or accepting a superintendency, there was a significant draw to a home district or region with family ties. In addition to these common themes, it was found that the timing of a woman's decision to apply for a superintendent position was dependent on certain variables lining up at the right moment. There was also a strong appreciation and desire for mentorship for women as they decide to enter administration and move along their career paths.

Several recommendations resulted from the findings of this study, including ones for women aspirants to the superintendency, university preparation programs, and search firm consultants and school board members. These recommendations addressed the need to purposively study women's issues in leadership to further understand how women make decisions about their career paths.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### **Introduction**

Women continue to be underrepresented in the position of the American public school superintendency, which has prompted many researchers to investigate the reasons why more women do not become superintendents (Brunner, 2008; Glass, 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Tallerico, 1999). Studies have attributed the underrepresentation of women not to the lack of training or experience necessary to succeed in the position, but to societal norms and beliefs regarding leadership (Shakeshaft, 1989), school board expectations (Tallerico, 1999), and factors in the search and selection process. The challenge of reaching the superintendency appears to be even greater for women educators who come from an elementary background. The focus of this study is on women superintendents who began their careers from the elementary principalship, not the secondary pathway, to more fully understand women with an elementary background and how they reached the superintendency.

This study provides an overview of women's access to the superintendency historically through a review of related literature, as well as stories of the journey to the superintendency from women who have achieved the position. Using expectation states theory focusing on the status belief of gender as well as discussing gender as a social structure provides a lens to better understand how the experiences of female superintendents are significantly different from the experiences of males. A second framework used to make sense of the lack of women in the superintendency, specifically from an elementary background, is feminist poststructural theory, which blends a commitment to social change by calling for a shift in perspectives (Grogan, 1999b). Grogan states, "This framework is based on the view that women and others similarly situated on the fringes of power have not been served as well as the middle- and upper-class

white male, who has traditionally wielded the most power” (p. 200). Both frameworks support the notion that there are gender differences in the experiences of male and female superintendents. They also both look at micro and macro levels and structures to explain these differences as related to educational hierarchies.

I viewed expectation states theory first as an important theory because I appreciated the value it placed on the micro and macro levels of individuals and the larger society. This theory explained that status structures are deeply embedded within a social hierarchy and the implications of this are explicit in K-12 schools. This theory resonated with me in terms of recognizing a male dominated and highly developed power system in educational leadership.

Feminism emerged as a secondary theory later in my research, and one which I first resisted until I read more about the specific theory of feminist poststructuralism. Because feminist postructuralism also focuses on females as positioned in a discourse subordinate to males, it became clear that both frameworks had legitimacy. Both theories are helpful in explaining current practices and also in seeking ways to change those practices by highlighting the experiences of women.

My personal interest in this study stemmed from my own experiences as a female educator who began my career in the ranks of elementary education and desired to obtain a superintendency. Within the five searches I was part of as an interviewed candidate, as well as the dozen others I observed, there were significantly more men than women selected for interviews out of the pool of candidates that applied for a superintendent position. Furthermore, I observed that most of the interviewed candidates, regardless of gender, came from secondary backgrounds and/or central office administration, not directly from elementary backgrounds.

This particular research study focused on six women superintendents who were able to become superintendents after starting their careers as elementary teachers or principals. By choosing this specific sample, I sought to gain a more in-depth understanding of the journey these particular women went through to obtain their position.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The 1992 and the 2000 studies of the American School Superintendency conducted by AASA revealed that the number of female superintendents doubled from 6.6% in 1992 to 13% in 2000 (Handy, 2008). The most current nationwide study of the superintendency, commissioned by the American Association of School Boards in 2003 (AASA), revealed that women lead only 18% of the 13,728 school districts in the United States (Grogan and Brunner, 2005). Researchers found that although the number of women superintendents more than doubled in that eight-year period, the percentage is still quite small: women compose 51 percent of the general population, 52 percent of elementary principals, 83 percent of teachers in elementary settings, 57 percent of central office administrators, and 33 percent of assistant/associate/deputy/area/superintendents, but only 18% of superintendents in the nation. That survey also revealed that 40 percent of women central office administrators do aspire to the superintendency.

Even though formal employment discrimination by gender has been discouraged in the United States, it is clear that strong male connections and networks exist that remain largely closed to women and minority school superintendents. Brunner (1999) suggests that schools are gender-bound institutions with women superintendents not experiencing the same reality as men superintendents. She further laments that gender is the deciding force in superintendent selection, effectiveness, and retention, so it is important to understand the individual experiences of women (Brunner, 1999).

In past years, multiple potential reasons for this gender gap in the superintendency have been examined in an attempt to explain the continued underrepresentation of women in the position. To explain how the education system is stratified by gender, Bell and Chase (1993) suggested four explanations. First, they suggest that gender stratification in schools is maintained by differential access to opportunities for advancement and fewer opportunities for women to advance vertically in the educational system. As an example, the elementary principalship is the administrative position most occupied by women, yet this position is not as likely to lead to further promotion as the high school principalship, a position typically occupied by men. Second, they contend that gatekeepers in schools are predominantly white men, which includes established superintendents who have clout at local, state and national levels including search consultants hired by school boards and school board members.

Third, Bell and Chase (1993) point to the persistence of both subtle and blatant forms of sexism and racism, which are often unbeknownst to women because such issues are usually raised behind closed doors, framed, for example, as school board members' concern over community acceptance or whether women can assert the right authority for the job. Instances of discrimination can range from not receiving help in their educational pursuits to overt discrimination in hiring. Furthermore, even when school board members or consultants express acceptance of women superintendents, they explain it in ways that promote the value and competence of certain women superintendents who are successful without acknowledging that there is a very real component of dominance and inequality structured into the occupation overall (Bell & Chase, 1993). Finally, they argue that recent trends in public policy have had negative effects on equity because the focus has changed to education reform, performance standards, and an excellence agenda, which thus marginalized the issue of equity policies (Bell & Chase, 1993).

With new emphasis on learning outcomes and the fact that women who reach the superintendency have generally taught longer than men, it would seem women would have an edge in obtaining the superintendent position now more than ever. Expectation states theory argues that status beliefs are central to explaining how stereotypes act as distinctively powerful barriers to women's achievement in positions of authority, leadership, and power (Ridgeway, 2001). These status beliefs can then serve as a series of obstacles for women. Feminist poststructural theory would also claim that power is inequitable because women are positioned in discourse that is subordinate to males.

Traditional practices and pathways of hiring have always been gendered throughout history (Kim & Brunner, 2008). When the pathway to the superintendency was first traveled, it was traveled mostly by white men. School boards then hired educated white men, and as time passed, the pathway was created and a tradition was established. And these traditional practices, regardless of other influences, reflect constructions of gender that are difficult to abandon (Kim & Brunner, 2008).

Even in higher education, the same lack of females in top positions as compared to men is clear. Whether it is in school superintendency or college presidencies, a very powerful "glass ceiling" exists for aspiring females. And this barrier continues to deprive capable and deserving women of the opportunity to lead educational organizations (Polka, Litchka, & Davis, 2008).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretive study was to understand the process of women's access to the superintendency for a selected group of women who all came from an elementary career path in the state of Michigan. This is important because much research has been done about traditional pathways to the superintendency being prevalent for males and for

those with secondary backgrounds (Kim & Brunner, 2008). Brunner (2000) reported that half of all men and only one-fifth of women in administrative roles serve as high school principals, a position commonly considered a stepping stone to the superintendency. Interestingly, only 26% of superintendents (male or female) began their teaching career as elementary teachers (Glass, Franceschini, and American Association of School Administrators, 2007).

Brunner and Grogan (2007) reported that the most common path women take to the superintendency is that of teacher, principal, and central office administrator, with the principalship at the elementary level the most common. Conversely, male candidates typically possess experience as secondary school administrators, with about 70% of all superintendents coming from a secondary school background (Glass et. al, 2007; Tallerico, 2000b). In the 2000 American Association of School Administrators (AASA) study, only 18% of female superintendents possessed experience with secondary school administration (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Tallerico (2000b) also reported that a prior secondary school administrative background is highly valued by school board members and headhunters when considering candidates for the superintendency.

Qualitative research helps us explore and understand the meanings that people experience in their own lives (Creswell, 2009). My study purposively looks at women who started as elementary educators. I wanted to understand specifically how women with a background in elementary education rather than secondary education gained access to the superintendency – from the inside or the outside, from rural settings to urban ones – in the past few years. Most women who make it to the top line position of superintendent had career paths similar to male administrators, which included positions of teacher, assistant principal, secondary principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent (Noel-Bastiste, 2009; Brunner & Kim, 2010). How



had these women from elementary backgrounds persevered against great odds, when research tells us the path is more difficult for women than men, and it is more common for both men and women to gain a superintendency through the traditional high school principalship?

### **Significance of the Study**

According to various sources, public education in the United States is facing a leadership crisis. Brunner and Grogan (2007) report that the results of a national survey on the school superintendency indicate that chief executive officers of the nation's schools are concerned about future recruitment and retention of strong, qualified superintendents (p. 20). Grogan (2000) also states that superintendents are retiring, resigning, or being fired in increasing numbers, and the candidate pools are not perceived to be as deep as they once were. With the 2011 election of Governor Rick Snyder in Michigan and his announcement of cuts to K-12 school funding amid continuing demands for high achievement, the challenge for K-12 leaders to redesign and reinvent educational practices to ready students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century with fewer resources was made clear. One response to this challenge implied reconceptualizing the role of the superintendent as well and finding those who will embrace new approaches especially related to effective teaching that results in student learning. Reforms have shifted from leaders with management backgrounds to those with more emphasis on instructional leadership (Miller, Washington & Feine, 2006).

In light of current pressures on the system of education to change, now was a good time to study the superintendency once again and from a gender perspective to see what experiences female candidates seeking a superintendency are having and how more women, especially those with elementary backgrounds whose expertise may have been underappreciated in the past, may successfully rise to the superintendency. Search firms, predominantly led by retired

superintendents, may understand conceptually that school needs are changing, but they are part of a former system that depended on extensive networking by males and organizational preservation to keep things going. Gender stratification reflects patterns of control and differential distribution of resources that still allow the power in the public schools to belong mostly to men who occupy the more desirable and influential positions of formal authority (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996).

As women advance in education, a large gap still exists between the number of females who are teachers and principals and the number of females serving in a superintendency, especially those who have come from the elementary ranks. According to Glass (2000), central office administrators were hired 65% of the time in large districts, with less than a third coming from an elementary background. Many current superintendents gained their first position without experience in critical district functions such as finance, operations, personnel, or working with school board members, and this is particularly true for those with elementary backgrounds or curriculum roles in central office (Glass et al., 2007). Seventy percent of superintendents come from secondary school backgrounds that more closely align with superintendent-type tasks (Glass et al., 2007). In the 2000 American Association of School Administrators study (AASA) study, 18% of female superintendents possessed experience with secondary school administration (Glass et al., 2007).

The glass ceiling metaphor, often cited in literature, implies that women and men have equal access to entry and mid-level positions, although they do not (Eagly & Carli, 2009). Eagly and Carli argue that whether jobs are traditionally masculine or feminine, women do not advance as fast and drop out more often than men. Thus, the problem for women is multiple, complex, and changing and is an obstacle from the start of their careers (Eagly & Carli, 2009).

The results of this study will be useful for a couple reasons. One, it may help aspiring female superintendent candidates from the elementary principalship by providing new insights as they learn about the paths and journeys of similar women who were successful in achieving a superintendent position. School boards and search consultants, who typically have tremendous influence over the hiring process, may find this study as a source of enlightenment, and a challenge to their own decision-making and status beliefs. University preparation programs may view this research as a springboard for planning explicit teaching for leadership development that benefits aspiring women leaders with practical ways that will help them gain positions.

### **Theoretical Lens**

The theoretical lens for this research study was grounded in two frameworks: expectation states theory and feminist poststructuralism. Both are explained individually and in detail below. Expectation states theory is a conceptual framework that suggests gender is deeply entwined with social hierarchy and leadership (Ridgeway, 2001). According to the framework, hierarchies are formed by beliefs, and the development of those hierarchies is central to how people gain access to positions of leadership. Correll and Ridgeway (2003) describe expectation states theory as:

A ‘macro-micro-macro’ explanation about one way that categorical inequality is reproduced in society. Cultural beliefs about social categories at the macro level impact behavior and evaluation at the individual level, which acts to reproduce status structures that are consistent with pre-existing macro-level beliefs. Status structures in groups can be thought of as the building blocks of more macro-level structural inequalities in society. (p. 48)

For example, a cultural belief about a social category at the macro level is that males have greater power and potential to assume leadership than do women, as reflected in traditional

family structures among the majority in this society, where the husband runs the family and the wife follows the husband's lead. This status structure is reproduced in the educational setting. Cultural beliefs about the superiority of men over women for leadership also play out in schools, where, at the individual level, a male teacher is far more likely to aspire and be promoted into a leadership position than a female, even though females outnumber males in education (Glass et al., 2007). These individual male teachers become coaches, assistant principals, athletic directors, or high school principals at a quicker and more substantial rate than do females (Glass et al., 2007). When job openings arise at the superintendent level, these cultural beliefs about males as more capable leaders than women reproduce themselves at the macro-level status structures when males are the candidates considered most favorably and in line from their other leadership experiences.

Gender represents one aspect of an institutionalized system of social practices which highlights the fact that males and females are different in ways that cause inequality. Ridgeway (2001) explains that expectation states theory encompasses status beliefs at their core, which are shared cultural schemas or stereotypes about status positions. These status beliefs are based on gender, race, ethnicity, education, or occupation where people attach certain social practices to groups based on these beliefs. As status beliefs develop, they form an element in the stereotypes of the groups involved and can attach greater competence and social significance to the advantaged group (men, whites, professionals) than to the disadvantaged group (women, African Americans, laborers) and associate the advantaged group with more valued skills (Ridgeway, 2001).

Status beliefs imply both difference and inequality at their core. Although any distinction between people can create in-group favoritism, in status belief formation, both groups come to agree, as a matter of social reality, that one group is socially evaluated as better than the other (Ridgeway &

Erickson, 2000). Therefore, a degree of consensuality, or the appearance of it, is essential for status beliefs to form and carry force in social relations. Thinking that most people hold a status belief gives it an apparent social reality that even those disadvantaged by it feel they must concede and deal with (Ridgeway & Erickson, 2000). Expectation states theory demonstrates that status beliefs account for the obstacles faced by women who aspire to the same leadership roles as men by affecting the processes by which individuals are given access to positions of power, wealth, and authority (Ridgeway, 2001). We live in a society that has always honored males as top leaders, from the President of the United States to the leaders of companies to the heads of churches and households. Societal norms say men are more pragmatic, experienced, and business-minded, and women are softer and more emotional. Therefore, to be highly able in the workplace, a woman must display a higher level of competence than a similar man. The implications of this for hiring and promoting women in leadership are substantial (Ridgeway, 2001).

In educational institutions, these status beliefs can account for how males and females are perceived as different in the way they behave as teachers, principals, and all the way to the superintendent. For instance, many people believe that female teachers are better elementary teachers because they are more nurturing and work better with smaller children. Another example of a status belief might be that male principals have a stronger sense of authority when it comes to disciplining students. This social stereotype plays itself out in the role of superintendent, where male superintendents far outnumber female superintendents. According to Tallerico (2000a), the high school principalship has often been seen as a traditional training ground for superintendents. In comparison to the elementary principalship, the high school role is viewed as more complex and with more pressures and accountability that attract public attention.

In my personal experience as a candidate applying and interviewing for superintendent positions in Michigan in the 2010-2011 school year, my observations revealed that most final candidate pools that made it to the interview stage include sitting superintendents or assistant superintendents and at least one high school principal and that very few pools include any elementary principals. The exception would be if an elementary principal within the district where there is an opening is granted an interview. Also, every candidate pool I observed had more male candidates than females, and a few searches had no females at all being interviewed. These data observations come from my own direct conversations with search firms conducting searches and lived experiences as well. The criteria for consideration of candidates seemed to follow that current superintendents are often given the highest probability of being selected in the interview pool, followed by assistant superintendents, curriculum directors, and high school principals. A candidate with a background different from that rarely made it past the paper screening process. Consciously or not, the male pathway to the superintendent appears to be quicker, more direct in terms of steps to take in acquisition, and more successful as noted by the data that indicate there are more males in the superintendency than females.

The status perspective also suggests that there is considerable interest in dominant group members maintaining their status advantage over the subordinate group, which contributes to the prescriptive quality of group stereotypes (Ridgeway, 2001). Thus, the elements of stereotypes that are likely to be most strongly enforced are those that represent the dominant group. This process of legitimacy certainly is borne out in the educational setting and the role of search firms in the recruiting and hiring process for new superintendents. Most search firm staffs are composed of white, male, retired superintendents who often have direct regional contacts and/or personal investment with the districts who hire them to lead the search. This status theory

postulates, then, that similarly dominant group members displaying the same status characteristics will often be looked upon more favorably than candidates with differing characteristics so that there is a legitimacy process to maintaining the current status (Ridgeway, 2001). In this researcher's experience, candidates in several searches disclosed being contacted directly by those persons leading the search or others connected with the search process such as board members or even the outgoing superintendent asking them to apply for the position. This seems to be a direct link to the status structure concept and wanting to reproduce status structures by selecting others similar to those beliefs. It is also a function of networking, which women are not as good at as men (Glass, 2000).

A theory of gender as a social structure consists of multiple levels of causality with gender consequences (Risman, 2004). Gender is a basis not only for our personalities, but also for our cultural roles and our institutions, and in complicated ways. Risman contends that gender is a structure deeply embedded in society as a basis for stratification on three levels:

- 1) At the individual level, for the development of gendered selves; 2) during interaction as men and women face different cultural expectations even when they fill the identical structural positions; and 3) in institutional domains where explicit regulations regarding resource distribution and material goods are gender specific.

(p. 433)

Individual identities are often constructed through early childhood development, explicit socialization, modeling, and experiences that lead to internalization of social ways of being (Risman, 2004). This goes back to the way in which girls grow up learning about being nurturing and becoming teachers or nurses whereas boys are conditioned to think of themselves as having an aptitude for being doctors or engineers. Although this early role identification and

conditioning plays a part, there is a strong belief that gender is an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting men and women as different and organizing social relations of inequality on the basis of those differences (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

When trying to understand gender on the interactional dimension, many inequalities are created and reproduced in everyday life because how individuals define themselves in relation to others determines everyday interaction. Changes in individual identities may change interactional expectations, but the opposite is possible as well (Risman, 2004, p. 435). For instance, since social structures can shape individuals, young aspiring female teachers often remember elementary school as a nurturing place where many female teachers worked together to help students learn. Thus, these female teachers act as individuals who, in turn, shape the social structure simultaneously by choosing to become elementary teachers. This recursive relationship between the social structure and individuals is perpetuated. Males also follow a similar identity structure as they often identify with male high school teachers and coaches and see themselves as pursuing those steps along with high school principals and possibly superintendents in their future.

As individuals enter public settings, their default expectation is that others will treat them according to hegemonic gender beliefs, such as believing that men are generally more competent than women (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). In education, this hegemonic belief can surface when high school students believe that male principals have more authority to enforce discipline of students than female principals (Brunner, 1999; Glass et al., 2007).

On the institutional domain level, areas like law, organizational practices, and formal regulations help foster gender neutrality. Unfortunately, despite progress with legal changes, gender stratification still remains (Risman, 2004).



This researcher endeavors to utilize Ridgeway's expectation states theory along with components of gender as a social structure theory to conceptualize what the women in this study faced in their personal journey to the superintendency, especially coming from the elementary ranks. Elements of gender structure theory can help us better understand "how" each superintendent obtained her position through whatever time, place, and context she lived.

Feminism provided a lens that influenced this study. Feminist research approaches center on and make prevalent women's diverse situations and the institutions or political or social structures that frame those situations (Creswell, 2009). The specific feminist lens this researcher chose to employ was a feminist poststructural framework. This framework was based on the feminist view that women have not been served as well as middle and upperclass white males, who have traditionally held the most power (Grogan, 1999b). Poststructuralism seeks ways to disrupt the social structures that have produced patterns of domination and subordination in our everyday lives. Feminist poststructuralism offers a means by which we can clearly see the positions we are in based on our gender and then question these positions. Grogan (1999b) states:

Positions are dominant or subordinate. The understanding that we are are not all equally well positioned in a discourse is important for us to make sense of what otherwise seems to be simply personal failure. If women still make up the majority of the teaching force from which administrators are drawn, and if women are becoming the majority in university preparation programs (Shakeshaft, 1989), why else are administrative positions not equitably distributed among men and women? For various reasons, the discourse has served men better than women up until now (p. 201).

Feminist poststructuralism was helpful both in explaining current practices and also offering ways to change those practices (Grogan, 1999b). For this particular study, the

connection between feminist poststructuralism and female superintendent aspirations was strong. As women have been well represented in the teaching ranks over the course of time, the same equality of representation had not been apparent at the superintendent level.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The research design of this study is qualitative, and the methodology used was a multiple case study. Using Merriam's interpretive case study framework (1998), the purpose of this study was to understand the process of women's access to the superintendency for a selected group of six women who all came from an elementary career path in the state of Michigan. An email was sent directly to each female superintendent in all public school districts in the state of Michigan according to the 2011 copy of the *Michigan Education Directory*, asking for their voluntary participation if they fit two criteria. The two criteria were that these women participants had to be serving in their superintendent positions for five years or less and had to have begun their careers as elementary educators and principals. The six women sought were currently serving as superintendents in various sized districts; two were from rural districts, two from suburban districts, and two from urban districts.

The approach used to collect data was a semi-structured, open-ended interview approach that would result in a "portrait" of each participant. These 60-120-minute interviews took place in each of the locations that the participant chose (usually the office of the district where they worked) at a time convenient for each. The interview format allowed for a guided list of questions but also time and flexibility to consider the words and experiences of each participant as important to their individual stories.

## **Research Questions**

As Creswell (2009) suggests, I used one central question with associated sub-questions to guide my study. By focusing on a single phenomenon, I hoped to convey an open and emerging design and allow dialogue to emerge naturally (Creswell, 2009). My central question was this: What can we learn from the lived experience of women who came from a background as elementary educators and advanced to the superintendency in a variety of district contexts within Michigan's traditional public school system?

The following questions were asked of each participant:

- 1) I am really interested in hearing about your journey to the superintendency. Can you share with me how your career as an educator began?
- 2) Will you tell me about your decision to become a superintendent, and the process you experienced getting there? Especially, what have been your experiences with the search and selection process for superintendent positions?
- 3) What, if anything, did you find most challenging about the process of securing a superintendent position?
- 4) How might your experience coming from an elementary background have helped or hurt your journey to the superintendency?
- 5) What advice would you offer to other women from the elementary principalship who aspire to the superintendency?

## **Delimitations**

This study used six participants, all women superintendents in Michigan who specifically came from the background of the elementary principalship. I sought two women from rural districts, two from urban districts, and two from suburban districts to honor different

geographical contexts and considerations. These superintendents I sought as candidates for this study were hired within the past five years. I used only districts where the superintendent serves K-12 students from traditional public schools, not charter schools. Women superintendents whose experience included a secondary background, even though they may have served as elementary principals, were excluded as subjects for this study. Also, women who were serving in dual roles, such as being the superintendent and the principal, were also excluded.

### **Limitations**

Because the pool of female superintendents with elementary backgrounds was small, the sample I envisioned for this study may have needed to be modified. If I had not been able to identify six women superintendents from Michigan who fit my criteria, I would have looked for participants in nearby states. A second limitation of this study came from the women I interviewed and the stories they told. Were they able to remember the details of how they received their position? How would they identify any barriers experienced? Would they be comfortable enough with me to tell me everything, or would they leave things out? Did any of these women fear exposure or lack of confidentiality where they would then be reluctant as participants to be fully forthcoming? Third, because of sample size, results of this study cannot be generalized to the overall population.

Another limitation was my own potential bias in this study as someone who was an elementary educator and who aspired to be a superintendent. I was aware that my own experiences in past pursuits as a candidate for a few superintendent positions myself may have biased my perspective. However, I reported and recorded the truth of these women as told to me and did not interface their experiences with any of my own.

## Summary

The number of women superintendents has increased from 6 percent to 18 percent in the last decade (Glass et al., 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005); however, this number is still disproportionately small compared to the total number of districts nationwide and total women who work in educational positions. Why? Examination of the career paths to the superintendency indicates females tend to follow the traditional path to the superintendency, teacher to principal to central office position to superintendency. Some men are able to bypass the central office position and go from principal to superintendent (Glass et al., 2007). The majority of superintendents have served as high school principals, another position where men dominate, thus denoting the high value of the secondary school experience. This further limited the pool of female applicants since more women have elementary school experience (Glass et al., 2007). I selected an interpretive, multiple case study approach using an unstructured, open-ended interview as a methodology for this work. Understanding the process of women's access to the superintendency for six women superintendents who came from elementary career paths in the state of Michigan and understanding their journeys and experiences is important qualitative research.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature review is divided into four sections: 1) Historical Perspective of Women in the Superintendency; 2) Gatekeepers; 3) Barriers Experienced by Women in the Superintendency; and 4) Conceptual Frameworks.

### **Historical Perspective of Women in the Superintendency**

Women are in charge of about 13% of school districts in the United States (Glass et al., 2007). The percentages have increased slightly in the last 100 years but only marginally, and it is nowhere near equitable amongst men and women. In the 1990s, the greatest gains were in suburban/urban districts serving 3,000-24,999 students (Miller et al., 2006). Miller found that female superintendents in those districts nearly tripled from 5% in 1992 to 14.1% in 2000. However, one third of these women had tenure of less than three years and 58% less than five years. Most women who made it to the top line position of superintendent had career paths similar to male administrators, which included positions of teacher, assistant principal, secondary principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent (Kim & Brunner, 2008, Noel-Bastiste, 2009).

According to Reed and Patterson (2007), researchers now study more than just demographic data and general information about female superintendents. Researchers are now examining the skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary for women to obtain that first superintendent's job and also how to keep it and find satisfaction in the position. Reed and Patterson (2007) state that female superintendents are much more likely to be single, widowed, divorced, or to have commuter marriages. They also are more likely to face negative stereotyping. To become successful, female superintendents must become resilient. Comeaux's research (2009) supports this with her case studies of superintendents in small, rural towns. More

than 75% of her respondents faced marital issues that led to divorce when in the role of superintendent because domestic life had shifted so much that these women knew things at home were not balanced, but remained in the role of superintendent anyway. Furthering this, women superintendents in small, rural districts tend to have limited internal opportunity structures – fewer financial and instructional resources and greater need for the superintendent to handle multiple tasks without a lot of extra support (Tallerico, 1996).

Stereotypical images of what a socially acceptable leader looks like and does also affect women in the role of superintendency (Tallerico, 1996). Perceptions of women superintendents being easy to direct by school boards because they were female or soft is one type of stereotyping (Skrla, 2000). A second type of stereotyping about women was made regarding assumptions about the types of operational knowledge and activities women had, such as managing a building program or financial activities. The third type of stereotyping noted was the need by women superintendents to maintain appropriate feminine behavior – what you wear, watching how you behave, being mindful of what you say – knowing you are always being evaluated (Skrla, 2000).

As reported by VanTuyle and Watkins (2009), the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) conducted a national study of the superintendency in 2007 of 7,958 active superintendents and received a 23.4% return rate. This study indicated that the mean age of superintendents is 54.6 years. The AASA study also reported that 93.8% of superintendents were white and that 93.8% of male superintendents were married, compared to 75.4% of female superintendents. Almost 51% of the superintendents (male and female) indicate possession of an earned doctorate degree. More than half of the responding superintendents indicated serving in

just one district. The AASA study reported that 64% of the respondents were in districts of fewer than 3,000 students and 31.4% in districts with enrollments from 3,000 to 9,999.

Quilantan and Menchaca-Ochoa (2004) report that most males position themselves for the superintendent role by moving early into assistant principal positions, whereas women do not make that transition until they are in their 30s. Along those same lines, Brunner (2008) also states that 52.8% of men are between 25-30 years old when they receive their first administrative appointment, and 53.8% of women are between 31-40 years old when they first step into administration. In addition, men averaged four more years of superintendent experience than did women superintendents. And even more interestingly, Brunner (as cited from Tallerico, 2001) says that “men were more likely than women to have five-year, rather than three-year, employment contracts with their boards of education....This was true whether the researchers looked at superintendents in their first superintendency, or those with two or more superintendencies during their careers” (2008, p. 670).

In Barrios' (2004) dissertation research regarding factors influencing the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency, she surveyed both school board members and a group of administrators, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, and deputy superintendents. Both groups agreed that the six primary factors that caused the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency were as follows:

1. Women have limited administrative experiences overall.
2. Women are inexperienced in handling fiscal matters.
3. Women have limited experience in leadership roles.
4. Women's career aspirations have been placed behind family responsibilities.
5. Women lack personal aspirations to seek administrative positions.



6. Women's family commitments are a priority to career advancement (Barrios, 2004, p. 121-122).

### **Gatekeepers**

Lewin's gatekeeping theory, as discussed in Tallerico's study (2000b), contends that there are many channels that reflect "in" or "out" decision points (gates) in a search process. These gates are controlled either by a set of impartial rules or by persons with differing degrees of power. Search consultants are one form of gatekeepers who rely on networks of friends, professional associates, and associations when developing a group of candidates to present for consideration to a school board (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999). In the context of superintendent selections, the impartial rules may be a set of academic or certification standards used as a minimum requirement to screen all applicants. Headhunters often control this part of the process.

The gates are open widest for candidates with prior experience as superintendents, assistant superintendents, or high school principals (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Tallerico, 2000b). The rationale for this is that these roles are better preparation for the superintendency than staff administrative roles and elementary principalships. After the initial stages, power can shift to board members to make these "in" or "out" decisions. From here, norms embedded in the culture and influences interact to determine how and when gates are closed or opened along the way (Tallerico, 2000b).

Consultants reported that there appears to be a significant difference between the number of women applicants vying for elementary superintendencies (K-6) and K-12 superintendencies; approximately 50 percent of the candidates for K-6 superintendencies were women versus 10 to 15 percent for K-12 superintendencies (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999). Another factor voiced as being a detriment was the rarity of women as high school principals, which consultants viewed

as being an important step to the superintendency. It was even expressed that it is more difficult for a male elementary principal to go to a superintendency than it is for a male secondary school principal (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999).

Men in positions of power often control the formal and informal sites of hiring, decision making, power-brokering, and sponsorship (Chase & Bell, 1994). Chase and Bell focus on how gatekeepers talk about women in everyday speech and their talk influences how women's actions and situations are interpreted by others and how this can contribute to men's dominance, even if not on purpose. When hiring, administrators are drawn to candidates much like themselves. According to Grogan and Brunner (2005),

Although this does not mean exclusively recruiting other white males, it does mean that those who are not likely to support the dominant discourse are rarely chosen. This affinity for sameness extends to the various processes of mentoring, networking, and sponsorship within the field. (p. 259)

School board members are generally lay people elected by their communities to employ superintendents (Chase & Bell, 1994). Because of this responsibility, some board members acknowledge having to defend the decision to hire a woman superintendent to others in their communities. Some board members feel the smaller the town, the worse it can be for women superintendents in terms of "women's place" thinking or women's biased subjectivity (Chase & Bell, 1994). In Comeaux's narrative study (2009) of four small, rural superintendents in Texas, she found that all four women interviewed had experienced many forms of blatant discrimination by school board members or community members who felt that women should not be in the role of superintendent. Comeaux also revealed that a few of the women superintendents said they

were not seen as financially savvy as men and were consequently micro-managed by their boards for every expenditure (Comeaux, 2009).

One interesting statement from a board member in Chase and Bell's study (1994) was that norms for relations between men and women at public social gatherings could be constraining for women when the majority of the leadership in the community is male. This experience of exclusion for a woman can hinder her effectiveness as a superintendent.

Tallerico (2000b) found that many school board members assume strong disciplinary and other noninstructional technical expertise of male applicants compared to women and spend longer amounts of time questioning the competencies of females. The idea of acting affirmatively in a proactive way to attract female candidates is not reinforced by school board members in her study.

The demographics of key gatekeepers (mostly nonminority male); what we know about human similarity-attractiveness (i.e., the propensity to connect with those most like ourselves); and the predominance of gut feelings, chemistry, and intuition in critical interview interactions (i.e., factors that foster the introduction of subconscious bias) combine to favor male rather than female and majority rather than minority superintendent applicants. (Tallerico, 2000b, p. 37)

### **Barriers Experienced by Women in the Superintendency**

Barriers to securing a superintendent position are perceived as either institutionalized and evidenced by problematic gender discrimination practices or as self-imposed and occurring when women self-select out of the job for reasons of personal lifestyle choices (Derrington & Sharrat, 2009). When reporting out about barriers limiting administrative support for women from the AASA Study, Brunner (2008) found some interesting results. Respondents were asked how

important a factor were each of 10 listed barriers for women obtaining a superintendency. Those barriers included:

- school boards do not recruit women
- lack of mobility
- midmanagement glass ceiling
- no opportunity for key experiences to seek superintendencies
- lack of networks
- perception of school boards that women are not strong managers
- perception of school boards that women are not qualified in budget and finance
- perception of school boards that women's emotions influence decisions
- superintendent work is unattractive
- lack of district mentors and mentoring.

Brunner's (2008) findings suggest there was clear discrepancy between the views of women superintendents and those of men superintendents. Approximately half of the men considered all but two barriers to be "not a factor" – the exceptions being "lack of mobility" and "superintendent work unattractive." In contrast, most women superintendents believed all barriers to be a factor except two – "no key experiences" and "superintendent work unattractive."

In a 2006 study, Glass surveyed male and female superintendents for the reasons why they believed so few women were obtaining the superintendency as compared to the number of women educators as a whole (Glass et al., 2007). In that study, 28 percent of female superintendents identified gender discrimination by school boards and the presence of a glass ceiling as a response, whereas men in that study were only half as likely to select gender discrimination from school boards or glass ceilings as a reason to explain the disproportionate numbers of women in the superintendency. Instead, 28.3% of male superintendents believed the

working conditions of the job were not appealing to women, and 22.3% felt family concerns were barriers for women in the position (Glass et al., 2007). The results of this study strongly indicate that male and female superintendents have differing perceptions of barriers for women.

Furthermore, defining quality candidates has more to do with following a standard male career path than an actual listing of generic leadership qualities that don't relate to gender. Most consultant firms and board members were found to value a candidate who was already holding a superintendent position, an assistant superintendent position, or the high school principalship (Tallerico, 2000b). That career path automatically identifies more white males in it than any other subgroup, as has been expressed by other researchers in this literature review when discussing the most common paths to the superintendency. Most researchers have found that women come from more of the elementary principalships or the staffing roles that are not considered as "tough" as the path above.

Polka et al. (2008) conducted a quantitative study of Georgia superintendent's perceptions of barriers and found that the top barriers as reported by women in this study were:

Conflicting demands of career and family, existence of the "buddy system" in which men prefer men for jobs, lack of political "know-how," lack of acceptance by male administrators and staff, and gender bias in screening and selection processes. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the top five most effective strategies for females attaining the superintendency were: developing political know-how, developing a strong sense of self concept, learning the characteristics of the school district in which applying for, obtaining the support of family, and attending workshops to improve professional skills.

(pp. 303-304)

In VanTuyle's and Watkins's study (2009), family responsibility was also listed as a personal barrier to the superintendency. These responsibilities were expressed in a variety of ways: residency issues when the female spouse wanted her husband to move, moving children, and time and attention diverted from families to accomplish work-related responsibilities. Derrington and Sharrat (2009) reported that women with children in grades K-8 are rarely superintendents. Derrington and Sharrat explained that women in the superintendency who try to balance family life with professional expectations face tough choices at great emotional cost. Furthermore, they state that women have not been successful in offsetting their increased workplace responsibilities with decreased obligations at home. This was certainly evidenced in Comeaux's work (2010) in that each of the small, rural superintendents talked quite a bit about lack of balance in work/home relationships. Because of the excessive demands at work and the need to be in "job mode" all the time, they were not able to spend much time at home helping with domestic chores, taking care of children, or participating in a spousal relationship.

One barrier to women in superintendent positions is a lack of mentoring relationships with other women. Wallin and Crippen (2007) noted in their study that although they supposed women would naturally connect with each other for support and mentorship when knowing that other women superintendents were available, that was not the case. The women seemed to accept the fact that some women don't like other powerful women and prefer to work in isolation. Underlying these assumptions may be an individualistic determination to succeed and not to acknowledge a gender tie with others because of the perception that it might weaken their position within this already very limited group. Females in Wallin and Crippen's study (2007) discussed not always knowing

how to work with males, fear of asking for support due to worries that they would be laughed at, pressure to take on masculine characteristics to be perceived as being effective, a lack of networking from other female superintendents, and feeling like they had to be experts in their positions to prove worth. (p. 33)

Comeaux's research (2009) about four superintendents from rural, small towns also revealed a sense of isolation that each felt. Comeaux reported geographic isolation, which limited the quantity of people available, but also the lack of other females. These women even reported feeling that men colleagues were more helpful when they asked questions than women.

The barrier chart in Table 1 depicts the barriers that were reported by both men and women in the last ten years (Brunner & Kim, 2010). This chart is a summary but also highlights how each gender self-reported his/her own barriers.

Table 1

*Barriers limiting administrative opportunities for women*

Barriers	Men Superintendents (2000)				Women Superintendents (2007)			
	Important	Somewhat Important	Not a Factor	Don't Know	Important	Somewhat Important	Not a Factor	Don't Know
Schools boards don't actively recruit women	153(7.9)	566(29.3)	1000(51.8)	211(10.9)	196(27.5)	335(46.9)	144(20.2)	39(5.5)
Lack of mobility of family members	408(21.1)	978(50.6)	258(13.4)	287(14.9)	321(44.9)	311(43.5)	58(8.10)	25(3.5)
Mid-management career "glass ceiling"	53(2.8)	527(27.5)	927(48.4)	407(21.3)	159(22.6)	322(45.8)	157 (22.3)	65(9.2)
Lack of opportunities to gain key experiences prior to seeking the superintendency	142(7.4)	582(30.2)	1059(55.0)	144(7.5)	168(23.5)	281(39.3)	255(35.7)	11(1.5)
Lack of professional networks	74(3.9)	611(31.8)	1008(52.5)	226(11.8)	158(22.2)	337(47.4)	196(27.6)	20(28)
Perception of school board members that women are not strong managers	129(6.7)	693(35.9)	834(43.3)	272(14.1)	287(39.9)	280(38.9)	114(15.9)	38(5.3)
Perception of school board members that women are unqualified to handle budgeting and finances	70(3.6)	435(22.5)	1168(60.5)	257(13.3)	272(38.0)	281(39.2)	125(17.5)	38(5.3)
Perception that women will allow their emotions to influence administrative decisions	99(5.1)	553(28.7)	979(50.7)	299(15.5)	218(30.4)	295(41.1)	164(22.9)	40(5.6)
The nature of superintendents' work makes it an unattractive career choice	252(13.1)	693(36.0)	749(38.9)	233(12.1)	165(23.1)	335(46.9)	198(27.7)	17(2.4)
Lack of Mentors/mentoring in school districts	116(6.0)	670(34.8)	884(45.9)	255(13.2)	151(21.1)	364(50.8)	185(25.8)	16(2.2)
Perception that women are not politically astute	•	•	•	•	148(20.7)	275(38.5)	250(35.0)	42(5.9)
Perception that instructional and curricular orientations or emphases limit administrative and managerial interests and skills	•	•	•	•	104(14.5)	305(42.7)	244(34.1)	62(8.7)

Note. Values in the parentheses are percentage

Source:

This table was reproduced from Brunner and Kim, 2010 (p. 309).



## Conceptual Frameworks

Much public and scientific discussion has centered on the idea of a “glass ceiling” – a barrier of prejudice and discrimination that excludes women from higher-level leadership positions. In general, prejudice toward female leaders follows from the incongruity that many people perceive between the characteristics of women, which are perceived as predominantly communal qualities, to the requirements of leader roles, which are perceived as predominantly agentic qualities (Eagly & Karau, 2002). People tend to define female leaders with certain traits and male leaders with different traits and give credence to some skills over others. In aspiring to leadership positions, women often face two problems – conforming to their gender role may produce a failure to meet the requirements of their leader role, and conforming to their leader role may produce a failure to meet the requirements of their gender role (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Some of the challenges that women face as they gain access to the superintendency have to do with the power and political structures that exist in educational institutions. Blount (1998) explains that women have over-occupied the role as teacher, and men have held an abundance of the administrative positions throughout history, and such a system explicitly provides men with power over women. As Blount (1998) stated, the solution is not simply to get more women into superintendencies, but rather there must be a larger re-conceptualization of how power is structured in public schooling (p. 165). To further his stance, Blount (1998) asserts that what happens in schools influences what happens in society, and vice versa. Therefore, he explains that students are aware of the power relationship between teachers and administrators, so if students are accustomed to women as teachers and men as administrators, they form a schema in their mind about gender and power. This schema then translates back into society at large and

shows how gender and power are related. There needs to then be a paradigm shift in education but also in society (Blount, 1998).

Gender is an important aspect of social stratification in society as it relates to access, participation, influence, and positive evaluation (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003). Status characteristics, such as gender, are attributes for which there are widely held beliefs in the culture associating greater social worthiness and competence with some tasks than others. Status beliefs embedded in gender stereotypes seem to hold women back from positions of high authority and leadership by creating barriers (Ridgeway, 2001).

Expectation states theory is a “macro-micro-macro” explanation about one way that inequality is present in society (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003).

Cultural beliefs about social categories at the macro level impact behavior and evaluation at the individual level, which acts to reproduce status structures that are consistent with pre-existing macro-level beliefs. Status structures in groups can be thought of as the building blocks of more macro-level structural inequalities in society. For example, to the extent that status processes make it less likely for women in work groups to emerge or be accepted as leaders, in the aggregate we will observe that more men than women hold leadership positions in organizations, a stratification pattern that is reproduced at least partially by the way macro-level beliefs impact individual behaviors and evaluations. (p. 48)

Status beliefs are shared cultural schemas about the status positions in society of groups such as those based on gender, race, ethnicity, education, or occupation (Ridgeway, 2001). Status characteristics theory is a formal sub-theory of expectation states theory that seeks to explain how beliefs about status characteristics get translated into performance expectations, which, in

turn, shape the behaviors of individuals in a group (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977). At the heart of the theory is a set of assumptions that link beliefs about status to behavior and determines that most processes occur outside the realm of conscious thought (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003).

Status construction theory argues that interaction among individuals, where shared status beliefs are at play, is a potent forum for the creation, spread, maintenance, or change of status beliefs (Ridgeway & Erickson, 2000). People carry these status beliefs to future encounters and induce some of those others to take on the status beliefs as well. These beliefs can then become powerful local realities for people, which then have the capacity to spread to bystanders as well as direct actors (Ridgeway & Erickson, 2000).

Feminist poststructuralist theory seeks to disrupt the social structures and patterns that have reproduced dominance and subordination in the everyday lives of women (Grogan, 1999b). Poststructuralism reveals that women are positioned in discourses that are determined by our race, class, gender, sexuality, abilities, or disabilities (Grogan, 1999b). According to Grogan (1999a),

It is imperative that we scrutinize the social, economic, and political structures that influence educational administration. We need to question the approved administrative practices to discover who they benefit and who they limit. At the same time, we need to assess critically the knowledge base to discover what has been problematized and what has not. (p. 525)

With feminist poststructural theory, there is conflict between men and women administrators in discourse, where women sometimes experience a clash of values between their discourse as administrators and their discourse as mothers or partners (Grogan, 1999b). Feminist

poststructuralism helps us to examine the various positions within which we are positioned and make this discourse visible by giving voice to women superintendents.

Feminist poststructuralist theory also suggests the notion of a need for reconceived leadership, which can ultimately help shape the superintendency into a more equitable profession. The theory points to the need for all leaders, women and men, white and of color, to come together as critical informants working collectively to resist past and existing structures of leadership and to address and transform new macro level systems of gender, race, and class that will better serve everyone (Grogan, 1999b). As Grogan states, “Feminist poststructuralism can be used to both explain and to change current practices (p. 202).

### **Summary**

This literature review has examined the historical perspective of women in the superintendency, the role and influence of gatekeepers, barriers experienced by women in the superintendency, and an overview of the conceptual theories of expectation states theory and feminist poststructuralist theory. Women seeking the superintendency confront barriers and challenges that men do not realize exist or acknowledge. The advanced male network, lack of mobility, school board members’ perceptions, conflicting demands of career and family, and limited administrative experience are repeatedly identified as barriers and challenges that women superintendents and women aspiring to the superintendency encounter (Glass et. al, 2007). Few studies specifically address how women superintendents who come from the elementary principalship are able to acquire the position of superintendent and describe the experiences they went through to earn those positions. Given this gap in the literature, this researcher seeks to understand the path(s) of these particular women and how they navigated this journey.

## CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

This study was intended to add to the knowledge that exists about how public school educators ascend to the superintendent position, particularly women who came to the position through the elementary ranks. An understanding of the lived experiences of women superintendents may serve as useful information to other female elementary teachers or principals aspiring to the superintendent role. An interpretive, multiple case study approach was selected for this study to describe the lived experiences of six women who had been elementary educators and what each of them experienced, remembered, and interpreted about their personal pathway to the superintendency. Two conceptual frameworks—expectation states theory and feminist poststructuralism—provided the context for this research. Using Merriam’s interpretive case study framework (1998), the purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the process of women’s access to the superintendency for a selected group of women who all came from an elementary career path in the state of Michigan.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the study and were designed to elicit the stories experienced by these six women superintendents. My central research question was: What can we learn from the lived experience of women who came from a background as elementary educators and advanced to the superintendency in a variety of district contexts within Michigan’s traditional public school system?

My interview questions included:

I am really interested in hearing about your journey to the superintendency. Can you share with me how your career as an educator began?

- 1) Will you tell me about your decision to become a superintendent, and the process you experienced getting there? Especially, what have been your experiences with the search and selection process for superintendent positions?
- 2) What, if anything, did you find most challenging about the process of securing a superintendent position?
- 3) How might your experience coming from an elementary background have helped or hurt your journey to the superintendency?
- 4) What advice would you offer to other women from the elementary principalship who aspire to the superintendency?

### **Research Design**

I selected a qualitative design for this study because I wanted to gain deeper understanding about phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to those circumstances.

Creswell (2009) identifies the following characteristics of qualitative research:

1. The source of the data is the natural setting of the participant.
2. The key instrument of data collection is the researcher.
3. The data are transmitted through transmission of language.
4. The outcomes or findings of the study are a result of an inductive process.
5. The meaning of a participant's experience is a primary focus.

When researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities. According to Merriam (1998), "Research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspective of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education" (p. 3).

The orientation this researcher used was the constructivist or interpretive worldview as a base. Creswell (2009) writes that the interpretive approach is core to the characteristics of qualitative research where self-reflective stories are the primary data source. In this worldview, individuals seek understanding of their world and develop subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2009). With this interpretive orientation, researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation when interacting with others (Creswell, 2009). A multiple case study method was used to conduct this research as it is an appropriate method consistent with the purpose of this study and the specific research questions being studied (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998). Five types of qualitative research methods that are commonly used in educational research are narratives, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Case studies of individuals often involve in-depth interviews where participants share their experiences.

Merriam (1998) states that the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study. She defines a case study as an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit” (p. 12). According to Merriam (1998), case studies are characterized as particularistic (focusing on a particular situation, event or phenomenon), descriptive (rich, thick description using as many variables as possible), and heuristic (illuminating the understanding of the subject being studied by the reader, with previously unknown relationships and variables emerging that that can lead to new insights). She further suggests that the model of analysis is inductive and that the level of interpretation ranges from suggesting relationships to constructing theory. For my particular research, I looked to interpretive case studies as an appropriate orientation to help particular women navigate the waters of the superintendency. There was a good match between interpretive case study and

expectation states theory, along with feminist post-structuralism theory in helping women activate their own knowledge. Therefore, an interpretive, multiple case study approach, in which reflective stories are the primary data, was appropriate for the purpose of this research, which was to study six women superintendents who rose to their positions through the elementary ranks.

Feminist research approaches focus on and make prevalent women's diverse situations and the institutions or political or social structures that frame those situations (Creswell, 2009). According to Neuman (2000), gender shapes our beliefs and values, which cannot be isolated from scientific inquiry. There are several characteristics of feminist social research, including:

- Advocacy of a feminist value position and perspective
- Rejection of sexism in assumptions, concepts, and research questions
- Creation of empathic connections between the researcher and those studied
- Sensitivity to how relations of gender and power permeate all spheres of life
- Incorporation of the researcher's personal feelings and experiences into the research process
- Action-oriented research that seeks to facilitate personal and societal change. (Neuman, p. 83)

Two different but compatible conceptual frameworks provided the lens that influenced this study. Expectation states theory is the first, and it provides a "macro-micro-macro" explanation about one way that inequality is present in society (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003). Feminist poststructuralist theory is the other, and it is based on the view that women have not been served as well or had the same power structure as males in higher authority positions. Both frameworks are legitimate in that both address social inequity from a historical and systems



standpoint and both deal with the distribution of power in a group theory. Expectation states theory is based on the belief that expectations and assumptions about people are formed early, are based upon cultural consensus, and are not easy to change (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003). Feminist poststructuralism proposes that we grow up with a discourse handed to us from a society that has the power to shape our practices and beliefs, especially about women's place in society and within social systems (Grogan, 1999b). Both frameworks are concerned with how our beliefs and values shape our expectations, the social institutions we encounter, and how these impact society as a whole in terms of being inequitable with gender and power. Both also see the need for a shift in new leadership perspectives as a result of being critically reflective. A description of each theory separately is explained below.

Expectation states theory is a conceptual framework that suggests that gender is deeply entwined with social hierarchy and leadership (Ridgeway, 2001). According to the framework, hierarchies are formed by beliefs, and the development of those hierarchies is central to how people gain access to positions of leadership. Correll and Ridgeway (2003) describe expectation states theory as:

A 'macro-micro-macro' explanation about one way that categorical inequality is reproduced in society. Cultural beliefs about social categories at the macro level impact behavior and evaluation at the individual level, which acts to reproduce status structures that are consistent with pre-existing macro-level beliefs. Status structures in groups can be thought of as the building blocks of more macro-level structural inequalities in society. (p. 48)

Ridgeway (2001) explains that expectation states theory encompasses status beliefs at their core, which are shared cultural schemas or stereotypes about status positions. These status beliefs are

based on gender, race, ethnicity, education, or occupation, where people attach certain social practices to groups based on these beliefs. As status beliefs develop, they form an element in the stereotypes of the groups involved and can attach greater competence and social significance to the advantaged group (men, whites, professionals) than to the disadvantaged group (women, African Americans, laborers) and associate the advantaged group with more valued skills (Ridgeway, 2001).

Status beliefs imply both difference and inequality at their core. Although any distinction between people can create in-group favoritism, in status belief formation, both groups come to agree, as a matter of social reality, that one group is socially evaluated as better than the other (Ridgeway & Erickson, 2000). Therefore, a degree of consensuality, or the appearance of it, is essential for status beliefs to form and carry force in social relations. Expectation states theory demonstrates that status beliefs account for the obstacles faced by women who aspire to the same leadership roles as men by affecting the processes by which individuals are given access to positions of power, wealth, and authority (Ridgeway, 2001).

The feminist poststructuralist framework is based on the feminist view that women have not been served as well as middle and upperclass white males, who have traditionally held the most power (Grogan, 1999b). Poststructuralism seeks ways to disrupt the social structures that have produced patterns of domination and subordination in our everyday lives. Feminist poststructuralism offers a means by which we can clearly see the positions we are in based on our gender and then question these positions. Grogan (1999b) states:

Positions are dominant or subordinate. The understanding that we are not all equally well positioned in a discourse is important for us to make sense of what otherwise seems to be simply personal failure. If women still make up the majority of the teaching force from which administrators are drawn, and if women are becoming the majority in

university preparation programs (Shakeshaft, 1989), why else are administrative positions not equitably distributed among men and women? For various reasons, the discourse has served men better than women up until now. (p. 201)

Feminist poststructuralism was helpful both in explaining current practices and also offering ways to change those practices (Grogan, 1999b). For this particular study, the connection between feminist poststructuralism and female superintendent aspirations was strong. As women have been well represented in the teaching ranks over the course of time, the same equality of representation had not been apparent at the superintendent level.

### **Delimitations**

Six subjects, all women superintendents in Michigan who specifically came from the background of the elementary principalship, were identified for participation in this study. I chose two women from rural districts, two from urban districts, and two from suburban districts to honor different geographical contexts and considerations. These superintendents were all hired within the past five years. I used only districts where the superintendent serves K-12 students from traditional public schools. Women superintendents whose experience included a secondary background, even though they may have served as elementary principals, were excluded as subjects for this study. Also, women who served in dual roles, such as being the superintendent and the principal, were also excluded.

### **Limitations**

Because the pool of female superintendents with elementary backgrounds was small, I identified six women superintendents from Michigan who fit my criteria. A second limitation of this study came from the women I interviewed and the stories they told. Were they able to remember the details of how they received their position? Were they able to identify any barriers

experienced? Were they comfortable with me to tell me everything or did they leave things out? Did any of these women fear exposure or lack of confidentiality whereas they were then reluctant as participants to be fully forthcoming? I used my own experiences as an educator and an applicant for superintendent positions as a way to build trust and rapport. Third, because of sample size, results of this study cannot be generalized to the overall population.

Another limitation was the potential of my own bias as someone who comes from the elementary background and aspired to be a superintendent. I was aware that my own experiences in this pursuit as a candidate for a few superintendent positions myself could bias this study. I needed to be aware of this potential throughout the study and to report and record the truth of these women and not interface their experiences with any of my own. As Creswell (2009) denotes, it was my responsibility as a researcher to set aside (bracket) any personal biases, values, or feelings about this topic when interviewing so I could be fully open to each of my participants' unique and personal experiences. I acknowledged this bias and was able to put it aside in each interview as I sought to hear each person's story as it truly was represented for them.

### **Research Method**

A multiple case study was used as a method for this study because I sought to understand the personal perspective, values, experiences, and beliefs of six women who began their careers in elementary settings and were able to obtain superintendent positions. I selected an interpretive, multiple case study methodology and used a semi-structured, open-ended interview approach that would result in a "portrait" of each participant. As Merriam (1998) describes, less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways. Although the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, neither exact

wording nor the order of questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic (Merriam, 1998). My interviews consisted of asking all participants the same standardized information, some of the same open-ended questions, and some time in an unstructured mode so that individual insights or new information could emerge.

### **Participant Selection**

Within the different types of purposeful sampling procedures, I used criterion sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I sought six women who were currently serving as superintendents in various sized districts in Michigan—two rural districts, two suburban districts, and two urban districts. My sampling strategies were purposive criterion sampling, and I chose six superintendents who agreed to participate in the study and who fit the criteria of having been hired within the last five years and who began their administrative careers through the elementary ranks. These women were identified first by looking through the most recent copy of the *Michigan Education Directory*, which lists all school superintendents in the state of Michigan and making a data chart of name and contact information for each potential respondent.

I first emailed directly each female superintendent (92 total), explaining the goals of my study and my interest and criteria in selecting six women as participants, and I asked for a response within one week if interested. Within 48 hours, I had 10 responses, including a couple of superintendents who fit my criteria. After two weeks, I had received 26 total email responses out of the 100 emails sent from different women who fit my criteria and those who did not. The ones who did not fit usually responded that while they did not fit the criteria, they wished me luck with the study. In a couple of cases, a secretary wrote me back on behalf of a superintendent to inform me that the superintendent did not fit my criteria. One superintendent told me she fit

my criteria but had taught some secondary in her special education teaching role and wondered if I would determine that was acceptable for this study.

When I gathered enough candidates to insure I had at least six total participants fitting my criteria and representing the three geographic areas, I corresponded with each individually to set up an interview schedule. I shared a couple of emails back and forth with each, confirming their career pathways to date, confirming what type of district they considered themselves to be serving in (rural, urban, or superintendent), and setting up days and times that worked for them to meet. It usually took three to five emails to get everything set up with date, time, and location to meet. In two cases, the superintendents called me by phone to arrange a time to meet, as one was having email problems and the other just wanted to make sure we connected in person.

The six candidates selected represent six geographic areas in the lower peninsula of Michigan. All have served in an elementary principalship. One is currently serving as superintendent in southwest Michigan, two are in one county in the greater Detroit area, two are working in the suburban eastern Michigan area, and one is located in mid-Michigan. Four of these participants are the first female superintendents ever in their districts. Two have doctoral degrees in educational administration. Four are working in their first superintendent position, while two of them are in their second superintendent position.

### **Data Collection**

In qualitative studies, the primary instrument of data collection and analysis is the researcher, particularly when using interviews and reporting those experiences (Creswell, 2009). Merriam (1998) writes, "Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them...or when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate" (p. 72).

To help develop trust and rapport among the participants and myself, open-ended, face-to-face, in-person interviews were conducted for this study because they allowed participants the freedom to narrate their own experiences without being tied down to specific answers. Each interview was audiotaped at a time and place designated by the participant, and notes were also taken. An interview protocol was used including the following components from Creswell's framework:

- A heading (date, time, interviewer, interviewee)
- Instructions for the interviewer to follow so that standard procedures are used from one interview to another
- Probes for the questions to follow up and ask participants to elaborate on what they have said
- Space between the questions to record responses
- A final thank-you statement to acknowledge the time the interviewee spent during the interview. (Creswell, 2009, p. 183)

### **Data Analysis Process**

In qualitative research, data collection and analysis are simultaneous activities (Merriam, 1998). They are also a process of making sense out of data. In a multiple case study, there are two stages of analysis: the within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998). First, each case was treated as a comprehensive case, a "portrait," in and of itself. Once each individual case was completed, cross-case analysis was conducted to look at whether there were themes or categories to build across multiple cases. "Devising cases is largely an intuitive process, but it is also systematic and informed by the study's purpose, the investigator's orientation and knowledge, and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves"

(Merriam, 1998, p. 179). The categories this researcher used became the findings of the study and were linked together to help explain the meaning of the data collected.

### **Validity**

Use of the multiple case study approach is “a common strategy for enhancing external validity and generalizability” (Merriam, 1998, p. 40). Internal validity deals with the question of truthfulness and how one’s findings match the experiences of the people being studied. In case study research, there is usually high internal validity. One of the assumptions underlying qualitative research is that reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured (Merriam, 1988). According to research experience, there are six basic strategies a researcher can use to ensure internal validity:

- Triangulation – using multiple sources, multiple investigators, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings
- Member checks – taking data back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible
- Long term or repeated observations of the same phenomenon
- Peer examination – asking colleagues to comment on emerging findings
- Participatory modes of research – involving participants in all phases of the research, including writing up the findings.
- Researcher’s biases – clarifying the researcher’s assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation at the start of the study (pp. 169-170).

To ensure internal validity, I clarified with participants after each interview my own experiences and biases that have likely shaped my approach and interpretation of the study



(Creswell, 2009). I used member checking as a strategy, not of interview transcripts, but of individual “portraits” to reflect on the accuracy of what was recorded and analyzed. I did this by emailing the “portrait” I had written for each participant to her directly. When asked for verification of what I had written by emailing back any corrections, participants were also asked to share any final thoughts or reflections to be included in their representations. Five of the six participants emailed back within a week and one never did. One participant did add a few remarks, and the others replied that their “portraits” were accurate. With both of these validity checks in place—clarifying my own personal experiences and member checking—the validity of the study should be assured.

### **Reliability**

Reliability refers to the extent to which findings can be replicated. Qualitative research seeks to describe and explain the world from the perspective of those who interpret it, so there is not a scientific base for reliable replication with this type of research. However, since I am researching six case studies to study the same phenomenon, I used sampling, predetermined questions, and specific procedures for coding and analysis to enhance generalizability (Merriam, 1988).

### **Legal, Ethical, and Moral Issues**

Researchers have moral, ethical, and legal obligations that guide their work. An informed consent proposal, approved by Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee, was distributed and signed by all participants. All participants were informed that their participation in this study was voluntary and their responses would remain anonymous when reported in the final research results. Participants were notified they could withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without penalty. No parts of this research were in violation

of anything legal or ethical anyway, and participants were assured their contributions were safe, secure, and confidential. Each participant was assigned a random pseudonym to further insure anonymity.

### **Summary**

Chapter Three addresses the research design methodology, data collection, and analysis followed in completing this interpretive case study approach using multiple case studies. I interviewed six female superintendents who were able to obtain that position after beginning their careers in the ranks of elementary teaching or principalships and presented them as six portraits individually and then together in a cross-case analysis. These case studies were interpreted using expectation states theory coupled with a feminist poststructural lens. This researcher identified patterns and analyzed themes to provide rich descriptions of the lived experiences of these specific women to help examine the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency as it relates to structural inequities in education and gender-related barriers.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PORTRAITS

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this interpretive, multiple case study was to understand the lived experiences of six female superintendents who came from the elementary ranks and their personal journey to the superintendency. The stories derived from the six participants in this study prompted me to organize my findings into two distinct sections. The first section is a detailed, descriptive “portrait” of each female participant as an individual case. After each individual is portrayed, the second section is dedicated to a composite cross-analysis organized around four themes derived from the data as well as a section on other findings.

The following questions were asked of each participant:

- 1) I am really interested in hearing about your journey to the superintendency. Can you share with me how your career as an educator began?
- 2) Will you tell me about your decision to become a superintendent, and the process you experienced getting there? Especially, what have been your experiences with the search and selection process for superintendent positions?
- 3) What, if anything, did you find most challenging about the process of securing a superintendent position?
- 4) How might your experience coming from an elementary background have helped or hurt your journey to the superintendency?
- 5) What advice would you offer to other women from the elementary principalship who aspire to the superintendency?

The essence of those conversations and responses are what composes the following descriptions of each woman’s personal journey.

### Cindy's Story

*When I decided to become a superintendent – it actually kind of snuck up on me. I had started college, quit, had children, and it was like going to college was a struggle financially. So I went, quit for a semester, for a year, until I had enough money to go back. So it took me a long time to actually finish my bachelor's degree. And I wanted to be a teacher very badly. It was what I always wanted to do. I graduated in a time that was economically very much like this. There weren't a lot of jobs so I substitute taught for about three years, and then was hired as a teacher. About the time I got hired, there were things that happened, decisions that were made, that I didn't understand so I went back to get my master's degree in administration.*

Cindy is a Caucasian superintendent in a rural, consolidated school district that has felt the ripple effect of an economy dependent on General Motors. A very large geographic area covers this school district in which Cindy was born and raised and has been a life-long resident. Her own children also attended here. Cindy and I met in her office, which was a small building located on the same property as the middle school building and high school building. The administration building was actually a house gutted at one time to become an administration building. The bathroom was cozy, like a bathroom in one's own house. Cindy's office was small but seemed adequate. It was neat, tidy, and comfortable. Cindy was composed and professional and didn't exude a lot of emotion when we spoke, but she seemed genuinely at home in her office.

After teaching for twelve years and taking seven of those years to finish her master's degree, Cindy decided to apply for an administrative position. It was a former superintendent and personal friend who convinced her it was time to try out becoming a school administrator. She spoke of this man with true admiration because he had always encouraged her.

There was a man who had retired as the superintendent of an ISD who we were lifelong friends with, who convinced me it was time to at least try it out and see if I would like to

be a superintendent, or a school administrator at least, and this is a person who had always encouraged me to do more, to become something he thought I should pursue. Cindy applied for a principal position in her home district but didn't get it, and when offered a position as an elementary principal in another school district, she took it only with the security of negotiating with her home district that she could return to her teaching position the following year if she didn't like the principalship.

During this two-and-a-half-year period of really liking her job as elementary principal, Cindy worked with a very strong superintendent she describes as "gruff, with a sarcastic sense of humor, but he would tackle hard decisions and do things he believed were good for kids." When the assistant superintendent left, this superintendent came to her asking her to step in as the new assistant superintendent. He did not approach others, only her. Cindy thought about it and decided, "I liked what I was doing as a principal so much I began to broker a deal with him that I got to go back to my principal position if I didn't like being an assistant superintendent." The superintendent did tell her that he purposefully wanted an elementary person because he felt secondary people were knowledge specialists and elementary people were much better at looking at how kids learn.

Because Cindy was interested in a new challenge, she accepted the position as an assistant superintendent and remained in that position for seven years. During that time, Cindy worked for a second superintendent, a woman from a very large school district in another country. She felt that this woman had a very different style than what she was used to, but she also believed she learned a lot from this superintendent. During this time, the superintendent position became open in her hometown, so she applied. Cindy became a finalist against a person who was external to the area. When the other candidate got the position, her feelings were very

hurt as she had lived there, taught there, and had community connections. The search firm consultant relayed to her after her failed first try for a superintendency that the board wanted someone different from what they were used to. Cindy felt unsure if she would ever want to interview again for a superintendent position. She summed it up as, “Sometimes I think schools look for a silver bullet. I am not one of those people. I am never going to be the flash. I am a hard worker and a steady as a course kind of person.”

Cindy’s next step was another assistant superintendent position, still within the county but at a different district. Here she worked for a female superintendent she described as having great strength in her convictions, even though those convictions did not suit her well on a personal level. After less than two years, the superintendent position in her hometown became available again mid-year when the superintendent left and an interim superintendent she had known and worked with before was brought in for a few months. Cindy was then contacted by the search firm to apply again and explained that a modified (local) search was conducted rather than a national search as most others had been. This time, Cindy was awarded the superintendent position.

In looking back, Cindy felt as though she has always had several cheerleaders and supporters along the way. Women superintendents were plentiful in her county—at one time she recalled having seven or eight women superintendents out of 21 total districts—although there were fewer now. She never felt that being a woman stood in her way. She remarked, “I have heard on occasion things like, you know, you can’t go there (a superintendency) without a high school background, those kind of things, but that was never a barrier for me.”

Cindy found the interview and preparation process as the most challenging part about securing her superintendent position. She said:

Until you've at least gone through it once, gone through that whole set of questions and those kinds of things that you would have to answer and the essays that you are writing and all of those things, that's a little daunting. Just knowing what to expect out of those kinds of things. Public interviews. It's a little, depending on how it goes, it's a little unnerving.

Having an elementary background was somewhat helpful for Cindy. She believes having been a teacher and "being bounced around in assignments year after year as well as teaching adult education gave me lots of unique perspectives on kids." She did feel that going from elementary principal to central office was a struggle for her in gaining credibility with high school teachers who knew she didn't know anything about secondary teaching. She felt it was a "real teacher issue for a while until I was able to work with those high school people over time in a way that was helpful. It helped that I didn't claim to be an expert in their subject matter either."

Cindy believes that being a good superintendent is about being able to make the decisions that matter. Her advice to other women aspiring to the superintendency from the elementary principalship is to not listen to anyone who tells you you can't do it from an elementary background. She encourages others aspiring to the superintendency to "get as much exposure and experience as you can all over the district you are in or even another one." She encourages women to be big-picture thinkers and to ask lots of questions so they can think carefully and then make a decision. She also recommends building a strong network of people that they can go to for advice and who are willing to mentor them. Cindy feels very fortunate to have worked for three very different superintendents, two females and a male. Sitting back and watching them do things was a lot of unexpected learning for which she is very grateful.

### Debbie's Story

*No matter where you walk in town, I've only been here a year, but I can walk through town now and people already know who I am. They like the fact that I can walk downtown in my sweats and my baseball cap or if I'm painting I'll go into the local hardware store in my paint clothes and it's no big deal.*

Meet Debbie, a Caucasian superintendent of a small, rural, and historic district town of about 5,000 residents and 1,600 students. The community as a whole is made up of people who have lived in this town their whole lives. The goal within the community is to “bring back the small town atmosphere.” As Debbie describes, “Everyone is related,” and “there's lots of community involvement and a lot of volunteerism.” She further adds, “Everybody looks out for everybody.”

Debbie is an average-sized woman in her mid-50s whose office is located on the first floor of the high school building, which is an old-looking building. She commented that being located in the high school is fun because she can hear students walking and talking in the halls during the school day or when they come to her office just to stop in or ask a question. Debbie's actual office is fairly large, and there were lots of files and binders all over in different spots. I sat right in front of her desk, which was a big, old desk that had a stately feel to it. Debbie was animated during the interview, talking with passion and using her hands when she talked. There is spunk about her and she mentioned a couple of times the importance of her living right in the town, walking the streets, being recognized. She made it a point to tell me that when she was looking for a superintendent position, the town itself and her being able to live there, as well as her husband's feeling about it, was very important in her decision-making.

Debbie's career journey involved more than 20 years as an elementary teacher and principal, mostly working in a school of choice within the same public school district. Moving



from teacher to elementary principal was not something Debbie initially planned for, but worry over her principal retiring soon and panic about what type of “traditional replacement principal” might be in store was something of great enough concern to Debbie that she decided to take her then-principal to dinner to pose the idea of her potential candidacy once she left. As circumstances would have it, she was able to become co-principal with this woman with the belief that she would have a year to work alongside her the following school year. However, by Halloween of that year as co-principals, the other woman was moved to central office and she was on her own as sole principal. Although feeling thrown into the principalship at that point, Debbie did receive some very valuable training and leadership development from an outside consultant for a couple of years who invited her to attend his workshops and learn from him. That led to assisting him with his workshops, and she later even took over some of his trainings. Debbie made several mentions of his importance to her leadership growth.

During her principalship years, Debbie decided to pursue her doctorate to better learn how to use her elementary school test data in a meaningful way. She called it a “personal crossroads, a cosmic kind of a thing.” She was very direct in her purpose for that doctoral degree—to learn how to use data and read statistics and set up control groups for testing—so she could use those results in her elementary school to help with student instruction.

Despite academic success at the building level, Debbie realized she was ready to apply for a superintendency, a job she admits she was not even sure she wanted. In her words:

I never thought I wanted to be a superintendent, but there were a couple reasons I was doing that. First of all, there was no way I could get into central office in my district because budgets were starting to be cut and they were starting to take people out of there. So I thought, I am never going any further than a principal here.

She also noticed a changing dynamic within the superintendent position as her current superintendent had hired two new male elementary principals, and things were changing. Debbie felt when this same superintendent had first arrived a few years prior to this time period, he had cleaned house and “got[ten] rid of the good old boys network.” She noted being the only female administrator in the district for about eight years or so before this changing dynamic but admitted never feeling discriminated against as a woman until the last couple years.

As Debbie described:

We had some new male hires come in. All of a sudden they were all doing, like, Friday night card parties, and I’d come in on Monday and they’d say – oh, this weekend we discussed this, but we knew you were a team player and it’d be okay with you, and I’m like, no, that’s not okay with me.

Another story that led Debbie to feeling less appreciated as a competent female administrator was this:

I found out that two of the elementary principals that had been hired were getting stipends for doing additional jobs. And I went to the superintendent and I said, could you explain to me how come one principal, and I pointed out one, I said you know, he’s a great guy, very knowledgeable, he and I had great professional conversations. I’m sure he’s worth every penny, but you’re giving him a \$10,000 stipend for running secondary principal meetings and he’s doing it during the day. I’ve been running the elementary principal meetings for eight years, after school, and no one offered that to me.

The straw that really broke the camel’s back for Debbie around this time, though, was the closing of her high achieving elementary school despite having better state scores than any other building in the district. It was open on a Friday and closed the next Monday. She was very upset

and although assigned to another elementary the following year, she started thinking about applying for superintendent positions back in southwest Michigan where she was from. Debbie's elderly mother was down there, and a lot of her social and personal life had evolved in some of those southwest Michigan towns. She had conversations with her husband about having only a couple of years left before retirement, so she contemplated staying where she was and sticking it out for two more years as a principal, knowing she could not get to central office because of the dynamics she felt there, or apply elsewhere. Debbie asked herself, "Do I keep my mouth shut and stay in my own little corner the next two years or do I look for somewhere else where I might make a difference?" She decided to look elsewhere for central office but the issue that worried her was "the high school piece."

As Debbie applied for superintendent positions, she tried to find communities where she felt a good match. She interviewed in one place where she felt she was a good match and although she did not get that job, the gentleman who was hired was an elementary principal within that district. She said, "I felt good about that because he was up against the high school principal. So I thought, okay, people really do look at elementary." When Debbie interviewed in the district she is currently in, she felt a good connection to the people in the interviews right away. She also felt the search consultant was very helpful about discussing district fit and sharing his ideas about that with her. Another superintendent interview that did not work out before that was in a district she described as "bigger, more formal in their questions." She sensed "a difference in comfort level" and "didn't feel like we connected. It's interesting, though, that that board was all men, I believe. The one I am at currently now is about half [men] and half [women]."

Debbie found the most challenging part of securing her superintendent position was negotiating her contract because she had never done that before. She also found lack of high school experience a downfall because of not understanding the high school schedule and knowing how many teachers are needed in each subject area and how that translates to budget. She used her high school principal, as well as colleagues from other places, as trainers to make sure she was asking the right questions and seeing the whole picture.

As for having an elementary background, Debbie shared these specific elementary-based experiences as helpful on her pathway to the superintendency:

I think I had a totally unique elementary school experience that gave me different types of leadership skills. Keeping track of my own budget at the elementary was helpful.

Writing school improvement grants was helpful. Curriculum-wise, I don't think I could have gotten a better experience than being a teacher working on school improvement stuff and sitting in on all the professional development that the teachers did. I mean, the process is the process no matter if it is high school, middle school, or elementary. Those curriculum pieces in a smaller district are extremely important, so I think from the elementary standpoint that really helped.

Debbie's advice to other women from the elementary principalship would be to go through financial classes and negotiation classes. The spreadsheets are different than what you are used to in elementary. She also advises learning about the high school system, particularly how classes are scheduled. With the search process, Debbie would encourage aspiring female superintendents to send out their resumes, connect with more than one search firm, and look for good matches. Debbie said, "I think the biggest eye-opener for me was when I actually drove through a community and asked myself, is this some place I can live?"

### Gladys's Story

*My dream started as a very young child of being a teacher, and my sister and I used to play being teacher and school bus driver all the time. I'm one of eight children so we are a first generation family in terms of going to college. I've got a brother older than I am and I remember the day we all loaded up in the car to take him to MSU and I knew the moment that I set foot on that campus, that that was where I wanted to go to school.*

Gladys is an African-American superintendent of a mid-sized urban district and is a very driven woman. She is a petite, athletic, middle-aged woman who, when I met her, was dressed in a sharp business suit. She exuded a relaxed but business-like style, a calm demeanor, and spoke in a soft tone. Gladys's office is unique because the administration offices where she resides are located on the second floor of the city's public library building, with the library on the first floor. A stairwell leads up to her office area, but the doors are unlocked only during regular business hours. We met at 5:00 p.m. and her secretary and another administrator were still there, but the rest of the floor was quiet and lights were off. Gladys's office felt very historic with dark furniture and lamp lighting. One small window was cracked to let in fresh air as it felt a little muggy. We could hear the sounds of cars outside as the building is located on a typical downtown street that is fairly busy but not overly loud. It was a big office with lots of space, but it also felt very comfortable and had personal touches of artwork and other significant artifacts or memorabilia all around.

Gladys told of an early memory of when she was in high school having the opportunity to work in an elementary library after school, which proved to be a big motivator. Being in that school setting helped confirm her desired path in life: to be a teacher. After graduating, Gladys went back to her hometown and loved being an elementary teacher, saying, "I didn't think there was anything greater." After 13 years of teaching, her principal called her down one day to talk and asked her if she had ever thought of becoming a principal. Gladys told him no, absolutely

not. She thought the idea was absurd because she was very passionate about being a teacher and didn't have any other path than that. As she reflected though, she said, "I think probably what other people saw in me, that I didn't see in myself at that time, was [that] I was truly one of those people [who] was trying to have a larger impact on the school." Shortly thereafter, Gladys was hired by her female superintendent to become an elementary principal in that same school district in which she had grown up.

Gladys felt as though her superintendent really encouraged and inspired her to become a principal, especially because she didn't have the administrative degree yet. Instead, she hired Gladys anyway and allowed her some time to complete the degree. Gladys also remembers this superintendent as a positive person, yet also as someone who could be really tough. She stated that she could "look you in the eye and have those tough conversations, but it was always about trying to help you be better at what you did. And that's what I've appreciated the most about my start as a principal: having a success model."

After three years as elementary principal, Gladys's superintendent resigned and moved across the state to be superintendent in a different district. After a few months, she called Gladys to see if she would relocate as well for an elementary principal position. Gladys accepted the new position, moved, and felt like she had moved to a completely different district than she had ever been exposed to in terms of challenges, diversity, and culture. Having said that, though, she stayed as an elementary principal for four years and said it was an "awesome" experience. From there, she moved to another school district where she was again an elementary principal for another 12 or 13 years. She described that district as being "very progressive, which allowed me to grow as a professional. It also had some superior leadership during that time, which allowed me great experiences."

Gladys was approached again by her then-superintendent who asked if she had ever thought about becoming a superintendent. She thought, “What? This is just like *deja vu*. No, I don’t want to be a superintendent. I’ve never thought of becoming a superintendent. I really honestly and truly believe that.” After talking with him more and him offering her the opportunity to go the Supes Academy (a professional development for aspiring superintendents put on by a search firm called Michigan Leadership Institute), she decided she was interested. Gladys immediately decided to begin pursuing her doctorate, feeling it would help her be more savvy and marketable. At this same time, the superintendent left and the assistant superintendent became the new superintendent, and Gladys felt he was a “great guy.” After a couple more years, this superintendent announced his retirement and moved her into central office in a human resources position for a few months where she remained until he left, which opened the superintendent position again. This time Gladys applied, and though there were four internal candidates, including her, the board denied all of them the opportunity to interview. Once public pressure mounted and there was public outcry, the board elected to interview three of the candidates, and Gladys received the position. However, within three years, board dynamics changed and things were difficult for Gladys, so she began looking for a new superintendent position back on the other side of the state where she was from.

As Gladys reflected on her journey to the superintendency, she talked about perseverance, and in her words that meant “to always know what I want to do and believe in who I am and know that I don’t do things that are unethical or anything. Never sell your soul. And that’s been something I’ll live by.” Furthermore, she recognizes that race has really played a part in her role as superintendent. In her first superintendency where the district was very political; she noted some incomprehensible things were said and done to her that she didn’t want to share.

She felt as though people were living in a different era. In her current district, which is more diverse, she believes people recognize there are challenges being a female in a predominantly male role. She elaborates, “I think that there are some people [who] still aren’t very accepting that women can be in charge...that women can accomplish the same things and more than men can do. I think it depends on what (political) climate you’re in as to whether or not that occurs.”

When asked about whether having an elementary background helped or hurt her journey to the superintendency, Gladys feels her elementary background was unique for a superintendent but that it also brought fresh perspective. She said, “I have a good, solid foundation and I really do have this belief that that solid foundation from the beginning is critical and essential to the future success for what you’re trying to get to with kids. I just think it brings more depth of understanding to the process.”

Gladys’s advice to other women aspiring to the superintendency is to “be as involved as you can in diverse experiences so you can understand district perspective.” She suggests administrators “do or lead something in an area that they never expected to before.” She also really believes in “finding that thing in life you really feel strongly about and going after it. You don’t have to be an expert at everything. Being a superintendent is about intentional focus.”

### **Helen’s Story**

*I had been an elementary principal for 14 years and started thinking, what more can I do? What do I want to do for the next several years of my career? I read an article in the newspaper about one of our local assistant superintendents becoming the superintendent. She was one of the first female sups in the county. And I thought, well, if she can do that, I could do that too.*

Helen, a Caucasian woman, has been the superintendent of a small, suburban/rural, bedroom community district for the last five years. We met in her office, which was medium-



sized and seemed very organized and inviting. There wasn't a lot of excess clutter but there were lots of bookshelves and items around made by or about students.

Helen's pathway to the superintendency was filled with different experiences, mostly focused on taking her own initiative in "things of interest." After teaching for five years, Helen needed to quickly find college credits to keep her teaching certification, so she chose an educational leadership class and liked it. However, she admitted she had no intention of ever being a principal. As she accumulated credits in administration, she decided to finish a master's degree, and her mom called to tell her there was an elementary principal opening nearby. Being only 30 years old then, Helen applied, got the job, and decided to "stay as long as it's fun." When the district built and opened a new elementary building six years later, she went to her superintendent and asked to be considered for that new principalship. She was given the position and was an integral part of the construction process and design and liked the organizational part of the job, so she stayed eight years in that position.

After this, Helen was definitely feeling an urge to do something more and different than being a principal, so she decided to pursue a superintendency. She read an article about a woman superintendent, showed it to her superintendent, and asked him to sponsor her in the Michigan Leadership Institute Supes Academy, which he agreed to do. Helen stated, "That was the best professional development program I've ever been through. Going into that you're not really sure you want to be a superintendent, but by the time you come out of it you have a really good idea of whether or not it's going to work for you."

She wrote an internship plan for herself that included shadowing certain people, a couple of them purposefully being the female superintendents in her county "just to get my feet wet, see

what I thought, meet people, and get my name known.” She also had finished her education specialist degree around this time and decided:

I’m going to go meet with headhunters. So I met with a headhunter for Michigan Association of School Boards and then I already knew the Michigan Leadership Institute headhunters from the Supes Academy. And at that time just reading between the lines and playing the game, you pretty much had to be connected to one of those people if you were going to get an interview.

Helen’s interview for the superintendency in her home district was a big learning process because, although she was known by the community having been a principal there, she considered backing out of the interview process because she was uncomfortable with board (all male) interactions. Despite reservations, Helen accepted the superintendent’s job anyway when she was offered it. She stated:

There wasn’t any time from the beginning that I thought I was the one in charge of the district or that it was ever comfortable. It was a divided board from the beginning and I didn’t realize that, being a new superintendent. Looking back, I think one of the things that people don’t get when they are looking into becoming a superintendent, is they don’t have a lot of backroom knowledge of the politics and how it is to work with seven board members.

Helen began to feel there were serious “male/female issues” and mentioned it to a few board members by asking them point blank if there were any of those issues. They answered yes on more than a couple occasions, but wouldn’t elaborate. She really felt strongly that this gender issue was the most pressing issue they had, but no one would talk about it, and she had a hard time trying to figure out how to address it other than asking. When Helen asked what she could

do to improve things, they just said to keep working on it, but she was never clear what that meant, nor did she ever feel that any of the board members acted on her concerns or even took them seriously. After a few more months of continued issues, the board placed her on leave without explanation at the end of her third year as superintendent, but because of all the uncertainty she had been feeling anyway, Helen was already out interviewing in other districts. This was not an easy time because she found herself runner-up in several districts, feeling it was the public turmoil that was preventing her from being offered one of those positions. As it turns out, the superintendent position she got and is still in had a board of four males and three females, and although they were interested in hiring her, they did ask her to produce several types of verification through the search firm and lists of references and contacts that she was of good character and that the administrative leave was “not her fault.”

In looking back, Helen considers that leave experience extremely traumatic even to this day. She really feels the all-male board wanted a male when they hired her, and they have since hired two males after her. Her feelings were, “I don’t think they could see me as an equal person who had the experience and the background and who could tell them what was best for the district.”

When thinking about mentors along the way, Helen did not really feel she had that from any superintendent. She says, “I owe that to new superintendents so that they can get going and not have something happen to them before they even realize it’s happening.” Helen says it was different for superintendents in the past. She elaborates:

Male superintendents had generally been a teacher, principal, and/or a coach. Coaches generally rose to the level of superintendency so were probably not home as much in the evenings anyway. Women were home taking care of the kids. So men being raised to the

level of superintendent were used to not being home in the evening anyway. They could go to games because that's what they liked to do anyway.

Compared to women, Helen says:

As you get more women into the superintendency, we have kids at home. We have all this stuff to do at home and we're still managing this [superintendent] job. It can be very stressful. ...I hardly ever see my husband on our anniversary or his birthday and he's okay with that. I'm not sure with men in the past that that was an issue. When women become superintendents, we seem to be juggling a whole lot more things.

For Helen, she "never had a goal to go as high as she could" in her career. It was more about "wanting to do something different." She felt as though she found herself "in a pattern of looking for a superintendency" and it "just took her." She did tremendous homework with every interview: visiting the community a couple times ahead of time, asking lots of questions, researching the board members, figuring out how to dress, how to sit, making sure her husband came and deciding what he would be wearing, even what kind of pen she should hold. She believes, "It's a job to get a superintendency and you have to put all your effort into the process of it."

What Helen found most challenging about the process of securing her superintendent position was the whole interview process. She described it as "exhausting" and "a strange dynamic where everyone knows what you're doing and where you're going every day all around the state and you know everybody's business way too much."

When asked about whether having an elementary background helped or hurt her journey to the superintendency, Helen felt it helped because she was more involved with students and high profile activities in the community as an elementary principal in a small district. She

thought this was key because it gave her a wide variety of responsibilities and interaction with bus systems and with county meetings and working with other administrators, so doing a little bit of everything gave her helpful experience for the superintendency. She added, “I think as an elementary person, you are just more people-focused than just systems-focused I think, and more about collaboration and community and working together, which I think is also a female issue too.” Helen does believe that an elementary background hurt a little also, because even to this day she has to call others or count on other people to give her secondary background information, such as about scheduling. She did say, however, that she believes a secondary trained superintendent would have to ask an elementary person for help too. Helen remarked that:

I think sometimes boards look at those with just an elementary background as not as well versed and not having as much experience because you get into more difficult things at the high school level. I think you deal with difficult things at every level; you just deal with it differently. I don't think any board I've interviewed with has ever pointed to a certain level of experience. They all wanted somebody who could do a little bit of everything.

Helen's advice to other females aspiring to the superintendency is to be sure they have the time for the demands of the job. She also feels women superintendents need an understanding of what it's like to work with a seven-member school board, especially if the majority of board members are men. Ideally, they need a mentor relationship with a superintendent who can help them understand the politics of a board and that they are a team of eight, not seven plus one.

Helen summed up the pursuit of a superintendent position with this:

You have to find a place where you can have fun, and a place where you can laugh. Men are assertive, men can say things, and women have to be super nice about it and still get it done – without being cold, without being short, and still be approachable, and not be standoffish. Women are definitely held to different standards and watched a little differently. You've got to be able to play with the boys. You've got to be able to talk about sports sometimes. You've got to be able to fit in with them. It's still a man's world. but there are more and more female superintendents all the time.

### **Kari's Story**

*I was not going to be at this place during my career. Had opportunities to go other places to work, but decided to come home. I spent ten years doing special education and one of the things that happened with special ed. in our district at that time is if the population of the immediate school boundaries grew to the point where they needed to use your classroom, they moved you. After two moves, I said forget this. I'll teach regular ed. and after seven years of that, I decided to go into administration. I did a couple of years as an elementary assistant principal trying it out because someone was ill or whatever. I then applied for an assistant elementary principal position on the east side of our city. I was not the most welcomed person in that community but was there six years and enjoyed it thoroughly.*

Kari is a 5<sup>th</sup>-year superintendent of an urban district in a depressed city that was the epicenter of the demise of General Motors. She has lived in and worked in this school district her entire career. I met Kari, a well-dressed African-American, on a Monday afternoon in a small conference room near her office. Kari was a fairly soft-spoken woman who talked without a lot of expression. The administration building where she works is on a road that reminded me of something that was possibly very vibrant at one time. It looks like a cultural center row with buildings that have been painted with murals or have artistic signage. Yet somehow, I knew that represented what "once was" and is now more desolate. Kari's building is a three-story building, yet when you get inside, it is emptier than you first think it would be. There was a central

receptionist who greeted me and asked me to sign in. She also gave me the key to unlock the woman's bathroom down the hall. When I got to Kari's office, her secretary greeted me and I waited in a seating area with several pamphlets about the district and community services nicely arranged. The conference room that Kari and I met in had a white table and chairs for about 10-12 people, and there was evidence on the whiteboard that a community planning meeting had happened recently in there.

Kari spent 10 years as an elementary special education teacher where she was moved around to different buildings most of those years. At that time, special education rooms were often moved to make room for regular education enrollment needs. She got tired of that and decided to try out administration by serving in some elementary assistant principal roles when long-term subs were needed because of illness. After doing that for a couple years, Kari became an elementary principal of her own building for six years and loved the position even though it was in a part of the district that was primarily Caucasian, and she knew the community as a whole was not particularly happy she was placed there.

After her principalship experience, the next step for Kari was becoming chief of schools. In that role, she was responsible for K-12 education for half the district's schools and dealt with many responsibilities on many levels. This occurred because of so much change in both the superintendent position and the turnover of school board members. During her time as chief of schools, the superintendent to whom she reported was a series of males in short-term positions; in fact, there were five different superintendents within five years. The last superintendent she worked for ended up causing the district severe damage financially and also was the cause of lowering staff morale. Kari remarked:

At that point I decided I did not want to take the chance of somebody else coming in and doing that again, so I decided to see if I could do it. When I became the superintendent, I was the 6<sup>th</sup> district superintendent in five years.

Kari felt the process of becoming the superintendent was normal in filling out an application and participating in two interviews. But it didn't involve the search firm process because the board didn't feel they wanted to go that same route of using a search firm again after the negative experience they had the time before. There were three women who applied initially, and two of them, including Kari, became the finalists. It was historic for the district to have finals with two women, both of whom were internal candidates. Again, Kari felt compelled to apply because it was so important for her not to have another superintendent like the previous one, whom she described as someone who spent through substantial fund equity into debt and also had a leadership style dominated by fear. As it turned out, Kari had gone through the Michigan Leadership Institute training for aspiring superintendents two different years for different levels, so she had learned some skills from that she found valuable. Her preparation for the superintendent interviews revolved around her reviewing those training manuals. Other than that, Kari did not have any other mentors or colleagues to help her. What she did have, however, was some community support and several relationships with teachers over her years of working there who seemed to be rooting for her to get the position in hopes she could get the district out of the mess it was now in, and because they knew her, those supporters were grateful she was willing to try for the job.

The most challenging part of securing the position for Kari was the second interview process. She described it as a "packed house of people. And trying to keep your thoughts about you and having to think on your feet quickly. The board asked the question and we [the other



candidate] took turns answering.” Thus, having one interview with both candidates combined was certainly a different and trying experience for Kari.

Coming from an elementary background has been a positive experience for Kari. She explained:

I think coming from an elementary perspective you have a tendency to be a lot more nurturing. I think it is a misunderstanding that as kids get older they should be more independent of us. They are still kids. So from that perspective of what’s going to happen to our kids as a superintendent has been a plus.

Kari did add that it was her time in central office being responsible for K-12 schooling as chief of schools that proved to be challenging to her as someone with no high school teaching or principal experience. As she was able to gain that experience through years of working hard on it within her role in central office, she felt it benefitted her at the superintendent level.

In offering advice to other women from the elementary principalship who aspire to the superintendency, Kari believes they should take the time to get to know how middle schools and high schools work. She said:

Get to know the culture of teaching and teachers at the middle school and high school levels. It’s a different animal in terms of their attitude toward their students and their teaching. Also, become a lot more involved or knowledgeable about what happens at the central office level.

She also added the importance of finding a couple of people, not necessarily women, but people you can bounce things off of as a superintendent because there is no one to go to talk to.

Another reflection Kari shared was that:

My family dynamic is that my sister was the oldest, there were five boys, and then there was me. I believe that being socialized with males assisted me in doing some of the things I've had to do in this position. People press you to be emotional but you definitely can't wear it on your sleeve because it becomes a weakness that people prey off. You have to be decisive. You have to be objective. It's a man's world and you have to be tough.

### **Leslie's Story**

*In 1989 I was hired as a resource teacher and worked with learning disabled children for about four years. I was very successful at that and while I was there my room was adjacent to the principal so when she was gone, I was teacher-in-charge. And that was the first point I began to think – you know what? I could probably do her job and I could probably do it better than she's doing.*

Meet Leslie, a Caucasian fifth-year superintendent of a small, suburban school district. I met Leslie, 61 years old, at a hotel conference room in Lansing. She was punctual and willing to accommodate in any way to make our meeting time and location work for both of us. I found Leslie to be a refined woman who exuded confidence. She paused often during our interview because I felt as though she wanted to speak truthfully and carefully. She did not want to overgeneralize or express or assume anything about any other superintendent's experiences other than her own.

Although she has a relative who was a principal, Leslie never thought about becoming a principal. As she says:

When I was a teacher-in-charge, and began to see the poor example that was modeled for me, I right away began to see – oh, I could do this. And I've always been in leadership roles as a sorority president, a leader in Masonic Order as a child so it just seemed like a natural thing for me to embrace the principalship.

After a couple more years of teaching, Leslie began to interview for principal positions where she was often runner-up. She states, “This was the early 90s and more and more women were getting in the field, but what was important to me was finding the right fit for my challenge and my skills.” Leslie was elementary principal in a building she described as “where elephants went to die. And by that I mean these were teachers who had been run out of other buildings and were all gathered at my building.” Leslie then proceeded to raise this school up as a respectable, popular school, describing it as having “a home feel and it was probably one of the most enjoyable times of my life.” In reflecting back, Leslie attributes a lot of her success to her special education background in all grades K-12 working with “high maintenance kids and parents” in different situations. Although things were going well, Leslie was nearing 50 years old and began to think she was ready for the next step.

The next step for Leslie was as an assistant superintendent in a different district nearby working for a male superintendent alongside two other female assistant superintendents. She recalls that she “worked her tail off” during that position with a great team, and the superintendent was comfortable to just rely on his three assistants to do all the work and tell him what was needed. She feels she learned a lot during those years, not from the superintendent, but from her assistant counterparts. In the fifth year, Leslie became ill with a curable cancer and had to take a leave. She explained, “I sold my soul to that district for five years. And I was a little disgruntled about the treatment I received when I went through that.”

During this time, the superintendent position where Leslie works now opened up. In her mind:

I believe I’m spirit-filled and I believe I look for guidance on where I’m going to go and what I’m going to do, and just as it had led me to the principalship and then to the

assistant superintendency, it led me to believe that the superintendency was for me, and I knew I was being prepared for another position.

Since she had gone through the Michigan Leadership Institute training a year or two prior, she applied, interviewed twice (once with her own hair and once with a wig because of her cancer), and felt as though the district was the right fit. Leslie got the job.

Leslie feels her five years have been very accomplished, and she credits that to her style of leadership. She followed a male interim superintendent who was there for almost two years and who was known for trying to do everyone's job for them. She remarked:

I involve people in the process and validate their involvement. Not forming a committee for the sake of forming a committee and then saying, oh well, too bad, I'm going to do it my way anyway. No, you involve people who have skills and talents and you grow and build those and you mentor that.

Within the search and selection process, Leslie felt that following the Michigan Leadership Institute's process was important because the consultants became familiar with you and helped you get recognized. When she was preparing to send her application materials out for a superintendent position, the hardest part for her was believing that her current superintendent did not want her to go so much that he hindered her. Leslie had been asking him for a letter of recommendation for a few months and he wouldn't give her one, although she noticed he gave letters to everyone else who asked. When she confronted him as a last resort, he told her things like he didn't think she was ready. Leslie interviewed and was called for a second interview and when she told him, he said that didn't make any sense and that she had to be somebody's swing vote or token vote. When she was awarded the position, the superintendent told her that was good because at least he knew the business director there and she would have someone to mentor

her. Around this same time, a male principal in the district told this same superintendent he was thinking about applying to be an assistant superintendent somewhere and the superintendent told him he should just go straight to the superintendency. Leslie remembers feeling very degraded by that. She said, “I felt like I was being blocked from the superintendency because this superintendent knew how good he had it. He had three females who would do all the work, or a lot of the work.” She further added:

I learned from that, and I think it’s why women need to help women. Now and then men are supportive of women who want to advance in their careers. I would mentor a female. I would mentor a male. I’m hoping that those [women] that come after me are having better experiences than I did with that.

Leslie found coming from an elementary background beneficial but also that her special education background, including teaching secondary special education, really added value. She revealed that having that special education secondary experience gave her credibility with high school teachers who often “look at elementary teachers with rolled eyes.” Leslie felt that having elementary experience helped her understand those teachers, and secondary special education experience gave her valuable skills as well. To her, “I feel like I have a whole bag of tricks I can draw on at any point in time. I think I have the whole package – elementary, secondary, special education, curriculum.”

Leslie’s advice to women from the elementary principalship aspiring to the superintendency is to get curriculum experience at the secondary experience as well. She says secondary teachers look down at their elementary counterparts and have no clue how hard those elementary people work. What she would also say to elementary principals is, “If you have an

option at all, think about becoming a high school or middle school assistant principal, but you are seeing less of that as more and more women enter the superintendency.” She explained:

Years ago, the superintendency was made up of men who went to lunch and smoked cigars and drank, and it’s not that way anymore. So much of what today’s superintendent does is multi-task and being able to do multiple things serves women well in that role.

My experience was that there was a male before me and a lot of stuff just didn’t get done and I don’t really know why. I think it’s still out there that a woman might not be able to oversee a supervisor of maintenance and grounds. So I kind of had to prove that I could.

A final, interesting part of Leslie’s journey has to do with being in an all women’s professional support group of middle-aged women aspiring to the principalship several years ago. She felt it was a very positive thing started by a couple of women who were seeking mentorship, and it meant a lot to her because she needed that support from her female colleagues because she wasn’t sure she could get that from any male colleagues. She said:

I don’t know if there are any female groups now that get together. We needed it then because we’d go into a setting being the only female interviewing against eight or ten other males. So you needed these women to build your confidence so I speak about women helping women because I feel like it still needs to be here.

In closing, Leslie stated, “The obligation I have as someone toward the end of my career is to herd others who are following in our footsteps. And if they can learn from us, what a gift that is.”

## CHAPTER FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS

### Introduction

Merriam (2009) writes, “It is my position that all qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive and comparative” (p. 175). Using the constant comparative method, ideally, it is best to conduct the participant interview, code the data, and then move on to the next participant, which is the process I followed. I initially conducted the interviews, transcribed, coded, grouped, compared, and then started the process over again with the next participant. As I examined the categories and patterns from each of the participants, four themes emerged from the data that were common across all cases. There were also themes that emerged from some but not all cases, and there was a contradiction between a couple of cases. The four themes that emerged that were common across all cases included:

- 1) All subjects got initiated to the idea of obtaining administrative positions through an external event and/or person of influence who instilled in them a belief about their potential as an administrator. None of the participants had set a goal to become a principal, much less a superintendent, at the start of their careers.
- 2) All considered their elementary backgrounds as an advantage to their beliefs or strengths as a leader, which developed into understanding how the K-12 system works for students.
- 3) All participants raised the issue of the challenge of relating to secondary teachers—the steep learning curve around scheduling and staffing and also learning about a secondary climate and culture—as needed to be successful as superintendents coming from an elementary background.

- 4) In seeking or accepting a superintendency, there was a significant draw to a home district or region with family ties.

A discussion of each common theme is expanded in the following sections followed by a section that addresses themes that emerged through some but not all cases. Also following is a section that includes some additional findings and a contradiction that emerged through the participants' stories.

### **Theme One**

All of the women in my study did not begin their careers with the plan that they would eventually become superintendents. In fact, most did not even see the elementary principalship as a position they were interested in pursuing, as they were happy being teachers. What each woman experienced along the way was one or more external events or conversations with others who had influential power that led them to the idea that the principalship was possible for them. After being principals for a while, another external event or person of influence would plant a seed about advancing beyond the principal position. None of these six women started out in their career path wanting or considering being a school administrator of any kind. They each relied on a triggering event or incident that provided the impetus to seek a new position.

For Cindy, it was after 15 years of teaching that she decided to apply for an administrative position. What led her to considering this was a conversation with a family friend who happened to be a retired superintendent. In her words:

There was a man who was a former superintendent here who had moved on and retired who convinced me when my son (my youngest child) left for college that it was time to at least try it out and see if I would like to be a superintendent, or at least a school



administrator. This is a person who had always encouraged me to do more, to become something that, you know, he thought I should pursue.

After landing her first elementary principal job, it was less than two years before her superintendent came to her and told her he thought she was strong enough to do the assistant superintendent job that was just opening with him. She took that job and through the course of the next ten years, took other similar positions before obtaining her first and current superintendent position.

Debbie's desire to consider an elementary principalship evolved from her time as a teacher in a specialty elementary school with a principal she considered a mentor whom she knew was going to be leaving for other opportunities fairly soon. While at dinner with this woman one night, Debbie said the principal told her she would be like to see her (Debbie) become a co-principal with her the following year. During that year, her mentor left and she was the sole principal. After that year, a senior faculty member of the institute where her specialty school was originated became her mentor and leadership trainer. Many years after, Debbie decided to pursue a superintendency because of increasing frustration with where her district was headed and not feeling like she had any options to move up within the district. She lamented, "I never thought I wanted to be a superintendent, but there were a couple reasons I was thinking about that. First of all, there was no way I could get into central office where I was." Debbie described many instances where she felt disrespected as a female and also as the principal of the specialty school, which led to a feeling of discontent. She commented, "I was starting to get a really bad taste in my mouth. Things were changing and the thing that really broke the camel's back for me is that we had budget cuts going on and my school was at the top of the pack." Once

her school was officially closed, Debbie said to her husband, “Look, I have got a couple of years left before I can retire. And if I’m going to do a superintendency, now would be the time.”

For Gladys, she didn’t think there was any job greater than being a teacher. One day, her principal called her down to ask her if she had ever thought about becoming a principal. She responded, “absolutely not” and got up and left. In her words:

I thought it was absurd. It really was not my career path. But yet, I think probably what other people saw in me I didn’t see in myself at that time. I was truly one of those people that was trying to have a larger impact on the school. So he finally convinced me that might be the path I would go on.

After several years in elementary principalships, Gladys had a superintendent who walked in one day to talk. She remembers:

He asked me if I had ever thought about becoming a superintendent and I thought, what? This is just like *deja vu*. No, I don’t want to be a superintendent. I’ve never thought about becoming a superintendent. I really honestly and truly believe that.

However, she enrolled thereafter in the Michigan Leadership Supes Academy and a year after that enrolled in a doctoral program and decided the superintendency was something she was interested in. When her supervising superintendent left two years later, she had already been able to work with him in a central office capacity as he made happen for her for several months before replacing him as superintendent. Gladys said:

I think it’s important when people can see something in you that you can’t see in yourself. I don’t think I would have ever stopped to reflect about “do I want to be a superintendent?” without somebody saying that deliberately to me. It happened to be two males that said that to me. There’s something important about—and again, I try to teach

that to kids, too—to give something back, to reach out to let somebody else know they have the ability and capacity to do great things.

Helen's path was different from the others in this study in that she took educational leadership classes early in her career with no purposeful direction other than to achieve required credits to maintain her teaching certification. She had no intention of ever being a principal until her mom called her one day and told her about an elementary principal opening in her (mom's) town. Without much thought, Helen applied and got the job. After 15 years or so and feeling bored with the principalship, Helen saw an article in the newspaper about someone becoming one of the first female superintendents in the county, and Helen felt that if that woman could do it, so could she. Helen says, "It was never for me about having to do the highest job in my career. I never had that kind of goal to push, push, push and go as high as I could go. I just wanted to do something different." Since she was younger than many and the major breadwinner in her family, she wanted a specific type of income that the superintendent could have. She reasoned:

I've still got to have continuing education credits so I might as well get my specialist degree. So you kind of find yourself in this pattern and you get thrown along with it. I remember meeting the local superintendent and shadowing him for a day. He told me – its (the superintendency) like a freight train. Once you're on it, you can't get off. Once you start the process of looking for a superintendency, you probably won't stop until you are a superintendent. It's like it just takes you.

For Kari, teaching was great except for getting bumped and moved every year because of seniority, which got tiring. She decided during that time to go into administration by filling in for assistant principals who were out on leaves so she could see if she liked it. After receiving her own elementary assistant principalship a year later and staying for six years in that position, she

applied for and received a central office position as chief of schools. During those five years, Kari became increasingly frustrated with the constant turmoil and turnover of four superintendents so much so that she decided, "I did not want to take the chance of somebody else coming in and doing that damage again, so I'll see if I can do it." She talked with another central office colleague first to see if he was going to apply. When he declined, Kari felt, "I guess I have to apply. We can't experience what we have been through again." Kari also professed it would be hard to say if she would have ever wanted to be a superintendent without the circumstances she was under. She did say, "I wouldn't have done it when I did. I can say that for sure."

Leslie came upon her elementary principalship because of her room location as a teacher being next to the principal's office. She remembers:

I never thought about becoming a principal even though I had relatives who were principals. But when I had to be teacher-in-charge and began to see the poor example that was modeled for me, I right away began to think I could do this. I've always been in leadership roles.

After five years as principal and being conscious of turning 50 years old, Leslie felt ready for the next step. She became an assistant superintendent in a nearby district and learned a lot from her two assistant superintendent counterparts. In her fifth year in that role, Leslie was diagnosed with a rare but curable cancer that required her to miss some time at work. Her supervising superintendent was not respectful or sympathetic during her illness and questioned whether she really was ill. Leslie was extremely disappointed and unhappy with the treatment he was giving her and decided to pursue a superintendency to move on. She applied for a superintendency and, despite an ongoing lack of support from the superintendent where she was, she did receive the position.

Each woman in my study experienced a different pathway to the superintendency, yet none of them planned their own career path with clear intentions. Instead, participants received external pushes from other sources that gave them a sense of wonder about whether they could become administrators. This external event or person of influence opened the door for each woman to find her own journey.

### **Theme Two**

All participants saw some element, expertise, or experience gained through their pathway from the elementary ranks as important to their success obtaining and serving in the superintendency, although some were more explicit than others about what the benefit was. For Cindy, she found it “helpful because I did have a different perspective. A lot of my teaching background I had done in elementary and because I got hired in tough economic times, I got shifted around, you know, every year I got assigned to a different spot.” She also reported that, “I’m not sure there’s a whole lot of difference between an elementary principal who works with a budget and what a high school principal would do. You still only have control of your building’s discretionary funds anyway.”

Debbie feels that as far as curriculum work goes,

I don’t think I could have gotten a better experience than being an elementary teacher working on school improvement with the staff, sitting in on all those professional developments that they did. Those curriculum pieces in a smaller district are extremely important, so I think from the elementary standpoint that really helped. I mean, the process is the process no matter what level.

Gladys also felt that having an elementary background really helped. She noted, “It’s a

unique situation for a superintendent to have an elementary background, so it really brings kind of a fresh perspective to the understanding about what it takes to help a district progress.”

Although she recognized that if she had a high school background maybe she would feel differently, she said, “I have a good solid foundation and I really do have this belief that this solid foundation from the beginning is critical and essential to the future success for where you are trying to get to. I think it (elementary background) just brings more depth of understanding to the process.”

Helen feels strongly that it wasn't just having elementary experience that was crucial, but it was that she had those elementary experiences in a small district that gave her broad learning opportunities. She noted, “Elementary experience in a small district gave me a lot of interaction with buses and county agencies and with other administrators and anything and everything happens when you work in a small district so you get a lot of experience.” Aside from broad experiences, Helen also remarked:

Elementary experience did help me know a lot of people in the community because I had those kids for so many years and was able to do a lot of fun things that were more high profile. I think as an elementary person you are just more people focused than just systems focused, and more about collaboration and community and working together, which I think is also a female issue.

Kari felt her elementary background led to her being a more nurturing leader. She felt that building relationships early on with students and really getting to know them and their families was important. She said:

I think it is a misunderstanding that as kids get older they should be more independent of us. They do need to become responsible, but I think they need to be just a kid. And I

think we lose sight of that as they get older. So from that perspective, having an understanding of what is going to happen to our kids along the school pathway is a plus.

For Leslie, she values all her experiences—elementary, special education, secondary teaching—and doesn't feel that any one area hurt her chances of being a successful superintendent but rather that she was lucky to have multiple experiences that the typical superintendent candidate would not have.

### **Theme Three**

The challenge of relating to secondary teachers and the steep learning curve around scheduling and staffing and also learning about a different climate and culture at the secondary level was an experience shared by each female superintendent. This need for secondary level understanding for these women superintendents coming from an elementary background was a prevalent theme through each woman's journey. In fact, the lack of secondary experience prior to reaching the superintendency proved to be somewhat of a handicap for these women. Each felt that she encountered a steep learning curve in trying to understand the culture of how things function at the secondary level. Staffing and scheduling were two big pieces to learn about and each woman realized she was deficient in these areas at first, coming from the elementary ranks. Because of that deficiency, each participant developed and shared strategies of how to learn about staffing and scheduling in order to be successful as superintendents.

Some of the women were assistant superintendents prior to becoming superintendents and through that role were able to gain experience working with secondary school staffs. In Cindy's case, she had some secondary experience as a middle school teacher and adult education teacher. She remarked, "The thing I struggled with when I first went to central office was that I

did kind of have to earn credibility with the high school people who were like, you don't know anything about secondary. So that was always kind of an issue, from the teacher's issue."

Debbie admitted:

The biggest downfall for me is I didn't have the high school experience. If we're trying to cut budgets, it's really hard for me to look at the high school schedule and say, you know, you only need this many teachers in this area. Sometimes those classes are mixed with kids in multiple grades so that's a real struggle for me.

Gladys says, "You just learn to become abreast and understand the high school and I've had to really immerse myself into gaining some of those understandings. It takes more reading, more listening, more trying to gain knowledge about it."

Helen says:

Still to this day I have to call other people or count on people to give me secondary background information. Such as I want to go from trimesters back to semesters, how many staff members can I lose doing that, and what's the impact. I have to have people I can go to, to give me some of that secondary information that I don't have."

Kari felt that her five years supervising K-12 schools in her central office role, prior to her superintendent position, was an important time that gave her a working knowledge of secondary. She says, "Scheduling, the whole set-up of departments and teams, and the culture of teaching and teachers at the middle school and high school level is a different animal in terms of their attitudes towards their students and teaching."

Leslie really felt that a gap exists when incoming superintendents only have elementary experience but not secondary. She adds, "Secondary people are much more reserved and hands-



off. How they operate, how they work on curriculum, how they work on lessons, studies, and scheduling all give credibility to those who understand that.”

#### **Theme Four**

Each participant in my study experienced a significant draw to a home district or region with family ties. Two participants stayed living in their hometown city throughout their entire career. One worked for almost 30 years in her hometown and left to work in the same county for a few years while continuing to live in her hometown, and the other has lived and worked in the same hometown her entire career of over 30 years. Two participants started their careers living and working in their hometowns, left to work for several years in other places on the opposite side of the state from where they were born, but returned home because of a sense of belonging and family connections to their original home areas. One superintendent spent almost 30 years of her career in one location but chose to move a couple hours south to where her aging mother lived, near where she grew up, an area in which she has many family connections. The final participant has held several administrative positions all within the same two counties near each other on one side of the state.

Cindy has lived in her home community her whole life where she has worked as a teacher, principal, and now superintendent. Although she worked in a couple nearby towns for a few years, she has always remained “home.” Cindy also felt such a strong connection to home and that comfort that she experienced trepidation when offered a new position in a nearby district, to the point that she always made sure to work out with her new boss an option to return to her former position if she desired to do that. She said, “I liked my job so much as a teacher I actually negotiated with my district to a leave of absence that would let me come back if I didn’t like what I was doing.”

Debbie shared that a superintendent position she became interested in was near an area in Michigan where her mother lived. Since her mom was in her 90s, Debbie did not want to be too far away. She reported looking for a superintendent position exclusively in that one geographic area near where she is now.

Gladys started her teaching career back in her hometown and stayed for 15 years as a teacher and elementary principal. When she left for another position, it was because her superintendent had asked her to move across the state to join her where she had relocated. She described that move as “polar opposites in terms of diversity, and the whole district was very different than what I was used to. It’s just a different mentality once you cross the line in the state of Michigan. Something happens to the way people think. It’s just different, culturally different.” When she decided to pursue her current superintendent position, she reflected, “I decided to look back here on this side of the state because this is kind of home to me.”

Although declaring she had no plans to work or stay in her hometown after graduating from college, Kari has lived and worked in one district her entire career. She said, “I’ve been in the district for thirty-some years and worked at a number of different sites. There were a lot of people who knew me on the job and outside of the job. There were solid relationships with people.” Even when discussing her future plans, Kari explained, “I know the amount of time and effort I put into this [superintendent] position. I cannot muster this up for any place other than just this place I call home.”

Leslie also spoke of her experiences in a geographic context. She was born and raised on one side of the state of Michigan, moved for a few years to the other side of the state for a teaching position, began raising her small children, and moved back to where she first lived. She

felt it important to “go back where my parents were and where my husband’s parents were.”

From that point on, she has remained in that same general region.

### **Findings**

Aside from the four common themes presented above, other findings are worth including. One is that obtaining a superintendency for women with an elementary background was more challenging in some regions of Michigan than in others, based on the district, county, or region’s experience with female superintendents. Districts that already had experience with women serving in the superintendent role were more used to it or comfortable with it. When the precedent had already been set, it did not seem insurmountable for some of the women in my study who are working in a county where female superintendents have been in place for several years. It seems less “out of place” for women in some places or in some counties in Michigan as compared to others. Brunner (2008) notes that the issue of lack of mobility is a common barrier for women in the superintendency. In this study, these women did not openly express feeling as though they were not able or willing to move geographically, but that they preferred to work closer to home as it made more sense for family reasons.

Vicki commented, “I’ve had the great fortune of being in a county where being a woman superintendent here didn’t even seem like a kind of out of the ordinary thing.” Cindy felt the same way and stated, “I happened to work in a county where women superintendents were quite plentiful here. There were 7 or 8 women [superintendents] out of the 21 districts when I became superintendent. You know, they [women] were encouraged and I don’t think anybody has ever stood in my way.” Cindy also explained that the current ISD superintendent in her county is female.

For me personally, I have noticed that the county I live in is sparse on women superintendents and has been for the twenty years I have lived here. In 20 years, there have never been more than two female superintendents at any given time in the 20 districts that compose this county. Even closer for me, the school district I reside in has never had a woman superintendent, nor has the local intermediate school district employed a female superintendent. Currently, there are two female superintendents in the county where I live, one urban and one suburban. Some areas of the state seem to be more fertile ground for women superintendents than others.

A second finding was that five of the six superintendents self-identified that they are in their “final” superintendent position and will probably retire at the end of this position. That being said, four of these women are in the one and only superintendent position they will ever have. According to VanTuyle and Watkins (2009), over half of the responding superintendents in the AASA national study of the superintendency in 2007 indicated serving in just one district. The other two participants are each serving in their second superintendency and admit they may move again to a different superintendency. Furthermore, neither of these two participants has children, and one of the two has also never been married. Four of the participants are serving as the first female superintendent in their respective districts. Finally, each of these six women are in their 50s or 60s, which matches the research on women choosing to enter the superintendency later in their careers.

A third finding that emerged for each of the six participants was the idea of the importance of mentoring in advancing educational leaders. Even for those who did not experience a mentor relationship, or who experienced a negative mentoring experience, everyone was aware of the importance of having a good mentor. The gender of the mentors was not

consistent. Not everyone was aware of being mentored at the time it was happening, but all could look back and reflect.

Cindy and Gladys both felt strong mentors were present for them all along their journeys to the superintendency. They each could name a very important male mentor over the course of their evolving careers who encouraged them to do more or saw potential in them to move into administration. Both of these women highly valued these people and spoke fondly and warmly of them and still care about those relationships. Cindy stated:

There was a man who was a former superintendent here who had moved on and actually retired as the superintendent of the ISD, who we were lifelong friends with, who convinced me that it was time to at least try out and see if I would like to be a superintendent, or be a school administrator at least. This is a man who always encouraged me to do more, to become something that, you know, he thought I should pursue.

Cindy also had a second male mentor who purposefully recruited her to be his assistant superintendent, and she described his style as “pretty gruff and he had a kind of sarcastic humor and at first he scared the life out of me. But he was also a person who was very good at tackling hard decisions about things he believed were good for kids.” Cindy also worked for two female superintendents whom she believes she learned a lot from also. She described one as having “great strength in her convictions, even when it did not suit her personally.” Overall, Cindy stated that her first superintendent, a male, was instrumental in helping her develop by “being a cheerleader, always supportive and encouraging.” He was also someone she could “ask a lot of questions to, for advice, and to really understand an issue.”

Debbie also received valuable male mentorship more in the early stages of her career as principal and feels like she didn't have mentorship towards the superintendency. That first male mentor she described as:

I learned so much from that man. He started mentoring me by having me come watch his training so I watched that. And then he had me take over portions, like an hour of his training, and then we would sit and evaluate that piece. And then he would ask me what I would change. Eventually, I started taking over more and more of his trainings.

Gladys's first mentor was her male principal who asked her about considering the principalship. Gladys shared, "He thought that I would be a good principal for my organizational skills and my willingness to go the umpteenth mile to help kids be successful." During that same time period, her female superintendent:

...really encouraged me and inspired me. She was one of those kind of people who was more positive than negative and knew I was about to tread into a situation that was unfamiliar for me, so she did all she could to really help me to be successful. I appreciated her as somebody who had already been through the ranks that could really give guidance and help to somebody who had never thought about becoming a principal.

Many years later, when Gladys was considering the superintendency, her male superintendent "encouraged me to pursue my doctorate and was very supportive. In fact, he was one of the readers for my dissertation. He was really supportive of me making the move towards the superintendency or central office and even signed me up for the Supes Academy."

Helen spent most of her time advancing herself without the help of a mentor. She felt she could have benefitted from some strong mentorship in learning some of the politics of working with board members in particular but felt her superintendent did not prepare her at all. She felt he

did not give access to learning situations because he preferred to keep everything to himself. She shared, “I really didn’t have any mentors. The [male] superintendent I worked with for 20 years wanted nothing to do with mentoring me. Even though we met a couple times after work about a problem, he just kind of left me to flail.”

Kari also lacked mentorship in her ascent to the superintendency. Because the superintendent position kept turning over quickly and lacked stability prior to Kari obtaining the position, there was not an applicable mentor available to her. Both Helen and Kari, however, appreciate the county and association mentorships they are part of now as superintendents in their counties. They feel those mentorships help now and are supportive to their current work.

Leslie has a very pronounced interest in serving as a mentor now to others (male or female) because of two explicit experiences she had. Positively, she felt a strong connection and gratefulness to a group of women she called “principal wannabes” who were middle-aged women aspiring to be principals. She joined that group years ago and described it as a supportive group who got together regularly and shared useful information. On a negative note, Leslie also experienced being blocked by her male supervising superintendent at the time she was pursuing her current superintendency. She said, “I felt like I was being blocked from the superintendency because this superintendent knew how good he had it. He had three female assistant sups who were doing all the work.” He blatantly resisted giving her a letter of recommendation and also told her he didn’t think she was ready, but Leslie believes he did it to keep her working hard under him as his assistant superintendent. Leslie shared, “He was very degrading, the comments he made. He told the male middle school principal that he could go straight to the superintendency, and me, after giving six years as an assistant superintendent doing an outstanding job, he wouldn’t have faith in me.” She has very sour feelings about that to this day,

feeling undermined and disgraced by him. Overall, Leslie feels, “Women need to help women. Now and then men are supportive of women who want to advance in their careers. I would mentor a female. I would mentor a male. I’m hoping those that come after me are having better experiences than I did.” Brunner (2008) found lack of district mentors and mentoring as a significant barrier for women obtaining a superintendency. Wallin and Crippen (2007) noted in their study that although they supposed women would naturally connect with each other for mentorship when knowing that other women superintendents were available, that was not the case. More than 71% of female superintendents in Brunner and Kim’s (2010) study named lack of mentors/mentoring as an important or somewhat important barrier to success in their positions, whereas 40.8% of male superintendents felt it was a barrier for women superintendents.

For all six participants, the idea of giving to others was important. Several of them mentioned wanting to be in this study because of the passion they felt for helping other women. Helen said, “I owe [mentorship] to new superintendents so they can get going and not have something happen to them before they even realize it.” Leslie’s final point was, “When your email came about this study, it kind of spoke to my heart. I thought to myself, I need to expend myself and provide the kind of support to another female in case that support isn’t there.”

### **Contradiction**

A contradiction that was striking was the notion of whether women, especially those viewed as “elementary educators,” need to be tough or act male when being a superintendent. There was a distinction drawn by some participants between how women behave and how men behave in the role. Helen explained,



You've got to be prepared for the fact that you're going to be looked at as the bitch. Men are assertive, men can say things, and women have to be super nice about it and still get it done – without being cold, without being short, and still be approachable, and not be standoffish. Women are definitely held to different standards and watched a little differently [than men]. You've got to be able to play with the boys. You've got to be able to fit in with them. You can't be whiny. You can't be dramatic, because you won't work together well with them [men] if you show that.

Kari grew up with mostly brothers and said,

I believe that being socialized with males assisted me in doing some of the things I've had to do in this position. People press you to be emotional but you definitely can't wear it on your sleeve because it becomes a weakness that people prey off. You have to be decisive. You have to be objective. It's a man's world and you have to be tough.

Another statement Kari made was, "There are some 'good old boy' behaviors I have to be careful about how I explain." She then proceeded to tell me that a neighboring male superintendent to her district called her mid-way through a school year to inform her a student was found with drugs and that this student actually lived in Kari's district but had been attending school all year in his district and was counted in that district's enrollment numbers for state aid. However, now that the student was in trouble and needed to be expelled, that superintendent wanted to release the student back to Kari. Kari informed him that drugs were not allowed in her district either and that he could keep the student, discipline him, and count that expulsion in his reporting numbers rather than pass the student off to Kari now so her district would have to accept the consequences. Kari felt he only tried that because he thought she would not be tough enough to hold her ground and he would get his way on releasing the student now that the

student was in trouble. Tallerico (2000b) found that women superintendents who do come from elementary principalships were not considered as “tough” as they superintendents who came from the assistant superintendency or a high school principalship.

Not wanting to over-generalize, Leslie said she feels she works harder than many of her male colleagues. She feels so much of the superintendent work is multi-tasking and that serves women well. She added, “There’s still a degree of bias, a perception that a woman might not be as competent or knowledgeable. Can a woman oversee a supervisor of maintenance and grounds? I think women are still proving to people that they can do the job.” The other women did not specifically address whether or not it was important to be tough, but did talk about styles of women leaders being different.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

### **Introduction**

According to the 2012 *Michigan Education Directory*, there are 549 public school districts in the state of Michigan. These districts range in enrollments from less than 100 students to enrollments in the thousands. These districts serve predominantly K-12 students, but some are K-5, K-6, or K-8 only. Of the 549 districts, 125 of them, or 23%, are headed by women as superintendents. However, 34 of those 125 are led by women who either hold interim superintendent status, are serving in dual roles as principals or teachers and superintendents because the district is so small it warrants sharing roles, or are leading districts that serve only portions of a K-12 population of students. When taking those factors into consideration, there are 91 female superintendents, or 17%, who are serving as superintendents in a traditional, K-12 public school district. With these statistics, Michigan is average, with the latest studies on women superintendents compiled by reporting agencies such as the American Association of School Administrators (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of six female superintendents who began their administrative careers as elementary principals and their personal journey to the superintendency. Using an interpretive, multiple case study research design, I aimed to document how these particular women accessed their position. My central question was this: What can we learn from the lived experience of women who came from a background as elementary educators and advanced to the superintendency in a variety of district contexts within Michigan's traditional public school system? The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of the study, present conclusions and discuss recommendations. What have these women taught us? In discussing recommendations, there are recommendations to change

and make things easier for those aspiring superintendent candidates in the field, for superintendent preparation programs at the college level, for search firm consultants and school boards, and for further research.

### **Summary of the Study**

Participants included six female superintendents from Michigan who came to the superintendency from an earlier administration position as an elementary principal. These women superintendents have all obtained their respective superintendent positions within the last five years; two are working in urban districts, two in suburban districts, and two in rural districts. I conducted one face-to-face interview with each participant to hear about her personal journey to the superintendency. Interviews were digitally audiotaped, transcribed, and verified for accuracy. Member checks were conducted with each participant afterward to verify the accuracy of the written stories and to allow them to submit any changes or corrections or add any additional insights that came after the interview. Although each individual participant experienced a different journey, each had to forge her own pathway through her own differing circumstances.

### **Conclusions**

The career path and experience of an administrator is an important component to review when studying the superintendency. Without a doubt, in order to reach a deeper and broader understanding of gender differences in career development toward the superintendency, research must focus on typical career paths of school administrators in terms of mobility and experiences (Brunner & Kim, 2009). Women seeking a superintendency confront challenges that men do not have to acknowledge or with which men do not have to deal. Much can be learned from the shared experiences of others.

Feminist research approaches make prevalent women's diverse situations and the institutions or political or social structures that frame those situations (Creswell, 2007). There are three characteristics of feminist social research that brought connections to my study upon which I want to expand (Neuman, 2000). The first is the stance of advocacy of a feminist value position and perspective. For my study, a feminist poststructuralist lens was appropriate because feminist poststructuralism helps women activate their own knowledge, which fits well within an interpretive case study approach. My status as a female interviewer and also as a school administrator with 15 years of direct administrative experience helped me establish credibility and form a bond with these women as someone who has been an elementary principal and has also interviewed for superintendent positions. I wanted to hear the lived experiences of women superintendents to see what they learned as women, how they made sense of their independent journeys as they reflected about their experiences compared to men, and what they believe helped and/or hurt their obtaining their superintendent position. Feminist poststructuralism offers a means by which we can clearly see the positions we are in based on gender and then question these positions. This worked well as a framework for this study.

The second characteristic of feminist social research that I wanted to understand and be sensitive to is how relations of gender and power permeate some spheres of life (Neuman, 2000). According to expectation states theory (Ridgeway, 2001), gender is deeply entwined with social leadership, which can lead to inequality. Gender role expectations are deeply embedded in society, which affects the way women are viewed by others and also how they view themselves. Correll and Ridgeway (2003) describe expectation states theory as:

A 'macro-micro-macro' explanation about one way that categorical inequality is reproduced in society. Cultural beliefs about social categories at the macro level impact

behavior and evaluation at the individual level, which acts to reproduce status structures that are consistent with pre-existing macro-level beliefs. Status structures in groups can be thought of as the building blocks of more macro-level structural inequalities in society.

(p. 48)

Expectation states theory demonstrates that status beliefs account for the obstacles faced by women who aspire to the same leadership roles as men by affecting the processes by which individuals are given access to positions of power, wealth, and authority (Ridgeway, 2001). In my study, the role of mentors and the influence of those mentors shaped each woman's status beliefs about themselves and their ability to move to higher positions.

The third characteristic of feminist social research that connected well to my study was that I incorporated my personal feelings and experiences into the research process. For instance, search firm representatives seemed to play an important role in each of four superintendent positions I interviewed for during the 2010-2011 school year. During that time, I also observed three other search processes that I was not affiliated with and discovered that similarities existed amongst all processes. In two of the four districts where I interviewed for superintendent, there was at least one internal candidate who was the male high school principal in the district. In both cases, that person was awarded the position after interviews took place with all candidates.

Although it was not overtly stated during my own talks with search firm candidates, I did feel a strong sense that my background in central office administration was valuable compared to many candidates who had applied, but not necessarily above that of a successful high school principal. In my personal experience, there appeared to be a definite advantage for candidates with high school experience, especially a principalship. In the other two districts, the search firm representative revealed they were recruiting applicants from colleagues in their networks, and in

both cases, those two candidates received the position. There was a woman finalist in two of the four positions who did not receive the superintendency in either district.

These six women have taught us a couple additional things beyond the themes and findings in Chapter 5. One is that it appears that for them to actually apply for a superintendency, there were variables either controlled by them or out of their control that inevitably lined up for each of them. There was a moment in time for each where “the stars lined up” and each woman was then able to initiate an action step of her own to apply for a superintendency. For one participant, it was a health reason that led to her feeling disrespected by her superintendent enough to become disheartened by his treatment, while simultaneously becoming more aware of her competencies for the role of superintendents, which led her to believe it was time to pursue a nearby superintendency. For another participant, it was a five-year history of superintendent turnover and district turmoil that led her to believe she was ready to take action before she let someone else try one more time. For a third participant, a combination of variables of feeling bored where she was, wanting a challenge, seeing a nearby female superintendent get a position and comparing herself to that woman and feeling comparably qualified, led her to seek the superintendency. Another participant realized that she had outgrown the position she was in and combined with being near retirement and wanting to move closer to her aging mother, the variables lined up for her.

What stands out about the women in this study is how each woman handled the different variables that were presented to her. Each woman encountered events or happenings that were out of her control but attended to those happenings in a purposeful way. These women paid attention to the variables that occurred, spent time connecting the dots, and decided what to do through reflection. They perceived themselves to be strong internally, capable of taking

situations that happened around them, and acting on them. Instead of letting events happen without reflection, these women chose to take an attitude of personal action. They chose not to be victims, but to exhibit true leadership. For other women aspiring to the superintendency, they should develop a similar strategy of not just taking what life throws out, but paying attention and making connections to personal action.

Second, none of my participants started their careers engaged in any type of career planning. In fact, none of the participants even planned to become principals. These women evolved into their administrative roles. There was a certain context for each woman, a moment when either an influential person or external event triggered her decision to apply for a superintendency. In this study, these women seemed to let life happen to them, which seemed to be a function of their own expectations and which supports expectation states theory. It also supports feminist poststructuralist theory because it reinforces women's local realities.

According to Grogan (1999),

It is imperative that we scrutinize the social, economic, and political structures that influence educational administration. We need to question the approved administrative practices to discover who they benefit and who they limit. At the same time, we need to assess critically the knowledge base to discover what has been problematized and what has not. (p. 525)

What the women in this study and my own experiences can teach other women is that it is helpful to overcome certain realities and to get directly involved with career planning in the beginning of their careers, including in their university preparation programs. Colleges need to do a better job of proactively helping women to career plan by insisting on advising, and women



may need to make sure they are learning about setting goals and plans and looking at models of other women's goals as samples.

A third learning is that obtaining a superintendency for a woman with an elementary background may be more challenging in some regions of Michigan than in others, based on the district, county, or region's experience with female superintendents. Are women's career options limited? Why are there certain counties that have the soil tilled as fertile grounds for women and some do not? What surprised me was that in one county, where there is predominantly a blue-collar workforce, there seemed to be an abundance of women superintendents compared to counties near where I live. I assumed that a more white-collar community would support women leadership more than a poorer area. However, perhaps some men may thrive in and prefer factory and farm work and manual labor, which may be heralded in certain areas; therefore, women in those same areas are more accepted into white-collar "office" jobs like a superintendency. Expectation states theory supports this because it draws a straight line from the notion that what any of us see and experience growing up is where we see ourselves later. What is attainable for us growing up in terms of careers is what we experience in our living situations at home.

A fourth learning was the importance of mentoring and the roles mentors played or did not play for each of my participants. It is clear from the research about mentors that mentor relationships provide valuable support for women, and that was confirmed with my participants. In my own career, I have experienced the good fortune of several mentors along my own journey, both males and females. These were people I selected to learn from and build relationships with to support me. I have also been disappointed in leaders who I thought could become mentors, but their styles or behaviors were not appropriate to who I wanted to be. I know that I have been very purposeful in trying to connect with female mentors, and have been

disappointed by a couple of them because I thought they perpetuated stereotypes and preferred male networks to the exclusion of females.

### **Implications of this Study**

The implications of this study suggest that even in today's world, many women seem not to start out with the superintendency being considered as a career option. For whatever reasons, women walk down this path only when they are encouraged to do so by an influential person or mentor, or because external things happened in their environment that serves as a catalyst to making that step. What we saw in these six cases of women superintendents is that some came from within their own districts or ones similar. Therefore, it makes sense for district leaders to recognize leadership potential within its own women and develop programs that allow these women to be grown and nurtured toward the superintendency in a purposeful fashion. This would certainly help future female talent get a jump-start to careers as superintendents.

Current superintendents (male or female) could identify women who show leadership capacity and encourage them to try leadership roles. They could mentor women in the job skills and expectations of the superintendency and help them develop confidence in those skills. They could encourage women to enroll in the Michigan Leadership Institute's Supes Academy early on so they can develop relationships with other aspiring superintendents as well as search consultants. They could also help them get that first position by recommending them and helping them prepare for interviewing.

Aspiring women superintendents also need to be active in their intended pursuit of a superintendency by becoming as involved as they can in leadership experiences in all levels of K-12 and in central office, regardless of their current position. They could actively seek out a mentor, especially in areas of weakness, such as finance. They should develop a network of

women leaders to spend time with and learn from. They can step up and ask to be sponsored in professional development opportunities such as the Supes Academy from their current supervisors. They could also ask for help in determining if they may be a fit with a potential district of interest by doing a lot of homework and then asking their mentor and others who support them for guidance. These were all steps or lessons that the women in my study realized as important for future women.

According to Grogan (1999a),

It is imperative that we scrutinize the social, economic, and political structures that influence educational administration. We need to question the approved administrative practices to discover who they benefit and who they limit. At the same time, we need to assess critically the knowledge base to discover what has been problematized and what has not. (p. 525)

### **Recommendations for Women Aspiring to the Superintendency**

Aspiring female superintendents need to be proactive and forthright in their desire to obtain a superintendency. Seeking out mentors, whether female or male or both, is very important. Even more important, I believe that each female aspirant needs to take the initiative to set up time to meet with women superintendents in her area, asking to shadow for a day. I think this is an important forum—to be able to talk candidly and have inclusive conversations—with a practicing female superintendent. It is important to establish those relationships early enough in your career to have ample time to really learn from these women. Aspirants should also stay current of the research and literature surrounding leadership by women in the superintendency. In addition, aspiring female superintendents should learn as much as they can about the search and selection process by observing other searches when conducted from a learning perspective,

taking notes about as many variables as you can: interview attire, how interviews are conducted, behaviors of board members and candidates, the types of questions asked, how materials are prepared.

### **Recommendations for University Preparation Programs**

University graduate programs that develop future superintendents need to engage in purposeful discourse about gender issues and directly provide support and professional development around gender topics to aspiring female superintendents. The topic of gender seems to be largely ignored in college courses, so bringing it to the forefront is necessary where the academic community can really engage in critical thinking and provide situational teaching models to help future women. Given the findings in this study and other studies related to female superintendents, university programs need to be purposeful in addressing perceived gaps for female candidates such as in the areas of politics, finance, and budgeting, and secondary school cultures and issues compared to elementary school. A review of the curriculum should be undertaken with a deliberate focus on best practices for superintendents, including how positions are recruited and the value of networking with specific models of deployment in how to do that. In addition, universities should work to ensure a balanced faculty, with females teaching a multitude of professional courses in the superintendent preparation classes.

### **Recommendations for Search Firm Consultants and School Boards**

Most consultants and board members were found to value secondary over elementary principalships, which reflects the career pathways followed by males more than females (Glass et al., 2007). It is crucial that consultants be considerate of these inherent biases when selecting candidates to recommend to school boards. School board members also need training and development in the area of gender bias from state and local associations who train them.

Chase and Bell (1990) conclude:

When gatekeepers view the constraints of context from the perspectives of how women experience them, rather than how women have or could overcome them, they move toward a focus on the systems that support these constraints. When gatekeepers reflect on their personal and collective participation in perpetuating the constraints of context, rather than how women have or could overcome them, they begin to speak about the processes that reproduce relations of dominance. (p. 175)

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study provides educators, school board members, policy makers, and program developers more knowledge and insight about how women make decisions about their career paths.

Key possible recommendations include:

- 1) Males, by virtue of having more members in the superintendent profession, have built more networks and supports along the way to learn from. Therefore, a study of superintendency preparation programs should be undertaken at both the university level and the organizational level. Women are currently enrolled in graduate and doctoral educational administration programs in large numbers. Are these programs functioning now in a way that encourages and promotes women as superintendents? If not, how could changes be made to better serve women as aspiring superintendents?
- 2) Promoting the idea of purposeful mentoring has tremendous value. Are formal mentoring programs set up in each county? Are informal networks also in place? If so, how are they organized and how does one get access and information about joining?

- 3) The introduction of a required leadership class at the university level in administrative courses that specifically includes literature and research about being females in leadership positions should be developed or added in to current syllabi. It is not enough just to cover theories and history without also including the research on women. This class should be mandatory for both women and men, in an effort to be proactive about perceptions, stereotypes, and biases about female superintendents and their leadership abilities. An avenue for academic discussion would help bring women's issues out in the open.
- 4) Conducting the same study with a group of male elementary principals who became superintendents would be enlightening. What were their career paths and experiences like?

### **Concluding Remarks**

While women have made gains in entering the role of the superintendency, it is not equitable to men or where it should be. Only 26% of superintendents (male or female) began their teaching career as elementary teachers (Glass et al., 2000). Understanding the experiences of these successful women superintendents from an elementary background may assist other women in preparing themselves to become future superintendents. To help further women into the field, women themselves must choose and aspire to these positions early on and with intention by seeing it as a viable and achievable career goal of their own accord rather than waiting for someone else to plant that seed within them. Although there are challenges, the stories told by these women superintendents and others to come need to be told to inform and encourage a future of aspiring female leaders.

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## APPENDICES

### **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

- 1) I am really interested in hearing about your journey to the superintendency. Can you share with me how your career as an educator began?
- 2) Will you tell me about your decision to become a superintendent, and the process you experienced getting there? Especially, what have been your experiences with the search and selection process for superintendent positions?
- 3) What, if anything, did you find most challenging about the process of securing a superintendent position?
- 4) How might your experience coming from an elementary background have helped or hurt your journey to the superintendency?
- 5) What advice would you offer to other women from the elementary principalship who aspire to the superintendency?

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocol**

### **A Study of Women's Access to the Superintendency**

Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me and to share your experience and recommendations related to your pathway to the superintendency. This interview should take between 90 - 120 minutes. Although I don't anticipate that you'll feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions, please feel free to pass on any question, or to suspend the interview at any point.

- 1) For the benefit of the transcriptionist, will you state your name and the name of your school district and where we are located at this time?
- 2) Will you begin by telling me a bit about your school and your community to help me understand the context of your district (enrollment)?
- 3) I am really interested in hearing about your journey to the superintendency. Can you share with me how your career as an educator began?
- 4) Will you tell me about your decision to become a superintendent, and the process you experienced getting there? Especially, what have been your experiences with the search and selection process for superintendent positions?
- 5) What, if anything, did you find most challenging about the process of securing your superintendent position?
- 6) As you reflect on your experience interviewing for the superintendency, do any specific instances related to beliefs or attitudes from others stick in your mind? Can you share with me the nature of your experiences?
- 7) How might your experience coming from an elementary background have helped or hurt your journey to the superintendency?
- 8) What advice would you offer to other women from the elementary principalship who aspire to the superintendency?
- 9) Personally, did the experience of interviewing with me provide you with any new insights or perspectives related to obtaining your position that you'd like to share with me?

Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it very much. Would you like to receive a copy of your written transcript or a copy of the way I summarize your experience? Again, thank you very much for your help.

### Appendix C: Sample Participant Email

Dear Superintendent,

My name is Julie Powell and I am a doctoral candidate at Eastern Michigan University. I am currently working on my dissertation entitled “A Study of Women’s Access to the Superintendency in One Midwest State: Pathways from the Elementary Ranks.”

Your experience as a female superintendent may be important to my research, if you were previously an elementary educator. I hope through my qualitative study to learn about the pathway each of you took to your position as superintendent and your thoughts and reflections about that process as women and what experiences you have had that will help future women aspiring to the superintendency. I would like to identify and interview six current superintendents who fulfill **BOTH** of the following criteria:

- 1) Have been hired to your current superintendent position within the last five years.
- 2) Began your administrative career as an elementary principal and did not hold a secondary administrative position at any time during your career.

If both these criteria fit you and you are willing to participate in an interview process that will require approximately 90 minutes to two hours of your time, I would welcome your participation in my study. Please reply to this email no later than February 3, 2012. My study has been approved by the Human Subjects Internal Review Board at EMU; you may read the attached informed consent form, or call me at 616-901-1607, if you would like more details before responding. Once I hear back from you and you are chosen as a participant, we will schedule the interview at a time and a location most convenient for you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Julie Powell



## **Appendix D: Informed Consent Form**

### **Title of Project**

A Study of Women's Access to the Superintendency in One Midwest State: Pathways from the Elementary Ranks

### **Introduction/Purpose**

This research study is intended to add to the knowledge that exists about who has access to the superintendent position. The issue of gender will be explored along with pathways and barriers to the superintendent position for women who came to the position through the elementary ranks. You are invited to take part in the research study as you have valuable information and experiences to share which will contribute to new and additional knowledge about the experiences of female superintendents and access to the position which may help others who aspire to this position.

### **Process for Interviewing**

Participation in this study will require one open-ended interview with the researcher for up to 120 minutes. This interview will be scheduled at a convenient time and location for you. The interview will be audio-taped and notes will also be taken. Afterward, a transcriber will convert the audio-taped interview into a transcript. You will be given a copy of my summation of your interview for your review, verification, comments, upon request. The transcriber and I will be the only ones to view the transcripts, which will be stored securely in my files at home.

### **Discomfort/Risks**

There are no known risks associated with this research study. All information will be reported in such a way as to maintain confidentiality of the subjects. Participation is voluntary.

### **Confidentiality**

In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from this study, no personally identifiable information will be shared. The information shared will be stored in a secure area in the researcher's home. It is possible that either the Eastern Michigan University Institutional Review Board or the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Protection Office may inspect or copy records pertaining to this research. All audio recordings and notes will be stored in the researcher's files at home and will be kept for two years. Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information private and confidential but absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Pseudonyms will be used for all interviewees and school districts.

### **Rights/Privileges**

You have the right and privilege to cease your participation in this study at any time for any reason, which you may or may not opt to share with me. In doing so, I will ask if I can use the data collected from you prior to your cancellation of participation and, if you elect to not have me use your data, I will destroy both the tape and transcript at that time.

Your withdrawal from this study will not have any negative effect to you in any way. Your participation is considered voluntary, and not financially compensated from this researcher, Eastern Michigan University, or any other entity. The benefit to you for your participation is contributing to important research in the area of women in the superintendency.

### **How Data Will be Shared**

The information shared will allow me to publish the findings of this study in scholarly journals or to present them at scholarly meetings or conferences. Public dissemination will also include public/electronic access through EMU's library and UMI/Proquest for all dissertations. Again, no personally identifiable information will be shared. Pseudonyms will be used for all interviewees and school districts.

### **Consent to Participate**

After reading the above information, please sign and date the following statement:

I have fully read this consent document and am willing to proceed with my voluntary participation knowing that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I also am willing to have my interview audio-recorded. I realize that I will be provided a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

### **Closing**

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee (UHRSC) for use from January 1, 2012 through January 1, 2013. If you have questions about this approval process, please contact Dr. Deb deLaski-Smith (734-487-0042, Interim Dean of the Graduate School and Administrative Co-Chair of UHRSC, [human.subjects@emich.edu](mailto:human.subjects@emich.edu)).

Participants may contact Julie Powell before, during, or after the study at 616-901-1607 or [powellju3@gmail.com](mailto:powellju3@gmail.com)

Thank you for your participation,

Julie Powell  
Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership  
Eastern Michigan University