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Women and the Superintendency

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WOMEN AND THE SUPERINTENDENCY

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ABSTRACT

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       The purpose of this study was to determine whether past and present female

superintendents in Colorado felt their career paths were gendered. In addition, what strategies

they used to navigate their experiences were examined. A qualitative multi-case study design

was used to structure this study. A social constructionism philosophy as described by Crotty

(2003) guided the study. The multi-case design and epistemology support collecting multiple

experiences within a phenomenon (Crotty, 2003). Participants were selected through purposeful

snowball sampling. The community of female superintendents in Colorado is small and

connected. This study included four retired female superintendents and five who are still

currently serving in the role in Colorado.

       Qualitative data were drawn from three different resources. Interview transcripts, follow-

up questions, and newspaper and website publications were gathered, analyzed, and coded for

major themes. The data analysis suggested that female superintendents in Colorado have

gendered experiences within their path towards and service within the superintendency. The

findings regarding whether their experiences were gendered included themes of discrimination,

gendered leadership expectations, and what motivated these nine women to pursue the

superintendency. The first two were significant challenges for the women. To help navigate their

way to the top, the nine women employed various strategies, including hard work, collaboration,

and maintaining a strong support system. The participants felt as though they had to work harder to be noticed and had to do others' dirty work at times. They relied heavily on collaborative working relationships with others, and they discussed the need to have a supportive team when reaching the top. The study has significance in helping aspiring female leaders understand the experiences and strategies of these nine female superintendents in Colorado who successfully attained the role that other women find difficult to reach. In Colorado, only about 30% of school district superintendents are female even though women make up the majority of the workforce in education (Carli & Eagly, 2016; CASE contact list; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

Currently, female professionals dominate the field of education; however, that hasn't always been the case (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Kanter, 2008; Tyack, 1974). In the early 1800s, most educators were, in fact, men (Tyack, 1974). Throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century, there was a multitude of reasons for women to enter the workforce as teachers (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack, 1974). In some cases, men were sent to war, and in other scenarios, they were pulled towards farming or the industrial revolution. Regardless, women needed to fill the gap when men were tapped for other opportunities (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack, 1974). Slowly but surely, by the early 1900s, the field of education became a primarily female occupation (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack, 1974).

Conversely, other industries did not see women's emergence until the mid to late 1900s (Denmark, 1977; Kanter, 1977). By the 1970s, research specifically focused on working women began to emerge (Denmark, 1977; Kanter, 1977). As women started to enter the workplace at a higher rate, they faced paternalism, tokenism, and discrimination (Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). Many factors contributed to the barriers and challenges that women faced in the workplace; however, one of the most significant was that leadership positions remained dominated by men, reinforcing paternalistic patterns of the past (Denmark,

1977; Kanter, 1977). Men in top leadership roles have historically believed women were not capable of leading (Badura et al., 2018; Bailey, 2005; Bear et al., 2017; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Denmark, 1977; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Kanter, 2008). In addition, as women began to break into other industries as they had in the role of teacher many years before, intense pressures related to being tokenized created difficulty in the workplace (Kanter, 1977; King et al., 2010; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Torchia et al., 2011). These barriers created a phenomenon known as a glass ceiling that has challenged women since the study of working women began (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The term suggests that women can see the positions above them but can never attain said positions (Carli & Eagly, 2016). These challenges continue to exist for women in the workplace, although in recent years, perceptions of female leadership and women's ability to reach top leadership roles have started to evolve (Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Schock et al., 2018).

Not only were there negative perceptions or skepticism about a woman's ability to lead, but there were also paternalistic points of view that opined that women should be in the household and not in the workplace (Yoder, 2001). Because women had not traditionally held leadership roles, they struggled to be seen in such positions (Yoder, 2001). Researchers found that women were perceived as too soft and unprepared for difficult decision-making (Schock et al., 2018; Yoder, 2001). However, as attitudes about leadership shifted from the desire for a transactional, agentic leader to valuing transformational, collaborative leadership, support for female leaders began to emerge (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly, 2007; Schock et al., 2018).

Today, women make up almost 50% of the workforce, yet their ability to reach top leadership positions varies across industries. Corporate rates continue to hover in the single digits, while charity-based organizations have grown to above 50% of top leadership positions

being held by women (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Without the continued trend towards females in leadership, women's challenges cannot be effectively addressed (Bear et al., 2017). Strategies such as mentorship and networking are limited for aspiring female leaders until they have the opportunity to see and be led by other women who have successfully navigated their path (Bear et al., 2017).

The disproportionality of female leadership in education is equally stark. More than 80% of educators are female (Badura et al., 2018; Bailey, 2005; Baker, 1982; Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Schock et al., 2018; Sperandio, 2015; Thorpe, 2018; Wyland, 2016). Across the country, however, the percentage of female superintendents is just approaching 20% (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Wyland, 2016). As noted in the business industry, up-and-coming female educational leaders need to see themselves in leadership roles. To do that, they must have role models who offer a deep understanding of the challenges that must be faced and overcome to attain success (Brunner, 2008; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Eagly, 2007; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016).

Research Problem

Although women have had a significant presence in education for close to 200 years, they are still stymied in their search to lead large school districts (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Tyack, 1974). More than 80% of teachers are female, yet the inverse is true for female superintendents (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Grogan, 2005; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015). Numerous barriers continue to impede female leaders (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Wyland, 2016). Barriers, such as sexism and stereotyping, still prevail (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Thorpe, 2018). The imbalance of domestic expectations and motherhood guilt continues to plague women seeking

top educational leadership roles (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016). Finally, systematic and cultural barriers that still benefit male leaders remain in place, making it difficult for aspiring women to break through the proverbial ceiling (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan, 2005, 2008). Given that beliefs about female leadership are changing, women dominate the educational profession, and women have the knowledge and prerequisite experience that is needed to lead a school district. The barriers keeping women from the superintendency need to be further understood and dismantled to bring opportunity to would-be female superintendents.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The intent of this qualitative multi-case study was to study the career paths, successes, and challenges of women who have successfully attained the job of the school district superintendent. In addition, the study endeavored to understand the strategies they used to accomplish their goals and ascertain the advice they would give to those who will come after them. Two overarching research questions guided this study:

Q1   How do past and present Colorado female superintendent perceive that their gender influenced their path towards and experiences within the superintendency?

Q2   How do past and present Colorado female superintendents navigate their gendered experiences?

Method

This study's findings provide a detailed description of four retires and five currently serving female superintendents' lived experiences. Participants were selected using a snowball method as the community of female superintendents is closely knit. Two categories, currently serving and retired female superintendents, were asked to participate. Initially, the women participated in a semi-structured interview. Follow-up conversations helped clarify and deepen

the data collected. Finally, the review of newspaper articles and district website publications helped glean information about the participants, as well. Detailed personal perspectives were gathered from and about each participant regarding their experiences. Member checking, epoche, bracketing, and horizontalization were used to reduce bias and meet trustworthiness measures.

Significance of the Study

Currently and previously serving female superintendents are an excellent resource for researchers to better understand how barriers and systems have worked for or against other females on the path to the superintendency. A clearer picture of how to navigate this career path is needed for more women to attain the superintendent's position (Brunner, 2008; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016). Understanding the strategies these women employed to succeed can benefit those dreaming of the same career (Brunner, 2008; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016). Additional insight into the value of mentoring, networking, leadership preparation, support systems, and awareness of one's leadership style can be invaluable to women aspiring to the superintendency (Brown-Klingelhoefer, 2003; Brunner, 2008; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Eagly, 2007; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016).

In addition to understanding what it takes to reach the top and lead a school district, some researchers suggested that women who pursue the superintendency are more grounded in educational pedagogy and curriculum and instruction (Brunner, 2008; Brunner et al., 2002; Grogan, 2008). They went on to say that women altruistically pursue leadership to better serve students and community, rather than for personal gain and monetary gain, more than their male

counterparts (Brunner, 2008; Brunner et al., 2002; Grogan, 2008). With the ever-changing landscape of what it takes to educate children effectively, we must capitalize on and tap into female leaders' strengths (Grogan, 2008).

Definitions

The following definitions provide a common underpinning for this study:

Discriminations. The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or things, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex.

Paternalism. The policy or practice on the part of people in positions of authority of restricting the freedom and responsibilities of those subordinate to them in the subordinates' supposed best interest.

Role congruity theory. The theory proposes that a group will be positively evaluated when its characteristics are recognized as aligning with that group's typical social roles.

Sexism. Prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex.

Tokenism. The practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to be inclusive to members of minority groups, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups to give the appearance of racial or sexual equality within a workforce.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

History

Women in the 1800s could access a small sector of jobs such as teaching and care-taking; however, it was not until the 20th century that women began taking on more work outside the home (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Kanter, 2008; Tyack, 1974). Rarely, however, did that result in women attaining high-level executive positions (Eagly, 2007; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Kanter, 2008). Working women were weighed down with an imbalance of domestic expectations, such as housework, childcare, and marital responsibilities (Badura et al., 2018). Men were considered the breadwinners, assertive, and direct, while women, possessing communal traits such as warmth and caring, were considered homemakers (Badura et al., 2018). Socially constructed gender roles limited women's ability to be seen as contributing meaningfully outside of the household and evoked mental associations that shaped beliefs about a woman's role in society (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). Lako (2004), quoting Afhami, stated, "The unequal conditions of women from universally repressive and unjust social order that throughout history has denied women the opportunity to gain capabilities necessary to successful competition" (p. 6). To interrupt the unequal treatment of women, organizations must jettison the norms "which entrench and perpetuate the oppression of women by men in the name of culture and tradition" (Lako, 2004, p. 7). Patriarchy is the term used to define these universal norms of oppression; it "is a universal phenomenon transcending

all worldly cultures and traditions" (Lako, 2004, p.10). Lako suggested that patriarchy manifests itself in every aspect of life, including religion, employment, and politics (Lako, 2004). Patriarchy is why the workplace is gendered and heavily defaults towards masculine traits (Duersti-Lahti, 2002). Men's power is normalized, and as such, the control over women in the workplace is pervasive (Duersti-Lahti, 2002). In many settings, women are seen as property and need to be controlled by the stronger more-knowing male (Duersti-Lahti, 2002). Duersti-Lahti (2002) stated that for women to succeed in the workplace "women must have masculinist approval and assistance" (p. 381).

In 1977, Kanter published a seminal work entitled *Men and Women of the Corporation,* which examined women's roles in business (Kanter, 1977). Often women were entering and enduring gender hostile environments (Boulton & Coldron, 1998). According to Kanter (2008), women who operated in groups composed of 85% or more men experienced negative consequences associated with tokenism. "Tokenism theory posits that numerical underrepresentation is a primary cause of negative work experiences for minority group members" (King et al., 2010, p. 484). Tokenized people become hyper-visible in their setting (Kanter, 1977; King et al., 2010; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Schoen et al., 2018; Torchia et al., 2011). In an attempt to be less visible and fly under the radar, women are sometimes overlooked or seen as underperforming in the organization (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). In addition to being more visible, there is increased polarization for women (Kanter, 1977; King et al., 2010; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Schoen et al., 2018; Torchia et al., 2011). Polarization essentially draws attention to how women are different from their dominant male counterparts (Kanter, 1977; King et al., 2010; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Schoen et al., 2018; Torchia et al., 2011). Women are treated as outsiders because they don't fit the dominant mold of masculinity (Kanter, 1977; King

et al., 2010; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Schoen et al., 2018; Torchia et al., 2011). As a result of these pressures, tokenized people attempt to assimilate, which creates additional negative impacts, especially on their relationships with other non-dominate members (Kanter, 1977; King et al., 2010; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Torchia et al., 2011). Tokenized women who assimilate lose friendships, become isolated from other women, and sometimes experience backlash from men after seeking a promotion (Kanter, 1977; King et al., 2010; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Torchia et al., 2011).

In addition to being highly visible, polarized from men, and feeling pressure to assimilate, females were also often categorized into three profiles, according to Schoen et al. (2018). Women are seen as mothers, seductresses, and pets in the workplace (Schoen et al., 2018). All three categorizations stood to devalue women and their efforts and keep them patronized and marginalized (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). Such stereotyping served to create additional barriers for women seeking to attain promotion within an organization (Kanter, 1977; Lewis & Simpson, 2012). According to Kanter (1977), women promoted to management positions were older than their male peers, had longer work histories with their companies, and received lower salaries.

As women started to enter the workforce in higher numbers and explore leadership roles, new metaphors were introduced by researchers that help frame the experience (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Carli and Eagly (2016) stated that metaphors express social perceptions. The glass ceiling metaphor illustrated that women could only go so far in their careers; they could see the path above and beyond their own, but they could not access it (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

At least one researcher also discussed the metaphor of the "maternal wall" and the "motherhood penalty" (Carli & Eagly, 2016). These metaphors reference the social roles described above and workforce leaders' beliefs that women, especially those with families, were making the wrong decision when they chose to work outside the home (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Eagly and Karau (2002) also discussed the use of the "sticky floor" metaphor, which indicated societal and familial expectations held women down (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kanter, 1977). As time passed, women began to experience "the labyrinth," a recent metaphor (Eagly & Karau, 2002) regarding why greater access to opportunity includes new challenges that take longer to address. At times, women experienced barriers and started over, just as one would in a labyrinth (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In alignment with the labyrinth metaphor, Carli and Eagly stated, "Women continue to face challenges that men do not face. . . They are more complex and nuanced" (Carli & Eagly, 2016, p. 514). These metaphors have morphed over time, as has the role of women in business. Kanter's early work described women as the secretary who serves male leaders, the corporate wife who never attempts to outperform her husband, and the manager who gets stuck in mid-level decision-making roles (Kanter, 1977).

Despite changes to the proportion of women in the workforce over recent decades, there are still very few options at the top (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) showed that women make up 46% of the workforce and held 51% of all bachelor's degrees and 46% of all advanced degrees. However, nationally, women still hold only 4% of top-level leadership roles in the business sector and 14% of all top political positions (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

In a 2016 study, researchers found that the top leadership scene in politics had shifted during the previous five years (Carli & Eagly). Of the 24 female presidents and prime ministers

worldwide, 37% of them entered their role within the past five years; additionally, Carli and

Eagly (2016) found that the percentage of female government leaders in the U.S. grew from 9%

to 27% in that timeframe. In that same study, the researchers found that 26% of CEOs are

women, yet fewer than 5% of Fortune 500 companies appointed women to the helm (Carli &

Eagly, 2016).

Perceptions of Leadership

According to many researchers, the roles women have historically played in society

affected workforce perceptions (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan,

2016; Schock et al., 2018). Role Congruity Theory explains this phenomenon (Eagly & Karau,

2002). Role Congruity Theory specifically tied gender roles to sex and then helped identify how

those roles played out in the workforce (Eagly & Karau, 2002). According to Eagly and Karau

(2002), men are described as dominant, while women are described as integral to the community,

raising children, and caring for others. In other words, men possess agency, while women

demonstrate communal traits (Schock et al., 2018). When overlaid on perceptions of leadership,

these patriarchal concepts affect what subordinates believe about their leader's abilities (Eagly &

Karau, 2002; Lako, 2004). One study indicated that female evaluations had been affected by

gender role stereotypes in two ways (Eagly & Karau, 2002). First, women receive evaluations

showing less leadership potential than men because agentic, directive traits are perceived as less

desirable in women than men (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In addition, Eagly and Karau (2002)

offered that "women are perceived to have less leadership ability than men and that the

communal gender roles typically expressed or valued in female behaviors are not seen as strong

leadership skills" (p. 591). Schock et al. (2018) suggested a "backlash effect" when women

break the conventional social mold, similar to the researchers noted above. This effect is closely

tied to the metaphors of the sticky floor, maternal wall, and motherhood penalty (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Researchers in this area concluded that women in leadership are perceived more negatively because they have stepped away from taking care of their families (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Yoder (2001) found leadership itself is gendered and that leadership is a process that occurs within a social context that, too, is gendered. Traits considered effective for men are not regarded as effective for women. The contexts differ. Examples given by researchers include the concept of the head of the table (Yoder, 2001). When men sit at the head of the table, they are viewed as strong leaders, but it can often be perceived as domineering when women do it (Yoder, 2001).

The negative impact on perceptions of women's abilities in leadership is starting to change. Carli and Eagly (2016) found a change in the perception of women in leadership roles when the organization valued communal traits--organizations such as education, health care, and philanthropy (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Another way in which perceptions are challenged is in how well-prepared women are for their next role. Yoder (2001) found that "power status, confounded with gender, holds the keys to understanding what happens to women in a masculinized context" (p. 819). As previously stated, women now outnumber men in college enrollment and advanced degree attainment and, according to researchers, are no longer perceived to trail men in preparedness for the next level (Schock et al., 2018). For this trend to continue, researchers found that women must become familiar with, and attempt to adopt, a balance of communal and agentic traits (Schock et al., 2018). These researchers also discovered "the relationship of perceived agency and perceived communion with leadership emergence have some important practical implications for the promotion of equity for men and women in organizations and

society" (Schock et al., 2018, p. 7). One study suggested that women needed to focus on raising their status level to that of men by determining what they can do for themselves, what they can do for their organizations, and combining the two to affect the context in which they have come to be defined (Yoder, 2001). Schock and colleagues found that women must remain resilient. Even though they understand how they are perceived and how to challenge those perceptions, women must also understand the nuances of leadership and effectively apply all necessary skills (Schock et al., 2018).

Styles of Leadership

Transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire are well-known leadership styles (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Schock et al., 2018). Historically, transactional leadership is associated with male, agentic traits (Denmark, 1977; Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Kanter, 1977; Yoder, 2001). These traits are directive in nature, having a clear hierarchy between leaders and their direct reports, and typically including a reward system to address performance (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002). The transactional leaders often wait to get involved until a problem or issue rises to their level (Badura et al., 2018; Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Researchers attributed this waiting to the belief that most things will work themselves out before needing to be addressed by the leader. Finally, transactional leaders can be seen by others as self-serving, sometimes taking credit for their subordinates' work (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Transformational leadership, on the other hand, is associated with communal traits. It embraces a more collaborative structure as transformational leaders attempt to influence and inspire their subordinates' behavior (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Transformational leaders do this by communicating the mission, vision, and values of the organization. These leaders are skilled

problem solvers, but according to a 2007 study, they also mentor and empower their people to develop their potential as organizational contributors and leaders (Eagly). They are also sometimes called charismatic leaders. Recent research shows that this kind of leadership has been correlated with greater effectiveness and is becoming more desired by workers (Eagly, 2007).

Laissez-faire leadership is negatively perceived. These leaders lack involvement and are typically not present. Workers do not view anyone as truly in charge and feel the leader possesses little understanding of what the workers do (Eagly, 2007). One researcher asserted that there is generally a failure to take responsibility within the laissez-faire leadership style (Eagly, 2007).

Researchers have also studied the relationship between power and leadership (Yoder, 2001). Yoder (2001) identified three different types of power: power over, power from, and power to others (Yoder, 2001, p. 816). Power over others is similar to the transactional leadership style; the leader is dominant (Yoder, 2001). Power from others is when the leader drains energy from others and is associated with lassiez-faire leadership (Yoder, 2001). Power to others, however, empowers others' work and is related to transformational leadership.

Female leaders have become more closely identified with the transformational leadership style. One study found that women can enhance their perceived effectiveness by adopting the traits associated with transformational leadership (Yoder, 2001). According to some researchers, not only do leadership experts endorse transformational leadership, but they also acknowledge that women manifest this style more than men (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly, 2007). Eagly (2007) further found that this style of leadership "helps women solve for incongruity between their social roles and leadership expectations" (p. 6). Researchers also supported the assertion that

women must remain pliable in leadership as they balance stereotypical male and female traits (Schock et al., 2018). Quoted in Eagly (2007), Sharpe said, "After years of analyzing what makes leaders more effective and figuring out who has got the Right Stuff, management gurus now know how to boost the odds of getting a great executive: Hire a female" (p. 74).

Challenges Women Face in Becoming Leaders

Women have historically faced many challenges as they pursue top leadership roles (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Denmark, 1977). Discrimination has been one of the biggest challenges. Social role theory and gender discrimination have played a significant role in the treatment of women in leadership (Badura et al., 2018; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Men dominate leadership roles, and in a *Harvard Business Review* article from 1965, cited by Denmark (1977), men overwhelmingly reported that women were not suited for leadership. Almost 50 years later, Bear et al. (2017) found that women continue to receive evaluations that do not reflect the same success levels as men in the same roles. Also, men typically have been in charge of picking top leadership successors, and they usually choose those who mirror their image, background, gender, and beliefs (Denmark, 1977). Men in those top roles admitted that they treat female subordinates differently than their male counterparts, as described by the concept of polarization, a component of tokenized theory (Denmark, 1977; King et al., 2010). Examples of this disproportional treatment exist in the types of training opportunities offered to women and require females to reach higher qualification levels before considering them for advanced job titles (Denmark, 1977). Once women reached top positions, they continued to receive less compensation (Denmark, 1977). Years later, even as acceptance of females as leaders has evolved, researchers found that women still often hold higher academic credentials than their male peers (Badura et al., 2018).

Researchers have found other ways in which Social Role Theory manifests (Badura et al., 2018). Women surveyed about leadership candidates considered females warmer but associated that trait with lower professional status (Badura et al., 2018). In that same multi-method study, direct observations by the researchers found that, rather than asserting themselves as leaders, women looked down when confronted with conflict and complied more often when men were present (Badura et al., 2018). Denmark (1977) found that men talked more than women talked and repeatedly interrupted women speaking.

As acknowledged above, men are more often in leadership roles and, therefore, are the evaluators of women looking to move up (Bear et al., 2017; Denmark, 1977). Researchers found that the evaluation process gives men more credit than women, especially in group settings (Bear et al., 2017). Because the feedback women received, often to a different, higher standard, is patronizing, women felt discouraged rather than confident in their abilities (Bear et al., 2017). As a result, women self-select out of leadership pursuits because they believe their skills are perceived as inferior and will not receive recognition (Bear et al., 2017). All these factors lead to men retaining power and further challenging women who desire to progress professionally (Bear et al., 2017). A recent meta-analysis found that "female leaders received lower ratings of effectiveness than their male counterparts in the past, but that this is no longer the case for the most recent studies" (Carli & Eagly, 2016, p. 520).

The motherhood penalty aptly described the social role expectations that also challenge women (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016) found that domestic labor division significantly affects women's abilities to access professional opportunities (p. 360). Women with children continue to be primary caretakers, and those married to men may need to meet their husbands' needs in ways that are not reciprocal (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016).

Women must balance and successfully execute their personal lives without impacting their professional lives (Kokok, 2014). Researchers found that men rarely report having to choose between family and career, whereas women frequently report this challenge (Kokok, 2014). According to Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016), the call for women to attend to their children's daily needs and activities affects their attendance at work at times and can erode their built-up capital.

Not only are women expected to provide care, but they must also perfectly balance their male and female traits at work to ensure that their direct reports are comfortable (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Schock et al., 2018). One study showed that women benefit from masculine traits but must maintain their softer side (Schock et al., 2018). Women are caught in a "double bind" if perceived as either too feminine or too masculine (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016, p. 358). These researchers have also found that, as women move up the ladder to more senior roles, expressing agentic traits negatively affects them more than men (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016, p. 358). According to Eagly (2007), combining communion and agency has a strong positive effect on the perception of women in the workplace. However, one of the biggest challenges to overcome is prejudice: workers still report preferring male bosses over female bosses, regardless of the progress women have made in this area over time.

Development of Women

Women have learned how to strategize and balance masculine and feminine traits and are getting hired into leadership roles more than in any other period in history (Eagly, 2007, p. 4). This change in perceptions of women as leaders and their ability to hold more powerful roles is considered an asset (Eagly, 2007). To that end, different studies have looked at what women need to be more successful (Baker, 1982; Brown-Klingelhoefer, 2003; Carli & Eagly, 2016;

Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Wyland, 2016; Yoder, 2001).

Among the findings were that women benefitted from professional networks, opportunities to

show their skill set, and from having mentors, sponsors, or advocates (Baker, 1982; Brown-

Klingelhoefer, 2003; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Yoder, 2001). Other

studies focused on women's personal needs, such as available childcare, supportive spouses, a

family support system, and flexibility in their work schedule (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016).

Yoder (2001) also noted that women could benefit greatly from having a solid understanding of

how perceptions of women in leadership have evolved over the last 50 years.

According to several researchers, mentorship is of the utmost importance (Brown-

Klingelhoefer, 2003; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Gardiner et al., 2000;

Grogan, 2005; Wyland, 2016; Yoder, 2001). Influential mentors offer friendship, feedback, and

advice and help a female candidate view her position holistically (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016;

Gardiner et al., 2000). This kind of support can help women navigate the societal pressures that

they will inevitably face (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). In Brown-Klingelhoefer's 2003

dissertation research, a participant "discussed how fortunate she was to have the support and

guidance of her mentors and role models" (p. 206). Mentors advocate for women, legitimizing a

female candidate's strengths and potential (Yoder, 2001). According to Yoder (2001), helping

affirm a female leader's qualifications is one part of the mentorship, but the other helps validate

her skill set to others. One of many challenges to mentorship for women in male-dominant

industries is that men can be reluctant to mentor young females for fear that there will be

questions about sexual innuendo or their motives (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). According to

Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016), this fear can limit many young female leaders' access to

mentorship and coaching. Gardiner et al. (2000), in agreement with Kanter (1977), stated that

"women and minorities tend to feel that powerful men who mentor them may be doing this as much to enhance their careers as to help their protégés" (p. 8). They suggested women often ended up feeling used in these situations instead of mentored (Gardiner et al., 2000). With any mentoring relationship, there is also always a concern for issues created by the possible power differential and appearance of favoritism (Gardiner et al., 2000). However, the benefits still significantly outweigh the challenges when the right partnership is formed (Brown-Klingelhoefer, 2003; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Gardiner et al., 2000; Wyland, 2016; Yoder, 2001).

Additionally, there is evidence that women were historically excluded from high-level networking (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Kanter (1977) stated that "there is clear empirical evidence that women who operate in groups of 85% or more men experience negative consequences associated with tokenism, including heightened visibility, with resultant performance pressures, social isolation and gender role stereotyping" (p. 823). Kanter suggested that the way to combat these adverse effects is to add women to the group because networks offer their members access and opportunity (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Kanter, 1977). Access can consist of additional training, developmental assignments, and other mentoring and sponsorship opportunities from people within the industry (Badura et al., 2018; Brown-Klingelhoefer, 2003; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Yoder, 2001). Yoder (2001) tied the concepts of mentorship, networking, and training together when he suggested that organizations need to evaluate the resources they provide for women, how they legitimize their work publically, and how they offer advanced training that leads to further access and opportunity. One of the challenges of women accessing networks is the largely segregated nature of the organizations. Favor is offered to men in the hierarchy of organizations, and as a result, female networks often lack power and influence (Carli & Eagly,

2016; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). In addition, networking often happens outside the workday, making it harder for women when they are attempting to balance their family's needs (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016).

At home, women ascending to leadership need other types of support, including supportive partners and or family structures (Brown-Klingelhoefer, 2003; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). Having other people assume responsibility for taking care of children, making dinner, and minding household chores takes a significant load off the female leader (Brown-Klingelhoefer, 2003; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). Access to childcare is needed to ensure that women can participate at high levels of the organization. When the demands challenge women's' ability to execute professionally and in their personal lives, they are more likely to miss work that can erode their capital with colleagues (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016).

Studies exploring female leaders' needs provide suggestions for what women can do for themselves and what organizations can do to support them better (Badura et al., 2018; Bear et al., 2017; Yoder, 2001). Yoder (2001) had three primary suggestions for potential female leaders, the first of which included monitoring their speech patterns to avoid dominant speech patterns associated with men. Instead, women were encouraged to listen and converse with their direct reports to make them feel comfortable rather than barking directives (Yoder, 2001). Humor was of great value within this strategy (Yoder, 2001). A second suggestion was that women take their time before trying to influence the group. Instead, Yoder recommended that women sit back, listen, and develop an understanding of the whole group. The third suggestion was that women be overly competent, meaning having more experience, more educational status, and more training than their male counterparts (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Yoder, 2001). Yoder (2001)

acknowledged that asking women to compensate in these ways is unfair, yet such strategies may be necessary for women to employ in their leadership pursuit.

Other studies suggested what organizations can do to create more congenial environments (Badura et al., 2018; Bear et al., 2017; Brown-Klingelhoefer, 2003; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Yoder, 2001). These suggestions included providing needed supports, such as materials, resources, training, professional opportunities, and mentoring programs. Bear et al. (2017) went so far as to suggest that systems could educate men on treating women differently. The researchers further suggested that "organizations can create training programs designed to help women overcome subtle bias such as being interrupted and not receiving credit for suggestions" (Badura et al., 2018, p. 35). Above all, strategic planning for mentorship programs provides a significant value for organizations looking to develop female leadership (Badura et al., 2018; Bear et al., 2017; Brown-Klingelhoefer, 2003; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Yoder, 2001).

Women in Leadership Across Industries

As stated previously, women constitute 46% of the workforce, and as they continue to excel educationally, women now hold more than half of all bachelor's degrees and 46% of all advanced degrees. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), desire. Badura et al. (2018) concluded that the negative stereotyping preventing women from reaching higher management levels seems to be shifting due to the increased desire for more communal leadership styles.

Although over time the percentage of leadership opportunities available to women has evolved, the number varies by industry (Badura et al., 2018; Brown-Klingelhoefer, 2003; Brunner, 2008; Denmark, 1977; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Kanter, 1977; Schock et al., 2018; Sims et al., 2017; Wyland,

2016). Though industries such as education and philanthropy have seen a rise in female leadership, others fall well below 50% (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Schock et al., 2018). The discussion of female leadership in some industries follows.

Corporations

As noted above, according to the 2015 U.S. Bureau of Statistics, 26% percent of CEOs are women; however, fewer than 5% of the CEOs in Fortune 500 companies are female (Carli & Eagly, 2016), with women often still limited to the roles of manager, secretary, or corporate wife (Kanter, 2008). Manager assignments are elevated roles for women, but there is still a dance to balance agentic and communal traits (Badura et al., 2018). Managerial positions have become more available for women in the corporate setting but, according to a study by Badura et al. (2018), growth in this area has been hard to truly study because jobs of this nature are awarded to women on a seniority basis rather than as a promotion for performance.

On the other hand, secretaries or administrative assistants provide a support system for different leadership positions (Kanter, 2008). These supporting roles have historically helped men ascend through an organization, and their contributions are undervalued (Kanter, 2008). Women predominantly hold such positions, and Kanter (2008) suggested that men see these jobs as menial and lacking the prospect of advancement in the corporate setting. Cooperate leadership roles are still heavily dominated by men and male culture (Badura et al., 2018; Bailey, 2005; Bear et al., 2017; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Kanter, 2008; Keedy et al., 2007). Men are in control of the top positions, networking, the evaluation systems, and hiring--all of which challenge women trying to succeed professionally (Badura et al., 2018; Bailey, 2005; Bear et al., 2017; Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Kanter, 2008).

Philanthropic organizations are anomalous, with women holding some 56% of CEO positions in this industry (Carli & Eagly, 2016). According to Carli and Eagly (2016), the aforementioned statistic is in sharp contrast to Fortune 500 companies. This difference is likely because communal traits associated stereotypically with women influence the perception that women will perform best in these jobs (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Government

Men have also dominated the government; however, a 2016 study found that there had been significant shifts in the number of positions held by women (Carli & Eagly). In the United States government, women's leadership positions grew from 9% to 27%, and, internationally, 24 top leadership roles at both the prime minister and presidential levels were women (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Researchers found that women hold 14% of all top political roles (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Governmental jobs, such as political positions and military assignments, are highly male-dominated and incongruent with female leadership expectations (Eagly, 2007). Women are judged as substantially less effective than men in jobs generally considered masculine such as the military (Eagly, 2007). Eagly espoused that "advancing up a highly male-dominated hierarchy requires especially strong, skillful and persistent women" (2007, p. 6).

Education

In the early 1800s, most teachers were men (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack, 1974). Men were generally considered smarter and more prepared to lead the country's youth (Tyack, 1974). However, by the middle of the 19th century, educational leaders and reformers like Horace Mann were starting to shift their beliefs about who was capable of teaching (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). As a result, the field of education was one of the first to accept women in

the workplace (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack, 1974). According to historians in this field of research, female teachers were cheaper to employ, they were readily available, and caring for the country's children was seen as a good training ground for them to later become married and successfully raise their children (Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Teaching was spoken of as a natural role for women to take before they were married (Blount, 1998). By the mid-1800s, women began to dominate the teaching profession, so much so that the job, in the eyes of the public, became gendered and considered to be dominated by the female perspective (Badura et al., 2018; Bailey, 2005; Baker, 1982; Blount, 1998; Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Schock et al., 2018; Sperandio, 2015; Thorpe, 2018; Tyack, 1974; Wyland, 2016). Tyack (1974) suggested that women fit into three categories. Female teachers were either young and single, old spinsters, or potentially socially deviant lesbians (Tyack, 1974). The significant stigma associated with lesbianism drove women out of teaching (Tyack, 1974). During that time, men became less comfortable in the teaching role (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack, 1974). According to Rousmaniere (2013), the teacher's role became associated with feminine traits to such a level that men who taught, especially in rural areas, were considered weak, gangly, and incapable of physical labor such as farming. They also struggled with low pay, which made it challenging to support their families (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974).

As women entered the teaching workforce and men became less comfortable with the perception of them as teachers, the belief that these women needed to be controlled and guided due to their lack of experience and feeblemindedness rose (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). As such, men's promotion into leadership positions increased (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). There was also a belief that having too many females in the system would damage boys, so the placement of

men in leadership positions would offset that impact (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). The men who remained in teaching positions were typically at the secondary level, continued to be paid more than their female colleagues, and began to develop organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA) or the American Institute of Instruction. Nationwide that excluded or significantly limited women's access to their organizations (Blount, 1998). Blount (1998) found that these clubs were prone to fraternity-like atmospheres with plenty of drinking, smoking, and creating male fellowship.

Men dominated leadership roles in education (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). When they were not under their father's or husband's rule, women would naturally be under their bosses' control (Blount, 1998). This structure created a pedagogical harem, according to Tyack (1974). There was a belief that women already knew what it was to be submissive to men and, thus, this gender-divided structure felt natural (Tyack, 1974).

By the late 1800s, women began to find their leadership place (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack, 1974). These pioneering women faced limitless challenges dominated by sexism (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack, 1974). Examples include being held to a higher standard than their male counterparts, continually receiving subpar wages, and having to challenge the old boy's network that valued male leadership traits (Rousmaniere, 2013). As women attained supervisory positions, their male employees would refuse or dismiss their feedback, supported by other more senior males in the organization (Rousmaniere, 2013). Tyack (1974) found evidence of male teachers declaring they would not accept judgment from petticoats and other men cosigning on their belief that such an idea would be ridiculous.

In the first half of the 20th century, women occupied between 60% and 75% of principalships, differing between rural and urban settings (Rousmaniere, 2013). Most of these

jobs were at the elementary level. Women held less than 10% of high school principalships during this same period. This phenomenon's reasons include the belief that women were more suited to work with younger children, where nurturing was still needed (Rousmaniere, 2013). In addition, elementary administrative positions only required a two-year degree, whereas secondary jobs required a four-year degree from a university (Rousmaniere, 2013). Male students dominated university enrollment (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013). Rousmaniere (2013) also identified the cronyism that she aptly labels "the educational trust" (p. 55). The trust's composition was the government, collegiate, school board, and educational district systems controlled by men that presented substantial challenges for women as they began breaking into leadership positions (Rousmaniere, 2013). These paternalistic structures essentially required that women in these roles be married and manage their children while having an impeccable work ethic and managing a successful school (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013). Wyland stated, "Public school district leadership is a contradiction; males dominate it while teaching is dominated by females" (2016, p. 47). According to another researcher, women are less likely to occupy administrator roles, even though these roles are pivotal in affecting future school success (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). A 2001 study found:

> Discrimination still exists in terms of salary, benefits, recruitment, hiring, and promotion. Furthermore, women principals tend to be hired more frequently at the elementary level, while female superintendents are relegated to less desirable districts that are either small and rural or urban and troubled. These troubles merely scratch the surface of the inequities that impact women in educational leadership, yet the perception persists that women have achieved equity. (Young & McLeod)

The demand for women in teaching and administrative roles has ebbed and flowed over the last century as wartime requirements and economic needs have impacted families (Rousmaniere, 2013). As men returned from the war, women were pushed back into the home. Still, in times of economic downturn, men vacated teaching roles searching for higher pay, and women flooded back into the field to assist in supporting their families economically (Rousmaniere, 2013). Regardless, for approaching two centuries, women have played a significant role in education; however, reaching the superintendent's level remains limited for women (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack, 1974).

Women in the Superintendency

The concept of the role of a superintendent has had many meanings over time (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). In the 19th century, some superintendent positions were elected, and others were appointed (Blount, 1998). There were also vast numbers of superintendents' jobs overseeing a range of geographic areas ranging from one school to a governmental zone, to the state level (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). Some oversights encompassed an entire state, while others consisted of one or two schools in an area (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). Both scenarios proved challenging for women to succeed because "the educational trust" mentioned before asserted power in both arenas (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013). As women began to gain access to education organizations such as the NEA and were making advances in local-level leadership, men began allowing more access for women to the superintendent job (Blount, 1998). According to Blount (1998), as women gained the right to vote through the suffrage movement, more women were elected to the superintendency. Early success stories such as those of Laura Joanna Gherring and Ella Flagg Young served as some of the first female role models in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Young went on to also become

the president of the NEA, where she vowed to support women in the field of education and try to root out the cronyism and corruption that had plagued the organization (Blount, 1998). In a 2007 study, Brunner and Grogan referred to 1900 -1930 as the golden age of women in educational leadership. Due to the rise of women in the principalship and women winning the right to vote through the suffrage movement, more women began attaining the superintendent's role (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

In the 1950s-1970s, some male-dominated systems felt threatened by the increasing number of women in leadership positions. As a result, a large number of superintendents' jobs were consolidated, pushing women out as most superintendent jobs became appointed positions (Blount, 1998). Again, male-dominated school boards, university administration, local government officials, and conservative communities could better control who reached these top leadership positions (Blount, 1998; Rousmaniere, 2013). These decisions have had lasting effects.

Today, researchers in this field find women grossly underrepresented at the superintendent level (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Grogan, 2005; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015). According to a 2005 study by Grogan, 83% of teachers, 52% of elementary principals, 57% of central office staff, and 33% of executives, such as assistant superintendents, were female. A similar study found that, between 1994 and 2004, female elementary leadership grew from 41% to 56% (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). At that same time, women lagged in the secondary ranks, only increasing from 14% to 26%. Interestingly, most superintendents across the nation ascend from the secondary level (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010).

Since the early 20th century, there have been increases in the percentage of female superintendents (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Grogan, 2005; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999;

Wyland, 2016). In 1910, the percentage of female superintendents was approximately 9%; by 2010, that number had grown to 24% (Craig & Hardy, 1996; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). At the current rate, there will not be parity between the sexes until 2035 (Grogan, 2005). The percentage of women represented equated to approximately 15,500 in 1992 (Brunner et al., 2002; Craig & Hardy, 1996). Although the number of women in the superintendency doubled in 100 years, the percentage is still much smaller than that found in the female-dominated teacher ranks (Grogan, 2005; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). According to Craig and Hardy (1996), no study indicated one gender is better than the other in the superintendent's role, yet there is still a disproportional representation of women.

Researchers have found that women in education, as in other fields, lead in ways not labeled as leadership (Grogan, 2005). They are the teacher-leaders who inspire their colleagues or the community leader who connects to the school community's heartbeat (Brunner et al., 2002). In 2003, The School Superintendents Association (AASA) commissioned its first comprehensive study of women's superintendency (Grogan, 2005). Craig and Hardy (1996) and Brunner and Grogan (2007) found many reasons for the lack of interest in the superintendency in general, but those challenges also highlight the difficulty for women of doing the job well.

The superintendency has been an extraordinarily difficult job that has only gotten harder in the last few decades (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Grogan, 2005; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). The job requires an inordinate amount of skill and knowledge (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Craig & Hardy, 1996). Needed skills range from communication to transportation management (Craig & Hardy, 1996). A superintendent must also manage a constant bombardment of daily decisions, including long-term choices that will set up the education system for future generations (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Craig & Hardy, 1996).

The superintendent must understand the school district's finances because nothing is possible without the prudent management of resources (Craig & Hardy, 1996). Community relationship-building has also become a huge demand; community members must feel they can trust the person at the school's helm (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Craig & Hardy, 1996). While they establish local political relationships, superintendents must also balance state and federal initiatives, knowing that decisions at those levels will influence local demands (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Craig & Hardy, 1996). Moreover, as if these challenges are not enough, there are also demands around sports, building management, food and nutrition, health guidelines, human resource management, and, of course, teaching and learning (Craig & Hardy, 1996). None of these things are possible without a solid grounding in leadership skills (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Brunner et al., 2002; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009).

Barriers

As in other fields, significant barriers still exist for women in education (Brunner et al., 2002; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Wyland, 2016). These barriers have continually contributed to the misrepresentation of women in the top position (Craig & Hardy, 1996; Grogan, 2005; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Wyland, 2016). Some of these barriers are discussed below.

Stereotyping

Sex-role stereotyping and discrimination have inhibited women (Brunner, 1999; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Grogan, 2005; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Wyland, 2016). Sanchez and Thornton (2010) found that people preferred white, male, married, and heterosexual leaders. An example of how this type of discrimination has played out has been a community's desire to hire an older man because he is "wise," while conversely worrying about

a woman's age (Brunner, 2008). Additionally, women have fewer opportunities to learn and

stretch in their area of expertise, so they have engaged in fewer administrative experiences,

making them appear less prepared for the position and, thus, less likely to get chosen (Brunner,

2008). Because the superintendent's job is dominated historically by men, especially White men,

boards of education have learned to expect men in these positions to value White male traits as

the normative standard (Brunner, 2008). Thorpe (2018) found that, simply because of their

gender, women are viewed as less motivated for the next level of leadership. He coined the term

"benevolent sexism" to capture the soft underlying implicit bias (Thorpe, 2018). Those in charge

have internalized the belief that women should be taking care of their families and their children

(Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). The gender role expectation discussed by Derrington and Sharratt

(2009) is the same as mentioned by Eagly and Karau (2002). Gender role expectations assume

women are vying for these positions to portray themselves as influential leaders like men, yet

they still have to balance that with femininity (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt,

2009). As women are developing community relationships critical to the job's success, they are

expected to be attractive and have warm, kind hearts, all while projecting a sense of control of

their system (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Wallace, 2015). In 2008, Grogan developed a case

study of one female superintendent and proposed her findings through a feminist lens. She found

that her subject was treated differently. The community said she acted like an ice queen (Grogan,

2008). They were concerned about why her husband had not relocated and what that meant about

her family life (Grogan, 2008). As demonstrated in the previous research, this woman needed to

act the same as her male peers and "ladylike" (Grogan, 2008, p. 655). Sanchez and Thornton

(2010) found that men experienced more latitude to make decisions and make mistakes, whereas

women experienced critic on the details of every decision made. Again, men were stereotyped as

strong in dealing with discipline, while women were expected to be more communal and caring (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Gender stereotypes and expectations may be the most challenging hurdle for female superintendents, according to Craig and Hardy (1996).

Self-Imposed Barriers

Not all women's barriers are external (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Wyland, 2016). Women often self-select out of leadership opportunities they are given (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016). One reason has been their internal battle to take care of their families (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016). As mothers, these leaders often find themselves prioritizing the needs and development of their children before their professional goals (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). The job of superintendent requires long days, nights, weekends, and many hours on-call, which takes endless hours away from the family (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Thorpe, 2018; Wyland, 2016). According to researchers who studied the effect of the superintendency on family life, few superintendents had children below the middle-school age (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010; Thorpe, 2018; Wyland, 2016). Another family challenge is the expectation of relocation (Wyland, 2016). Women with superintendent options typically have to relocate, which is a massive demand for the family (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). While it is not unusual for a woman to follow her partner to a new location, the reverse is often not true (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). Lack of

family support has been a deterrent for women pursuing top leadership positions (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). According to Grogan (2005), familial pressures are more pronounced for people of color looking to advance to the superintendent's position.

Also, women judge themselves more harshly than their male counterparts (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). In surveys, they reported being less confident in their abilities and less willing to take risks as a result (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). That lack of confidence sometimes surfaces as a lack of tenacity or a lack of motivation and makes it harder for them to get hired (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). This harsh self-judgment makes it harder for female recruits to get hired (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010).

Finally, women reported feeling isolated and lonely in the superintendent's job (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Thorpe, 2018). Most team members did not have the experience to help their female employers (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Thorpe, 2018). As recently as 2018, Thorpe found women continue to report concerns about bearing a larger share of the burden of caring for their organizations, as well as being taken less seriously by their male colleagues. As a result, many women in these elevated positions continue to experience frustration (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Lynch et al., 2012).

System Barriers

Women have been missing from the leadership landscape for so long that few have had role models to emulate and, thus, have not imagined themselves capable of holding these positions (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan, 2005, 2008). Similarly, Kowalski and Stouder (1999) found that systems have failed to understand how to support women. The lack of support, such as networking, mentoring, career planning, and goal development, leave women to navigate the system alone (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). The field of educational leadership has been male-

dominated for a long time, and as a result, power structures remain with men and are unquestioned (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan, 2005). Growth opportunities, mentoring, and networking are male dominated, which creates a lack of employment opportunities for women (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999). These structural barriers have caused a lack of opportunity for women and people of color (Keedy et al., 2007). Women's voices are diminished because they are underrepresented and have less influence on policy and practice (Wyland, 2016)**.**

School District Politics and Policies

Politics is a challenge (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Craig & Hardy, 1996). One study found that managing elected officials, such as a board of education, can be taxing (Craig & Hardy, 1996). Concern or interest in children's education is sometimes secondary to the board members' personal agendas or future political aspirations (Craig & Hardy, 1996). There has also been heightened media interest in school district stories (Keedy et al., 2007). A leader's ability to establish trust is severely affected by negative coverage or "the churn and the burn" aspects of today's news cycle (Keedy et al., 2007). Situations such as this have caused superintendents to leave (Craig & Hardy, 1996).

In a 2008 case study, the Board of Education's political imbalance influenced the superintendent's decision to leave (Grogan). These elected officials were local representatives and believed that they knew the community better than the new leader (Grogan, 2008). In this study, the members not only fought with the superintendent, but they also fought with each other, making navigating the Board of Education hopeless (Grogan, 2008). In an earlier study, researchers found that women focused more on relationships, teaching, and learning, and community building-traits commonly valued and sought after (Craig & Hardy, 1996). However, when community leaders want to change the way children are taught, political issues can arise as

community members harken back to the good old days and fight change (Craig & Hardy, 1996).

Board and community management have become increasingly perplexing for all superintendents,

especially for women who are navigating their gender role stereotypes and it's congruency with

community culture and expectations (Brunner, 2008; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Eagly, 2007;

Grogan, 2008; Thorpe, 2018).

Of the top candidates in a school system (for example, assistant superintendents), studies

suggest that only 40% of candidates would even consider applying for a superintendent opening

because the job is known to be unbelievably demanding and stressful (Brunner & Grogan, 2007;

Grogan, 2005, 2008). Keedy et al. (2007) discussed the lack of college preparation for what such

a job entails as a critical concern. Some refer to it as the "superintendency crisis" because no one

wants the job (Keedy et al., 2007). Qualified candidates have left or are refusing to take positions

due to deteriorating work conditions, including stress, high demands, long days, and self-

expectations of perfection (Keedy et al., 2007; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Sanchez &

Thornton, 2010).

Factors contributing to these perceptions are feeling isolated and lack of personal

friendships because of the job's political nature(Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Robinson &

Shakeshaft, 2015). Unhealthy relationships, exacerbated by rumors, politics, and personal

agendas, further limited a leader's ability to share their experiences (Robinson & Shakeshaft,

2015). Some felt emotionally drained and, as a result, friendships and relationships suffered

(Brunner, 2008; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015). Helplessness, due to not knowing how to solve

problems, was reported as a cause of stress of the job as well (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015).

Specifically, they reported feeling out of control (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015). These aspects

were further intensified for women when they felt tokenized (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999).

Tokenization suggests that women were given jobs as exceptions rather than deserving them, further isolating female candidates and heightening their stress related to needing to perform (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999).

Health Concerns

Beyond feeling stressed and isolated, there were other dynamics that affected a superintendent's health (Brunner, 2008). The long hours, intense schedule, on-call demands, and scope of the workload affect sleep (Brunner, 2008). Also, the demands of the job impacted the superintendent's ability to eat well and exercise regularly (Brunner, 2008). These factors taken together can lead to weight gain, fatigue, and a lack of ability to relieve stress, which contributes negatively to a person's health and state of mind (Brunner, 2008).

Strategies

As in other industries, education researchers have begun to offer strategies they believe will be critical for encouraging women's success in this top educational leadership role (Brunner, 2008; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016). Researchers suggested that current leaders who want to recruit and retain female leaders must work to understand the culture and climate within their organizations and explore strategies needed to interrupt their problematic systems (Brunner, 2008; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016). The following sections identify several of these strategies.

Mentorship

As stated before, most dominant in the literature is the need for mentorship for women (Brunner, 2008; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Eagly, 2007; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016). Researchers suggested that women need a person who

understands them, their goals, and the demanding aspects of the job (Brunner, 2008; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Eagly, 2007; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016). This idea remains true in the field of education (Gardiner et al., 2000). Craig and Hardy (1996) specifically found that a superintendent needs to be mentored by another superintendent because no one else has a full understanding of the job. Another researcher found that current leaders must be intentional about sharing the joys of mentorship so that others are willing to try it (Grogan, 2005, 2008). A mentor's role can also be critical to steering teachers into top leadership roles by helping them see a pathway and strategies to creating a work-life balance earlier in their careers (Grogan, 2008). In the 2000 book, *Coloring Outside the Lines: Mentoring Women into School Leadership*, the authors described mentoring in this way:

> Mentoring is lending personal and career support and not just giving the rules that are valuable about how to be successful. It is sharing inside information that allows one to have an edge in making decisions, adding value to the organization, and leading others . . . mentors have the special capacity to help women garner the political support they need from others, by sharing the inside information about the organization. (Gardiner et al., pp. 26-27)

They discussed how contradictory the role of mentorship is for many women in leadership roles as they are offering guidance on how to break through the patriarchal systems and structures that they have managed to maneuver through and continue to work within (Gardiner et al., 2000). Grogan (2005, 2008) suggested the need for even more research in this area, specifically with female superintendents.

Networking

Networking was another strategy acknowledged by researchers. Networking can help future candidates and current superintendents create a confidante group that they can rely on in tough times (Sperandio, 2015; Wyland, 2016). Networks are also rich in possible connections to mentors (Sperandio, 2015; Wyland, 2016). Networks help connect people and foster professional relationships that support those willing to learn and lead (Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015). The proverbial good ol' boy networks historically supported men (Gardiner et al., 2000)). As such, women must actively pursue network opportunities that value supporting women in their endeavors (Gardiner et al., 2000). According to researchers, good mentors help guide female educators into networks that will help them become visible in the industry and connect them to the future supports and resources they will need (Gardiner et al., 2000). Once access is granted to valued networks, female leaders need to do their best to connect with others and bring them in (Gardiner et al., 2000).

Leadership Traits

According to Derrington and Sharratt (2009), having an iron will is critical for female superintendents. However, above and beyond personal grit, researchers also suggested that women be knowledgeable about and dedicated to a district (Sperandio, 2015). A 2009 study emphasized how important it is for women to be clear about their goals and vision for a district (Derrington & Sharratt).

Female leaders who built trusting relationships, developed strategic plans related to instruction and performance, and communicated a clear vision to staff and community were more successful (Grogan, 2005, 2008; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Wallace, 2015). Sanchez and Thornton (2010) suggested that women must develop collaborative environments. Collaborative,

healthy, work environments that articulate their vision to employees, value people, use power well, and expand opportunities for others are sought after (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). One study suggested that superintendents must actively resist practices deemed controlling, less collaborative, and antithetical to a work-life balance (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010).

Beyond the system they create, women also must be willing to advocate for themselves by negotiating for personal time, schedule flexibility, and higher pay (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Men have been doing this for years, which is recognized as a strength (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Derrington and Sharratt (2009) suggested that women must be clear about their goals, communicate such goals to colleagues, and then stick to those goals if they want to demonstrate resolve.

Support System

A home life balance and having supportive family members are essential (Brown-Klingelhoefer, 2003; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Some researchers go so far as to suggest choosing supportive partners willing to change gender role dynamics within their relationship (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Women need to be supported by others, ready to challenge traditional systems and social role expectations (Brown-Klingelhoefer, 2003; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010).

Differences in Female Leadership

Research indicates that women prioritize improving curriculum and instruction in the classroom (Grogan, 2008). Grogan (2005, 2008) found that women's professional time in the classroom firmly grounded them in educational practices. Women saw the role of the superintendent as an extension of the classroom, with the result that they ranked programs for at-

risk kids higher than males did (Grogan, 2008). Women are becoming associated with transformational leadership, as stated before. According to a study by Thorpe (2018), this kind of leadership is being valued and sought after in the field of education.

Studies suggested that women pursue superintendent jobs because they want to make a difference, like leading and learning, and desire personal growth that can come from such a challenging position (Brunner, 2008; Brunner et al., 2002; Grogan, 2008). In the next few decades, strategies must be studied and deployed to have a chance of creating equal opportunity for women in the superintendency (Grogan, 2008). Until there is a more equitable distribution of women in the highest educational leadership levels, women will believe that their leadership is still not valued (Grogan, 2005, p. 5).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Problem and Purpose

In business, only a small number of women ever make it to top leadership positions. That experience is no different in the arena of educational leadership. Most teachers across the United States are women, yet fewer than 20% of superintendents are female (Grogan, 2005). The state of Colorado fairs better than the national statistics with 54 out of 178 (approximately 30%) of superintendents being female (CASE contact list). The dynamic careers of women who made the journey to and through the superintendency are best studied through a qualitative research design. The research questions asked were:

Q1　How do past and present Colorado female superintendent perceive that their gender influenced their path towards and experiences within the superintendency?

Q2　What strategies did past and present Colorado female superintendents use to overcome those challenges?

This multiple case study focused on five currently serving and four retired female superintendents. The sample was female superintendents in Colorado. These women were interviewed using a semi-structured interview process, and the data were then coded and analyzed for themes. In addition, a document review and follow-up conversations provided additional sources of information regarding these women's experiences. The research's validity and reliability and the researcher's trustworthiness and biases are acknowledged and discussed in this chapter.

Methodology

"Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23). Stake (1995) stated that "contemporary qualitative researchers nourish the belief that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered" (p. 99). He suggested that research subjects can only share their own experiences, not others' (Stake, 1995). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), constructivism is the underlying philosophical perspective foundational to qualitative research. Social constructionism guided this study. Constructionism, different from constructivism, claims that:

> Each of us is introduced directly to the whole world of meaning. The melange' of cultures and subcultures into which we are born provides us with meanings. These meanings we are taught, and we learn in a complex and subtle process of enculturation. They establish a tight grip upon us and, by and large, shape our thinking and behavior throughout our lives. (Crotty, 2003, p. 79)

Constructionism is also defined as collecting multiple experiences within a phenomenon versus personal experiences (Crotty, 2003). Although every female superintendent had their own experiences, they exist in a culture of sexism and oppression that shaped their careers (Brunner, 1999; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Grogan, 2005; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Wyland, 2016).

Qualitative research design uses the researcher as the primary instrument. The process is more inductive than deductive, meaning that the data collected formulated a conclusion rather than deduce facts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Another characteristic is that the information

gathered is rich in detail and paints a vivid picture of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher is usually embedded in the field of study and has to be aware of and account for potential bias (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As a qualitative approach, multiple case study design is appropriate when a defined case can be identified (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). These cases can be of interest "for both their uniqueness and their commonalities" (Stake, 1995, p. 1). The multi-case study does not focus on the researcher providing specific, definable generalizations, but rather for the researcher to create such in-depth, thick description that the readers can arrive at their generalizations (Stake, 1995). Through thick description, Stake (1995) believed a case study can thoroughly convey the subjects' experiences and allows the reader to develop an empathetic understanding of each case. For these reasons, a multiple case study was the best model to fully understand these female superintendents' lived experiences. This study aimed to determine, through vivid storytelling, the impact gender had on female superintendents' careers and what helped them overcome the challenges they faced.

Sampling

When dealing with an information-rich qualitative study, it is most appropriate to use purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Patton (2015) argued that "the logic and power of purposeful qualitative sampling derives from the emphasis on an in-depth understanding of specific cases" (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). This homogeneous sampling criterion was females in Colorado who currently or previously held a school district superintendent's position. Nine women were interviewed, four retirees and five currently in the

position. The snowball effect helped to attain the number of participants needed. Snowball

sampling occurs when current participants connect the researcher to other potential participants

within the criterion group (Creswell, 2015).

Informed Consent

After obtaining IRB approval, an introductory letter was sent to participants with an

informed consent form. Each identified participant signed the informed consent form

acknowledging their understanding of the study's scope, the option for a pseudonym, and that all

data collected were confidential. The interviewees knew that the interviews were recorded and

transcribed. A member check helped verify the accuracy of the transcriptions. The informed

consent forms were scanned and secured in a password-protected computer file on the

researcher's personal computer.

Data Collection

Data collection included interviews, a document review, and follow-up conversations.

The purpose of an interview is for the researcher to find out through conversation all those things

that are not directly observable and gain the other person's perspective (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). A research interview is a conversation that has a structure and purpose (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). A semi-structured interview model was used to collect the needed data from the

participants. The initial questions were structured to tease out the participants' demographics,

such as age, experience, and career path. After gathering the standard information, the

interviewer shifted to open-ended questions to created dialogue about the specific experiences

and beliefs related to gender that impacted each individual's experiences. The goal was to

understand how these women were challenged by or overcame their experiences. The interviews

lasted approximately an hour. The intent was for the interviews to be in person; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews happened via Microsoft Teams and Zoom. The participants were offered a small gift card in appreciation for their time.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcription of the interviews was through the Rev Voice recorder application. Once received, the transcripts were reviewed alongside the recording to ensure accuracy. In addition, the transcripts were sent to each participant to verify the accuracy of the words captured. If questions arose after the initial interview or if clarity was needed to capture the participants' experiences, then follow-up interviews were conducted. The follow-up correspondence happened primarily through email.

As suggested by Patton (2015), the interview included:

1. Background questions intended to establish demographics.

2. Experiential questions intended to get at each participant's behaviors and ways of acting.

3. Opinion questions intended to get at the respondents' beliefs and values about what they experienced and how they experienced it.

4. Feeling questions intended to get at the emotion of the experiences.

5. Sensory questions intended to paint the picture of how the experiences of the participants looked or sounded.

6. Knowledge questions intended to elicit the participant's understanding of their experience.

Because the female superintendents' communities are relatively small and the districts they are associated with have such specific demographics, pseudonyms represent all participants and their districts. Demographic information that might identify a participant was generalized. For

example, if the interview indicated a female working in a large (50,000+ students) urban school district in Colorado, the district's size was generalized as large. The specificity of being a district of over 50,000 students quickly points to one person.

Documents related to each participant were reviewed to provide additional data. These documents included local and state newspaper articles as well as website publications. The documents were analyzed and coded to explore the career paths and perceptions of others throughout their careers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995).

Finally, follow–up conversations were conducted to capture a complete picture of each person's experiences. Follow-up conversation questions included probes for more details or requests to clarify responses given in the original interviews. The follow-up questions occurred through email. The text of the emails was coded similarly to the initial interviews.

Data Security

The recordings of the interviews, transcriptions, and selection of pseudonyms were stored in a password-protected computer file on the researcher's personal computer. All the data will be secured in this manner for three years. After three years, the data files will be deleted from the hard drive.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews gathered during the research process were read thoroughly and coded as each one concluded. Coding is the process of assigning shorthand notes to the phrases, ideas, and terms within the interviews to help the researcher retrieve the information as needed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Coding helps the researcher make sense of the large volume of data to be analyzed for themes, ultimately leading to the study's findings (Creswell, 2015). To begin the coding and analysis process, the researcher started focusing on the purpose of the

research and the epistemological framework under which it was conducted (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). Creswell (2015) suggested starting with a lean coding method that primarily picks out

each interview's big idea. He suggested that a list of initial codes is created then grouped by

theme and reviewed for redundancy (Creswell, 2015). After grouping the codes, the researcher

went back to test the preliminary groupings on the data set to assess their usability to determine

future themes (Creswell, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lichtman's (2013) *Qualitative*

Research in Education: A User's Guide suggested similar steps. The first step of the process was

initial coding. The researcher identified words, phrases, or quotes. Then, initial coding was

revisited for redundancies, condensing similar codes, and grouping codes into initial categories.

Once initial categories were developed, the list was adjusted based on additional re-reading of

the interviews to ensure the meaning was intact and the intended responses were reflected. The

fourth step was eliminating unnecessary categories and adding originally unrecognized elements.

Finally, key concepts or themes illustrated the data collected, as suggested by Lichtman (2013).

Due to this study's qualitative nature, the use of epoche, bracketing, and horizontalization

helped offset bias. Epoche is the notion "that everyday understandings, judgments, and knowing

are set aside, and phenomena are revisited," as Moustakas explained, quoted in Merriam and

Tisdell (2016, p. 27). However, it is acknowledged that a person's ability to set aside their own

bias is disputable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a current educational leader, positioned for a

superintendency, techniques synonymous with qualitative interviews helped identify and suspend

my bias before analyzing the interview data. Bracketing helped in setting aside bias (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). To accomplish this process, as the researcher, I wrote down personal experiences

regarding this study and then bracketed the main ideas to help capture bias and expose themes

that may seem predetermined. All data points were considered equal in data analysis's

horizontalization process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To ensure horizontalization in the initial stages of analysis, all experiences were separately written out and coded. As themes emerged across the experiences, isolated experiences that were not part of a major theme dropped off.

As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) cited, Creswell suggested that researchers work with 25 to 30 codes to manage the analysis process. Through the inductive and comparative process, the codes allow the researcher to arrive at five to six major themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For coding, the qualitative computer-assisted data analysis software, NVivo, was used to assist in the organization, visualization, and examination of the codes and themes. NVivo is a research software tool that helps make coding and analyzing qualitative data more manageable for the researcher.

As an educational leader in a large urban school district and the principal investigator, I have had the opportunity to work with several female educational leaders. The interview questions were designed and piloted with several top female leaders who were not included in the study to ensure they evoked the depth of response needed to paint a vivid picture of their experiences. The pilot experience helped determine the final interview questions used in the study with participants.

Trustworthiness

The techniques used in the research and analysis process helped ensure the trustworthiness of the study. First, the participants member checked the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. Inaccuracies were corrected. Also, the researcher's positionality was considered (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a current assistant superintendent in a Colorado school district, I chose not to look at women in similar leadership positions. The focus on the superintendency removed the researcher's perceived power regarding the participants. An audit

trail documented the clear path taken to arrive at the study's findings to safeguard

trustworthiness. "An audit trail in a qualitative research study describes the data analysis process

in detail including how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the

inquiry" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 252). The findings presented are a full, rich, thick

description of the interviews to create a clear picture for the reader to determine their interests

and experiences compared to the participants' (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, the

participants' pseudonyms and the details about the districts they work(ed) are intentionally vague

to maintain confidentiality. Confidentiality is critical, as these women shared potentially

sensitive and personal information about their career paths and experiences. Colorado's

educational community is incredibly connected and, thus, vagueness is maintained to protect the

women. The use of pseudonyms and demographic data reporting in categorical ranges

contributed to maintaining confidentiality for the women. Regarding transferability, the inquiry

produced information that future female superintendents might find useful in understanding the

challenges they may face and strategies used by those who went before them to combat those

challenges.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

As a female educational leader with over 20 years of experience, it is of utmost

importance to acknowledge and adjust for my bias to the best of my ability. I have had a myriad

of experiences in my career, some gendered and others not. I have experienced commentary

about how I look. A college professor told me that I'd be fine as a teacher because "little boys

like pretty girls." I have also had parents say, "They didn't make them like you when I was

young," insinuating that most teachers were old spinsters. In more recent years, as I have moved

up the proverbial ladder, I noticed fewer women in the meetings I attended. I would not, however, suggest that any of my gendered experiences have impacted my ability to succeed. To this point, I have gotten every job for which I have applied.

Through a thorough audit trail and the use of analysis tools of bracketing and horizontalization, I attempted to limit bias and give an accurate account of these nine female superintendents' experiences. To reduce bias, I recorded my own story, looking for patterns and themes predetermined in my own experiences. I also rewrote each women's story after collecting all the data, making sure to tell each woman's whole story before beginning to code and establish trends in the stories. This allowed me to give equal weight to each account.

My working assumption was that gender is one factor that shaped these women's journeys to their experience within their superintendent positions. I did not, however, enter the study assigning a positive or negative value to their experiences. The superintendent's job is not a phenomenon many women have experienced, and there is much to learn from this study. The findings of this study hold great value for female educational leaders who, like me, aspire to the role of superintendent.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore women's experiences of both working toward and acting within the role of female superintendent in Colorado. Each participant shared the unique story of their gendered experiences within their career paths that culminated at or passed through the superintendency. In total, nine women participated, four of whom were retired superintendents and five who were currently serving as superintendents in Colorado.

Collectively, these women have 50-plus years of experience, ranging from two to over 10 years of service in the superintendent's position. Each woman led a different school district in Colorado. Four of the nine were leaders in rural school districts; the others were leaders of suburban or urban school districts. The districts ranged in size from less than 2,000 to well over 20,000. Some women ascended within their system, while others were outside candidates who came to lead new organizations. Some worked in just one district as the superintendent; others worked in multiple districts and sometimes in various states. The women were forthcoming about their experiences and offered insights into the gendered challenges of becoming a female superintendent. The use of the participants' own words, when possible, highlight their journeys and honor their stories.

Each participant's story was carefully safeguarded. Pseudonyms were used to protect the women and the districts for which they serve(d). Because the community of female

superintendents in Colorado is so small, the simplest of details might easily identify a participant, specific information about their experiences, and those with whom they interact. Some details were kept intentionally vague for confidentiality.

The Women

Ann, Beth, Carol, and Diane are retired leaders. At some point in their careers, the women became the "first" in an educational leadership position, and most were the first female superintendents in their districts. There were even fewer female superintendents when they held their district leadership positions than there are today.

Erin, Faye, Gwen, Holly, and Iris are all current female superintendents in Colorado. They serve across districts, both large (7,000+) and small (<7,000) and have a wide range of years of experience in the field of education. Each described their path and the gendered experiences they had along the way. Although the number of female superintendents in Colorado has grown over the last decade, the collective group is still less than 25%. Most of these women know each other and the retirees who came before them.

All nine women painted a picture of their journey to the superintendency and how serving in the role was challenging, whether through discriminatory practices or expectations of their role as a female leader. They discussed navigating their way and offered advice for aspiring female leaders. They shared wisdom regarding the relationships they built and the hard work that helped them be successful. The themes that arose from their interviews and other data sources follow and illustrate their experiences as female superintendents in Colorado.

Research Question 1

This study explored whether the path towards the superintendency is a gendered one for females in Colorado and, if so, what strategies the women used to navigate their career path. The

following three major themes emerged from the analysis of the interview responses, follow-up questions, and newspaper articles examined: discrimination, gendered leadership expectations, and motivation to stay on the career path. These themes are described in detail below.

Gender Discrimination

Although perceptions of women in leadership positions have changed over the last few decades, women aspiring to and attaining the role of superintendent in Colorado still face discrimination that makes their career aspirations arduous. Examples of paternalism and sexism are easily identifiable in the data. The way in which these kinds of discrimination evidence themselves for women are clearly specific to gender. Paternalism is the practice that exists in a patriarchal society in which people in positions of power, historically men, limit their subordinates' desires (Duersti-Lahti, 2002; Kanter, 1977; Lako, 2004). The pattern mimics the father and child relationship; however, in this study, the subordinate is the aspiring female. As referenced in the literature review, paternalism leads both sexes to believe that men dominate women which leaves women needing to have their ideas and actions approved under paternalistic norms (Duersti-Lahti, 2002).

Sexism is a prejudice that prevails when women are discriminated against based on their gender. While sexism applies to both men and women and exists in both patriarchal and matriarchal societies, it serves to minimize women's abilities and contributions more often in patriarchal societies (Brunner, 1999; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Grogan, 2005; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Wyland, 2016). Women are seen as caregivers and homemakers rather than as potential leaders in an organization (Brunner, 1999; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Grogan, 2005; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015; Wyland, 2016). When women begin to break the gender role stereotype enforced by a patriarchal society, sexism

obstructs their path to leadership positions (Brunner, 1999; Grogan, 2005). Sexism creates an implicit bias against women based solely on their sex and disdain for non-conformity to gender role expectations (Thorpe, 2018). Sexism in a patriarchal culture is the overall primary discrimination experienced by these women.

Like our society, the American education system is organized under patriarchal norms (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). Historically, education was a male-dominated culture where men ascended from the teaching ranks to supervise their female teaching staff (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). Interestingly, even as the field of education shifted to be dominated by females with a majority of the teaching roles filled by women, male-dominant norms and values still existed, and few women rose to top leadership in educational organizations. Holly, the superintendent of a suburban district, stated, "There's definitely still some patriarchal types of habits, without a doubt." Several superintendents interviewed for this study said they think many of their female colleagues have had the same challenging experiences of overcoming sexism and paternalistic ideals. Faye, a currently serving superintendent, said she was considered "a poor little gentle flower" who is "too emotional and too sensitive." In response to that belief, Faye said, "I mean, I do tend to get a little emotional, not a little, I am. I just talk about it and admit it and just say, 'You guys know me. Now you know I'm going to cry.'"

Another example of sexism in a patriarchal system was being treated differently in the press than male counterparts. Faye said, "My salary had been talked about in the paper here multiple times. The city manager is a man. He's the same age as me. His salary was almost the same." She said that a few years ago, her Board of Education gave her a substantial raise. "Within weeks, the city council did the same thing for the city manager. There was a news story about my salary; there were letters to the editor about my salary. Not a single letter about the city

manager." Then she said, "He deferred his raise during this COVID thing, and there's a story about it. I defer my raise; it's not even in the story about budget cuts. You cannot tell me that it is not about gender." She inferred that city officials felt, whether consciously or unconsciously, that no male in a significant city leadership role should make less than the woman running the school district.

Sexist patterns are problematic when women try to attain a superintendency. Boards of education seem to ascribe to the same paternalistic values, as evidenced in the literature review (Brunner, 2008; Craig & Hardy, 1996; Eagly, 2007; Grogan, 2008; Thorpe, 2018). As a result, some participants shared stories of watching women struggle to get their first district leadership job. Beth talked about her female friends, saying, "It took them multiple years before they ever landed their first . . . interview, let alone be offered a position." She said that situation was so prevalent in Colorado when she started looking for jobs that she left the state to find her first superintendent position. She insisted female friends were "withering on the vine" waiting. Beth noted that women were constrained by "whatever the board is looking for, sometimes that's their bias," referring to the belief that a man is needed to lead a district.

After being hired by one district, Beth was told by her male Board president that the female union leader told him, "Don't hire female." When Beth asked the union leader if she had said that, the woman replied, "Yeah, we did, because we just find women to be more difficult." Beth found that interesting as they had never had a female superintendent before. "It's this mystique or something that I think that they see women, aggressive women . . . they're not striving to make things better. They're just bossy. Grinchy. You know?" This bias is so prevalent that several women remarked that they were "lucky" their boards took a chance on them. This

statement indicates the women weren't entirely confident in their ability and skillsets but felt that

they'd obtained their jobs because of a roll of the dice or an extraordinary chance given by the

patriarchal system.

"I will tell you sexism is real. It isn't anything like racism. What I endure is nothing like

what a person of color must feel in a role like this. But there is no question sexism is real." Faye

described being treated as different and "less than" because of her gender. In a patriarchal

culture, sexism relegates women to less powerful or lower status positions than their male

counterparts and assumes they lack men's capabilities in their arena. Almost all the women

discussed or alluded to the sexism they faced in their journey to the superintendency. One

participant even shared that a high school guidance counselor told her she wasn't college

material. Whether it came in the form of being treated as uninformed, being sexually harassed, or

feeling the need to look and act a certain way due to gender role stereotypes, these women have

experienced sexism.

After stating that sexism was real, Faye said, "And you didn't go here, but I'm going to. If

you look around at the female superintendent positions, most of the women are in very small

school districts or very high poverty school districts." Faye was making the case that when

women are considered for the top spot it is usually in less desirable, more impacted, or less

influential districts. This statement is true for more than half of the participants in this study.

However, regardless of the district's size or socioeconomics, examples of sexist behavior were

evident. Two of the women discussed large-scale changes they led in their tenure as

superintendent. Gwen was called revolutionary and radical in the local paper. Beth was publicly

blamed for an implementation dip and then fired. In a different instance, Faye was criticized for

not responding to a community crisis fast enough. Someone from her cabinet was on scene

quickly, and she had full details within 30 minutes, but the press was sure to include that, when the crisis occurred, she was vacationing with her family after attending a conference. Superintendents are often criticized, but Faye felt that the media was trying to discredit her because she spent time with family.

Throughout the interviews, almost all the participants discussed sexism's impact on working with other female colleagues. "Female counterparts can maybe not be the most encouraging," "Females are not female supporters," and "I don't think women are the best at helping women." Some chalk it up to competitiveness or jealousy. Holly remarked that "It goes back to competitiveness. I think for some women, it's almost like junior high and high school mean girls." Ann shared an issue she had experienced after being named a cabinet member by the Superintendent rather than going through a formal hiring process. The job had not previously existed, and Ann felt it put her at odds with the woman serving in a similar position. She recalled arriving early to her first cabinet meeting. When her female counterpart entered, she said, "You're in my seat." Ann moved but knew that there were no assigned seats in the meeting. She joked about wondering if there needed to be a "catfight" to solve the problem.

Gwen said that some women she knows would say that women were their worst enemies. "Women were other women's downfall because we didn't always support one another when we got through. Women tend to present as being more jealous than men do." She added:

> I see it in other women in our field. I'll be in a conversation with a woman, and someone will walk up, someone adorable and sweet and wonderful and brilliant will walk up. She'll say a few things, she'll walk away, and the other woman will go, "Oh my god, you should have heard what she said."

Gwen said she now tries to confront those female critics, telling them it's unnecessary. When appropriate, she tells the woman being gossiped about what is being said about her so she can address it or correct it as needed.

In some cases, the backlash went beyond petty competition, jealousy, and gossip. Two of the women shared stories of sabotage. One of the retirees shared a story of a female cabinet member going behind her back and working with a female board member to get her fired. The cabinet member was someone she trusted and with whom she had personally traveled. Others had warned her about the woman's manipulation, but she did not heed the warning and was blindsided when asked to leave the district. The experience crushed her, and she said she "had never experienced that kind of sabotage." One of the current superintendents told of a female colleague who "undermined me all the time. And really, it just has so much to do with, obviously, her own insecurities, her own need to prove herself . . . you could see it."

Whether being personally criticized, insulted, challenged, or sabotaged by other women, these women experienced sexism perpetrated by women as part of their journey. Being the first or only in a heavily male-dominated field put the women at odds and sometimes in competition with others. Although they navigated rough waters, their underrepresentation in the superintendent's role continued to create obstacles. Simply being female and demonstrating female characteristics placed them at odds with the dominant male culture. Communities and employees seemed to value stereotypical male leadership more than female leadership.

According to several participants, the superintendent's role engages with other top local officials, typically from male-dominated organizations. Some of the relationships are difficult to manage. Discussing relationships outside the organization, Erin said, "I don't think I have felt it until being a superintendent and probably not at first, but I think it's probably because I was just

figuring it out." Erin simply said, "I would not be taken seriously" and described the treatment as "dismissive." According to Faye, "There's still some of that undercurrent about women and what women are able to do."

Gwen described interactions with local law enforcement as a bullying situation. After working with them for some time and finding her confidence, she said:

I can go in now, and they know that I'm not going to put up with being bullied. In fact, I'll say, "Don't think you're going to bully me on this one, guys." Then they'll be like, "Oh, we're not trying to bully you." You're not trying, but that's exactly what you're doing.

For years, she was talked down to as if she didn't understand what was happening when collaborating on community issues. Beth had a similar experience with police one night when a problem arose at a prom event. When the officer was not getting his way with the female principal, he found Beth in the crowd. He wanted her to overturn a rule made very clear to the students regarding entry to the prom and about which Beth and the principal felt strongly. He said, "You know, you can make this all go away. Just let them in." Unhappy about his suggestion about how to do her job, Beth said, "I turned to the cop, and I said, 'You know what? You could make this all go away, too. Why don't you just go do your job?'"

Others talked about similar experiences with construction crews on bond projects, discussions with city councils, and organizations like Rotary clubs. Carol said it felt different when working inside her organization versus outside, saying she figured out after a while she didn't fit in with "those guys" from other community organizations. Erin talked about learning to work with a male construction team that seemed direct and mean-spirited and expressed themselves in more colorful ways. She acknowledged working with the group helped her learn to navigate male-dominated environments.

Diane recalled meetings where she was one of few or the only female. After being asked her opinion on a subject, the men would "kind of nod their heads, and then they would turn to what they had designated as the three male leaders to help the group." Then, without acknowledging Diane, they'd say, "Well, what do you think, Bob?" Everyone would then ponder that answer and determine it was insightful. Another one of the women, Beth, discussed being told to mind her own business when she talked to her principal about a male colleague's unethical treatment of students. Her feeling was that she could not comment on her male colleagues' shortcomings as a female peer.

Ann told a story about how her concerns over inequitable salaries were dismissed. Ann's administrative assistant, who had access to employee compensation in the organization, noticed that Ann was making less than her peers on the District Cabinet. The assistant brought it to Human Resources. Ann remembered feeling embarrassed that other staff talked about her salary and decided to address it with her superintendent, who told her, "You're going to be ok . . . it's all going to be taken care of." That affirmation was followed a short time later by, "No, it's not going to be taken care of." Unsatisfied, Ann continued to pursue the issue with the Human Resources Department but was told, "If this is the way you think, you're going to have trouble your whole life." Ann laughed, saying she was already old, so the threat was meaningless. She pursued the subject until she was point-blank told the conversation was over. Ann said, "Oh, no, it's not," but in fact, it was over. The situation remained unresolved.

Both men and women can cause the feeling of being dismissed; however, every story shared by this study's participants specifically involved men. Being dismissed was frustrating to the women in this study and made them feel less valued in their organizations. Beth went so far as to say that these and similar statements motivated her to seek the superintendency. After being

told to mind her own business, she thought, "Ok. You know what? Then I need your position to make sure this doesn't happen again."

All these superintendents said they experienced being first or only at some point in their careers. One woman described her local male peers' group as a huge boys' club and noted that she was the only woman in the room. Some were the first to win significant awards in education, while others broke glass ceilings in their role as superintendent. After winning Superintendent of the Year, one woman recalled other female superintendents thanking her for leading the way. One message said, "Well, thanks for opening the door because . . . it used to be that we weren't even considered."

Retiree Carol said the men in her career felt like they needed to "take care of me. Stick up for me when someone is being really ugly," acting as the protective father. In another example, Erin shared a time when community members looked for her support with a local initiative, which she didn't believe was best for her district, and they knew it. Erin recalled getting invited to meet with the local junior college's male leader and a couple of male community members. She said it was "a lunch, and I would be lectured to, as opposed to tell us more, help us understand what you're thinking. I was the only one there, so they can set me straight." Erin went on to talk about being the female leader of her district. She said, "For women, it feels like it's more, you better do it by the book, or you're going to get in trouble." Feeling, as a woman, you are in trouble with or being talked to like a child by a male peer is an example of paternalism (Blount, 1998). In Erin's case, the men acted like the disciplinarian, teaching her what she did not know and protecting her from inexperience (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). Treatment of this sort marginalizes women and maintains their subordinate role (Duersti-Lahti, 2002).

The hyper-visibility of being a female leader in a male-dominated role intensified the criticism encountered by some of the women. Diane said, "The stuff they put about me online was ridiculous. It didn't have anything to do with the district or whatever. It was personal attacks." The same gentleman said she "shouldn't be allowed around kids" and continued attacking her on social media. When finally confronted about his behavior and being excluded from future public meetings, the man offered, "Well, if she took it that way, then that's her own problem. I'm not going to apologize." Diane knew a defamation lawsuit would be dragged out in court. It wasn't worth her time and effort.

One of the women stated it bluntly when she said, "It was not easy. There was blatant sexual harassment." According to Faye, in the '90s:

It was an unsafe environment at the time for women like school counselors and things. Until I finally went to the principal, and I just said, here's how I'm going to address this with my colleagues. And we did, and we cleaned it up.

Diane shared an experience in which "I basically had a guy tell me I should just get on a table, and they could throw dollar bills at me, and maybe that was my place in life." This demeaning language came from a prominent, outspoken, conservative male in her community. To date, Diane is the first and only female superintendent to serve in that school district.

Gwen discussed a male educational consultant who was so persistent in trying to date her that it made her uncomfortable. She said:

He was a consultant for us, and I was going through a divorce, and he was not married, and he hit on me every time he came into my office. At first, I'd be like, "Come on, stop it. We have work to do. Knock it off." Then, I started bringing in my assistant and saying,

> "I need you to be in this room. If this man says another thing to me, I'm going to punch
>
> him in the face, and then I'm probably going to get sued."

She finished by saying it was weird and uncomfortable. Whether aggressive or insidious, these types of sexual harassment create situations that women must manage in precise ways to ensure their careers are not affected.

Gender discrimination affects females as they ascend the career ladder according to participants. Beth said, "I tell other females, the higher up the ladder you go, the more people are looking up your skirt." Along the way, all these women experienced some form of discrimination. Whether they were patronized, dismissed, harassed, belittled, attacked, or sabotaged, they took these hurdles in stride and succeeded in reaching the top of the American educational system, profoundly influenced by patriarchal norms (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). This kind of sexist treatment marginalizes women in society's eyes (Blount, 1998). Sexism is not insurmountable, but barriers are created for women.

Gendered Leadership

Leadership has been studied across industries (Eagly, 2007; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016; Kanter, 2008). In education, the patterns of leadership and beliefs persist about women's inferior ability to lead. Historically, women have been communal leaders while men employed agentic traits (Badura et al., 2018). In recent years, women's perceived nurturing style became associated with the transformational leadership style gaining favor in many arenas (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Although Carli and Eagly (2016) found evidence that perceptions were beginning to change, opportunities to lead still lag. The women in this study articulated their gender bias experiences in leadership and the challenges of working with the community and their board of education.

Expectations of Men

As these participants suggested previously, men tend to be accepted as soon as they are

hired into the superintendency, whereas women feel the need to prove themselves. The women

found their male counterparts characterized as "charismatic" or "exuding leadership" as soon as

they step into the spotlight. Holly described some of her male colleagues as "the sage on the

stage" or the "grand poobah type," exuding a commanding presence. Erin explained the

stereotypical male superintendent as large in stature, projecting a football coach style, and

instantly being liked by the community. Iris talked about the military-style male leader who

spouted orders and did little to pull people together. None of these descriptions were bestowed

on the women.

According to some, their male counterparts and previous male bosses tended to over-

delegate. One woman was called by her superintendent to take care of undesirable situations he

did not want to handle, including firing a female principal and escorting her from the building,

knowing it would upset the community. She also had to address a male teacher who had let his

hygiene practices lapse even though his direct supervisor was the male superintendent. Holly

shared that one male principal with whom she worked as an assistant principal was not qualified

for the job. All the work fell on her, and when something went wrong, she became the fall guy.

She recalled a time when he would say, "No, no, we don't tell them that. No, we don't share that.

No, no, we can't tell parents that." Her principal was telling her to keep sensitive information

hidden from parents to avoid conflict or questioning from the community instead of owning his

decisions or mistakes. Holly said she thinks for a lot of men, it is about saving face.

Some women curtail their careers because of their kids and family. Others think, "Oh, I

need one more year of experience." The participants suggested that these same barriers are not an

issue for men. Holly said, "A lot of men fail up." She also said men think, "I'm going to apply for the job, and then I'll figure it out. And then they don't think as much, really think about their family obligations . . . they figure it out on the back end." Carol affirmed this same sentiment. She said, "Research shows that men take the job and believe they will figure it out later. Women think they must know everything before they apply and interview. I think it's a detriment." She tells aspiring females to just jump in: "It's a cold, scary splash one minute, but then it becomes really comfortable."

Several women also expressed that they had worked with unqualified male superintendents:

I see men in positions of leadership in other districts that I've worked with in the past, and I'll just think, "Are you kidding me? What?" And you know this is a house of cards. If they didn't have the people around them doing their work for them, they would fall apart.

Beth said similar experiences pushed her to think about the role sooner because she knew that, if these men could do it, so could she.

Expectations of Women

Several of the participants talked about having to prove themselves in different ways than their male counterparts. "Women tend to have to earn their place in their role after they get the job more than men do." Another felt that men get the job and are immediately accepted as the leader, while women must prove themselves right away. Faye had her initial salary written about in the local paper as demonstrating that she was "unproven." The board members indicated to the community that her salary was lower than average because she had to prove herself before earning a higher salary. Of course, the only way to be proven in a job like the superintendency is to do the job.

Diane stated the situation clearly: "You've got to be hard and soft, and I don't think men have to do that." She went on to say, "As female leaders, we have to know more and demonstrate that knowledge in a nonthreatening way." These statements illustrate the need to carefully balance the perceptions people have of a female leader. One of the current superintendents stressed the importance of "being assertive in ways that build your career relevance so people see you're a player at the table, not falling into some of those traps that people will inevitably set up for you." The traps she's referring to are those in which women assert themselves to show leadership and end up being called difficult or a bitch. It's an experience described by Carol in this way: "I guess I'm back to Hillary. She would say some things, and she was called strident. A man could say the same thing, and people would take notes on him."

According to these participants, the expectations placed on women are different. There is a need to be a confident leader, balance nurturing and listening, and be transparent, honest, and forthright. Other traits discussed were patience and the ability to manage through ambiguity. "Living in the grey" was a skill that two women identified as crucial for female leaders; one went so far as to call it a saving grace. The need to communicate better, both orally and in writing, is also required of female leaders, likely in response to women's knowledge that they are more visible and judged more harshly than men.

There are not-so-hidden subtexts, according to Holly. The women described being at meetings where men get up and leave, but the women stay and clean up the trash. Female leaders were wiping up spills in the school cafeteria that would otherwise be left to the cleaning crew under male leadership. They make sure to actively engage with parents of staff, introducing themselves time and again, while men wait for a formal introduction or to be approached. These examples demonstrate the gender roles to which women in this study felt they must conform.

Three of the women spoke of another well-known female superintendent, who was not a participant in the study, pointing out how deftly she could articulate her skillset, noting that men rarely needed to define their skills. One woman stated, "I think there are definitely men who do it and do it well, but I also, again, I think it's more of this thoughtful type of leadership versus the charging ahead command decision move."

One of the most dominant sub-themes from the interviews was the concept that women had to look a certain way. Some were praised for their looks, and others were criticized. Interestingly, some just accepted it as part of the job. Beth stated:

You are the face of the school district, and people want to be proud of . . . our school superintendent . . . I don't consider myself pretty. I consider myself very presentable and appropriate, and I mean, I always went to work with my makeup on and my hair done.

One woman was called Cinderella in a local paper; another was referred to as an angel, dressed in white. Faye said they talked about how she dresses so much in the local press she had to have her communication director speak to them about it. She also recalled others in the organization demonizing women for what they wore. One male meeting participant was lambasting others for wearing $300 and $400 shoes. Faye noted he was clearly talking about female leaders.

Ann, who is tall, said, "My size helped me, and I knew it. So, was I conscious that I was a woman? Yes. Was I conscious that putting on a suit, and some pearls, and a little heel, did that help? It did." She also talked about not wanting to be this "big, overwhelming" woman, too. Her staff knew, though, if it was a "pearl day," she was serious.

"Who does she think she is? Where is she coming from? She dresses way too nice," were some of the negative comments Beth received for being what she considered "presentable." Similarly, Holly said there were so many comments about her clothes. She said, "If you're

wearing something nice, you're putting on a show. Or I can't believe she would wear something like that to a meeting."

Beyond clothes, a community member talking about Holly asked, "Why does she think she needs to walk around, shaking her ass all of the time?" Holly has a hip deformity that affects her gait. She also talked about wearing makeup to avoid looking washed out during virtual meetings during the current pandemic. She was doubtful that her male counterparts had any of the same concerns and admitted she'd like to get her nose pierced but is confident that it would not be received well.

Some of the words used by participants were "I'm height and weight proportional," "I'm very petite," "They called me cute," in addition to discussing the suits, jewelry, heels, and makeup they wore. How these women presented physically was a significant part of their experience. This kind of treatment serves to keep women in their place and gives them additional factors to overcome (Grogan, 2008). Ann jokingly asks at times, "Who is better, Ginger Rogers or Fred Astaire?" The punchline is that Ginger is better because she does the same thing Fred does, but backward and in heels.

Perceptions of the Board of Education

Approximately 25% of Colorado superintendents are female, an increase from 10% in the previous decade (CASE contact list). This ratio is still incredibly disproportional to the number of women in the education field. A significant reason for the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency is the lack of willingness of a board of education to hire a female superintendent (Brunner, 2008; Craig & Hardy, 1996). The women interviewed for this study noted that their colleagues waited years to get an interview, but often did not make it to the final round of the process. One left the state for a while because she said she saw the writing on

Colorado's wall: "Boards of education have three prominent roles in their elected positions, one of which is to hire the superintendent." Having worked with boards in many capacities, Carol said:

> Starting with boards of education, they treat men and women differently to this day and hold them to different expectations . . . That was eye-opening to me as I was providing counsel to men and women on the issues on that. When the vote was five to four or four to three, . . . you think ok, I'm one vote away from having my invitation to the door. Should I start looking? Should I polish my resume? . . . That's when it first became obvious to me . . . that men and women were treated a little bit different.

Erin recalled wondering if the community would accept her as a female leader when she put her name in the hat. She got the job; however, she also said a district nearby has a male superintendent and that she "constantly feels female in the county." She shared that the county often defers to him when it comes to questions on public education. Faye followed a female superintendent and said she knew her most significant "downfall was that I was a female." She was direct with the Board when interviewing, saying, "I understand you may have female fatigue in the system, and I'm asking you to please set that aside and consider the strengths and the work that I bring to this position." Faye, who interviewed against internal male candidates, concluded that, "Unfortunately, I do think there was gender bias there." When Beth left Colorado to find a superintendency, her husband went with her to demonstrate to the community and the Board that she was a family woman. She and her husband were already planning to divorce, but they knew that there would be questions if she were single in a conservative community. Although male

membership dominates school boards, all these women served under boards of education with representation from both genders. Ann did say she thought, "Women applying for superintendent are helped by boards that have strong women on them."

All these women successfully navigated their hiring process. Regardless of the perceptions of their leadership, they balanced communal and agentic traits and delivered them in a palatable package. Faye learned that, after she was hired, a male board member said, "Make no bones about it. She's a driven individual." However, he went on to say that she wasn't so driven that she'd run people over: "She will carry you along. She will carry us all along." This quote illustrates the exact balance women must strike when determining which districts and communities are ready for female leadership.

The Motivation to Be a Superintendent

Women drawn to the role of superintendent seem to have a different motivation than their male colleagues. According to past research, men seek power and influence, while women try to improve systems and meet kids' needs (Brunner, 2008; Brunner et al., 2002; Grogan, 2008). In some way, all these participants expressed a strong belief in public education and their roles as community leaders. Erin said: "It's truly an influential role. . . I feel like, wow. I can really influence this community. It feels heavy with responsibility, and it's also just so privileged. It feels like an honor to be able to do that." Carol, a retiree, said:

> I think that is sometimes where women differ a little bit from men, broad-brush there. I think not just of myself, but most women; I think, first of all, have a deep-seated passion for public education for what it means to help kids be more than they might be if they didn't have the opportunities that public education can provide.

The others talked about the privilege of serving a community and believing a robust public education system makes communities better for all people, especially kids and teachers. According to Diane, the job is incredibly challenging; there will be days you want "to stand in the middle of the room and say you don't want to do it anymore." But the belief in the work as part of the greater good brings these women back.

The motivation to improve the system of public education was prevalent. The mission of one woman "was to better the organization and bring value." In an op-ed piece submitted to a local paper, another female superintendent wrote, "Public education for all is one of our country's most important cornerstones," noting that the system was "worth all our advocacy." Ann said public education would never be far from her mind after retiring because she's amazed by what is happening for kids every time she enters a school. Diane stated, "You've got to be strong. You've got to have a strong constitution, pretty thick skin, but not so thick that you can't access your heart and soul for why you are doing the work."

Following the maternal theme of female leadership, several of these women spoke to the desire to support teachers and students as a significant driver in their need to serve their communities in the superintendent's role. When describing their motivation, they stated the importance of believing "that these are good people who want good things for children" and that "supporting and caring for the children we serve" is a critical part of their role. Another opined that she and others sought "a career that offered the opportunity to shape the future through the lives of children." Holly went so far as to say, "I don't exist without kids." Carol summed it up by saying, "I think we need more females in the role. I think our perspective is different. Our perspective is about nurture and supporting and caring for the children that we serve."

In a similar vein, these women saw themselves as servant leaders when it came to supporting teachers. Their careers were inspired by their profound passion for helping and supporting teachers. They believed that what teachers do in the classroom has the most significant impact on students. Even when her job was most challenging, Diane said that what kept her coming back was the team's fantastic work, not the superintendent's position. The desire to serve children and staff plays directly into our society's feminine stereotype. The women believe communal traits contributed to their tenure and their success.

According to several women interviewed for this study, men are more invested in the position and the power than in their impact on the community. Beth shared a specific story about her work with a group of men struggling with the No Child Left Behind legislation. She was frustrated and said, "Certain populations didn't score at a certain level, then there were sanctions and other things you had to do. And it was like they were perfectly comfortable with masking the performance of individual children's subgroups [as had been done previously]." She said that the men focused on keeping their paycheck rather than improving schools for kids. Gwen said that, when she became the superintendent of a school district with low socioeconomic status and was questioning how they were going to improve, a response she got from men was, "You can't make chicken soup with chicken shit." She was, of course, appalled that anyone would speak of her community in that way. The participants shared these examples of how men's beliefs differ from those of women, who were solely concerned with serving kids and communities.

Another belief expressed by participants was that some men use the superintendency as a steppingstone. They suggested some men use the job to get into the political arena rather than for the primary goal of serving the community. One woman said that men are serving a different

master and don't have the right focus on the job if they are only trying to further their career path through the superintendent's position.

Although motivated to do the job for all the right reasons, struggles came after gaining the superintendent position. The depth and breadth of the job responsibilities are vast. These women shared gaps in their preparation as they ascended to these roles. They discussed lacking skills in union negotiations, school finance, hiring a cabinet, and managing the school district operations. These gaps result from women coming up from the instructional side of education instead of the business side. As a staff developer, there is little need to understand transportation complexities and even fewer opportunities for exposure to operations. Even when the women rose through a direct line of supervision, such as the principalship and district-level positions, there was little exposure to aspects like union negotiations and school finance reform unless specifically tasked with those jobs. Universally, however, the experience of learning to address the board of education was daunting. The women suggested that the other gaps in knowledge were easy enough to figure out, but that board of education management was something none felt prepared to handle. Faye said:

> There is no other experience that I've ever had that is like that piece of the superintendency. All the other stuff, figuring out COVID, figuring out the pipe break . . . the fire break, figuring out even budget cuts, all that, you have something in your wheelhouse that you can relate to that. There is nothing I've ever had in my wheelhouse like working for a . . . board of education and navigating that. And I think that is where superintendents fail.

Holly had a similar sentiment: "I've never felt unprepared for this job in the actual work. The care and feeding of the Board are very, very, difficult." She described these difficulties:

> They all have very different drivers. I think what I've found, as board members, some of them are competitive with one another, and so then they want to one-up, who went to the most assemblies, who went to the most school events, who has talked to the most complaining parents . . . so what are their drivers, what do they need for their own edification, and is it in sync with where we're going, or can it sometimes be counter?

The women noted that one could not understand the work until being in the role. There is no real way to prepare.

Research Question 1 Summary

This study's first research question was, "How do past and present Colorado female superintendents perceive that their gender influenced their path towards and experiences within the superintendency?" The women who participated in this study shared experiences that make it clear that their path towards and service in the superintendency was, in fact, gendered. All nine faced the challenges of discrimination. Whether fighting to prove their skillset or be valued as a leader, gender discrimination was an obstacle. The sex-role stereotype and expectation of being simultaneously strong and friendly also created challenges. Finally, the pattern of why and how these women ascended to the superintendency again fell along gender lines.

Interestingly, seven women directly defined their career paths as gendered. One woman said she did not experience sexism but is quoted as having been horribly attacked by a male community member. The ninth woman said she realized gender bias existed but chose to ignore it. Yet, she shared examples of confronting men's sexist behavior toward her and other women. Gendered experiences were pervasive and tricky to navigate, yet these women succeeded in climbing to the top--a mission that eludes others.

Research Question 2

The second research question this study sought to answer was, "How do past and present Colorado female superintendents navigate their gendered experiences?" The themes that emerged were collaboration, hard work, and the importance of support systems. Each theme is described below with examples from the women's experiences.

Collaboration and Relationships

These female leaders identified collaboration as a skillset and strategy used to achieve favor and success. Each woman touted her ability to collaborate and emphasized the importance of working with groups of people. Some even attributed strength in collaboration to being female. Carol stated, "Women are better at listening intently with the purpose of understanding. Seek first to understand. I think they're marvelous collaborators, better communicators, better consensus builders."

Participants defined collaboration as bringing everyone together, making sure all voices are heard, taking your time, garnering multiple perspectives, and building authentic relationships. According to Holly, there is value in bringing people together and saying, "Let's figure this out together, or what are great ideas, versus we must get there like this." In a similar vein, Ann suggested, "Most of the jobs between principal and superintendent are middle management, so you have to be able to work with everybody who's going to be affected by whatever policy you are working on." One woman described the strategy of collaborating with her supervisees on evaluation ratings, which was useful when the performance was rated differently by the supervisor and the subordinate. Another example was developing building procedures to ensure consistency of expectations. Procedures as simple as how, why, and where students line up in the morning became collaborative conversations for one leader. Holly said,

Having an appreciation for the idea of bringing other people into the conversation and helping to create and to find a path forward, but not to the extent that we never get anywhere. I'm really good at facilitating groups and pushing people forward, but still getting a lot on the table where people's voices are heard.

Diane said that, when taking on her job as superintendent, rallying "people together, making them believe that winning, putting systems in place, using data, having it align to curriculum" was of critical importance to collaboration. Otherwise, she wasn't empowering the right people.

Finally, according to six of these women, collaboration is needed when a district pushes for a mill levy override or bond issue. Without having many constituencies represented and interests addressed, passing a bond and mill levy override can be incredibly difficult for a superintendent. Ann and Gwen earned praise in local papers for garnering the support needed by their staff and communities to pass their ballot measures. One woman summarized the concept of collaboration with this statement: "This is about the team. It's not about me." Collaboration benefitted these women's careers.

A component of collaborating effectively is building meaningful relationships with constituents. Seven participants expressly referred to themselves as relational people. Faye said, "I think relationships have always benefitted me." Ann recalled knowing she had to be both relational and task-oriented to succeed. Holly stated, "I'm very much a relationship-driven person." These women defined the traits needed for creating authentic relationships and discussed the importance of building relationships with staff, the community, and the boards of education, as explained below.

Traits of Strong Relationships

Vulnerability, humor, and honesty were the traits identified as critical to relationships by the participants. However, three women explicitly acknowledged that liking people is most important, and three others discussed needing to be a relational person. Faye said, "You really have to like people. I think if you're an extrovert, it's extra helpful because you're comfortable being in the community." Erin discussed the need to sit "face to face with someone and see them beyond being an employee." Carol expanded on the topic and acknowledged that conversation with people always wins out over email.

Humor played a role in relationship building, too. According to Diane, making fun of difficult situations and laughing about them helped her cabinet members bond. She claimed that humor aids in building trust within groups. Similarly, Beth said she frequently used humor to lighten the mood and connect with others.

One woman said that she relied so heavily on relationships that the separation caused by the COVID pandemic made her realize that "it's like my superpower has been taken away because I don't have the ability to sit eyeball to eyeball with people and really listen to them and have meaningful conversations where you can read body language." These traits helped build lasting relationships along the way, whether with their colleagues, staff, the board of education, or the community.

Remaining consistent, vulnerable, and honest under difficult conditions has served these women well. One woman said she learned to face challenges "with compassion, allowing that person to maintain their dignity." Another said she's honest about how she feels. She recently told a group that she cried while talking to them because they were the first group she had seen in person since the district had closed due to the pandemic.

Relationships with Staff

Building a relationship with colleagues and staff is crucial. Beth said, "Whatever their passion was, I always tried to encourage their being a lifelong learner and continuing their education." Holly said she always tried to:

Connect with people on a personal level . . . and make sure they know what I'm about, but not about the title. I really want to earn people's respect, and I want to again, walk my talk, and show who I am in order to earn that respect.

Encouraging those around you and mentoring them contributes to enduring relationships that helped these women lead during prosperous and difficult times.

There are challenges in leading a group of educators. Whether comforting staff members after losing a student or a team after losing an election, relationships are critical to working through these difficult times. When she took the superintendent position, Faye said that she had to repair relationships throughout her organization, including the staff, to pass a desperately needed mill levy and bond issue. She was successful in this endeavor. In later years, she used her relationships to comfort her cabinet members after losing a different election that they saw as critical to the district's future. After being named the principal of a local high school, Holly had to rely heavily on her ability to build relationships. The staff did not want her and made that known to district leadership; in fact, her boss gave her the option to step away if she chose to. Holly decided to plow forward. She went to the school and addressed the staff as a whole and then spent countless hours meeting with teams and individuals. Within a short time, she won the staff over, and they were sad when she left a few years later. After taking on a new superintendency, Beth followed a similar process of connecting with staff and discovering their dreams about the future before setting her vision on the district role.

These personal relationships with colleagues and staff are a signature trait of these leaders. They spent time cultivating the connections and then used the relationships to lead through celebratory and challenging times. The only drawback mentioned by the women came from Diane, who said, "My desire for people to feel appreciated, feel respected, feel involved sometimes kept me going at a process of involvement longer than I needed to." Beth shared wisdom from her mom, who told her, "You can tell somebody to go to hell, and they're going to hate you forever, or you can tell somebody to go to hell, and they're going to look forward to the trip." The point is that relationships are not about just making people feel good. They are about creating a trusting environment where people feel safe to learn and grow. Sometimes that comes with success, and sometimes it comes with failure, but great relationships help steer the way.

Relationships with the Community

School districts struggle without strong partnerships with community members. That includes parents, local businesses, police departments, and other agencies. Some of the women talked specifically about building relationships with the police department. Beth said having a strong relationship with the police was necessary because there are school resource officers in school buildings.

Similarly, when looking to improve schools and garnering support, Gwen was successful "in building relationships with local nonprofits, businesses, and government to bring resources into schools that would otherwise go without." These same partnerships were critical to bond and budget issues, according to these women. Ann passed a large bond and budget issue in an economic recession, a win largely credited to community relationships.

Relationships with the parent community are essential, too. Ann discussed being purposeful in approaching parents and introducing herself, especially after taking district-level

jobs. She said being approachable and actively interacting with others was very important.

Hearing and acting on parent concerns is also paramount. Holly shared a story of when parents in

her community believed that her school's long-standing traditions equated to hazing and bullying

younger students. Students and some parents pushed back on changing the tradition, but by

building partnerships with a broader parent community and her staff, she weathered the storm

and prevailed in stopping the demeaning behavior.

According to the participants, whether building a coalition of local agencies, changing the

perception of a school, or gaining the political support of constituents on a ballot measure,

relationships were critical to the school district's success and the superintendent. Countless hours

were spent developing relationships that benefitted their organizations. That support came

through community forums, city council meetings, Rotary Club projects, and district initiatives

that supported the vision parents had for their students. All of them took time, but the

relationships created were invaluable.

Relationships with the Board of Education

A stable relationship with the board of education is necessary for the superintendent,

especially for female superintendents (Brunner, 2008; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Robinson &

Shakeshaft, 2015; Thorpe, 2018). These women acknowledged the politics involved with

managing the board. However, Gwen claimed that the interaction is still primarily relationship-

based: "I invest time in the Board. That is one thing I do. I don't talk about managing my Board

because I don't manage them. I nurture them, I support them, and then they do the same for me."

Faye said building a relationship with her Board was "like speed dating seven different people."

Because she believes that consistent communication is essential to the relationship, she pays very

close attention to her communication style and each member's needs. Holly shared that she, too,

spent a lot of time trying to figure out each personality. For example, she knows that one of the

Board members needs a lot more time to process information. If meetings move too quickly, the

member can get defensive and default to the opposition, but if given time, the member often

supports the direction Holly wants to go. Another member of the same Board needs to ask lots of

questions. As a result, Holly gives him an overview of the presentation topics to gather concerns

upfront and then tailors her presentation to answer his questions throughout the presentation.

Seven of the women noted the importance of valuing all board members. Faye said, "I

think you have to appreciate who your board is, even if there's somebody on there who doesn't

have the same values as you, which will happen. That you don't like, that will happen." Gwen

said the following about her board:

> They don't work for us. So, I've had to think about, all the time, what are they telling me
>
> that I don't know about in our community? What do I need to listen to that they're so
>
> passionate about when their politics get really challenging? There is some truth to it.
>
> There is always some truth, so I try to figure out what is that truth that they're sharing?

Relationships with a board of education can make or break a female superintendent. Several of

these women were deliberate in taking great care of their relationships with their boards of

education. Without this meaningful partnership, success is likely to be limited.

Trying to Assimilate

Though the participants did not directly name this strategy, assimilation was another

tactic used to fit in with their male peers. They are not invited into the inner circle and often feel

isolated. In response, women sometimes assimilate to be accepted. These female superintendents

are no different—several shared specific examples of their attempts at assimilation. Sometimes

that came from trying to emulate male-style leadership; other times, it looked like "hanging with the guys" to fit in socially.

All these women served under male leadership along the way. As a result, male-style leadership was often the only model they had to follow. Faye recalls dealing with problems and thinking she had to solve them as the male administrators would. Erin said, "A big thing is fighting the urge to try to take on male characteristics, to demonstrate my leadership." She acknowledged that male leadership in a conservative rural community was known and expected. In referencing her leadership journey, Gwen said, "It was just this whole trying to figure it out. How do I figure out how to fit and still be me?" Others discussed the balance of being hard and soft in leadership roles. Faye recounted, "What I learned over time was, as a female, I couldn't solve the problem the way they did. I couldn't deal with the issue the way they did because I was a woman, and my skills were different." This realization came several years into her career. Assimilating, in terms of leadership style, seemed a double-edged sword for these female leaders. Trying to balance the demand for strong leadership presence and female stereotype expectations was a challenge for them.

Assimilating to fit in with their male-dominated peer group was another way these women navigated their paths to gain access to professional and personal relationships that helped them grow. Beth said, "Yeah, you have to, I had to . . . and I paid attention to that because I think that's a mistake if you don't." She learned to play golf and said, "Honest to god because I didn't do that before, and I found out that if I wasn't part of the gathering, then I was left out of decision making and direction where we were headed." Beth mentioned always being available to grab a

drink or get together to "muck it up" with the guys. The willingness to hang out in a happy hour type scenario garnered access to professional conversations and deal-making. A couple of the other women, including Gwen, also took up golf:

> I did. I tried doing the golf thing, and I hated it. I just hated it. For one thing, they drink all day. Everybody has a beer in their cart. "It's like this is not who I am, and it's not who I am going to pretend to be to fit in."

Trying a different angle, Gwen admitted, "I even bought a motorcycle and tried riding with them all because there was a phase when all of the guys rode motorcycles." After naming several well-known male superintendents, she said, "So I bought a Harley, and I was like, 'can I ride with you guys?' Oh my god, I hated that, too, because that's not who I am." Gwen discussed that the men thought her Harley riding was "cute," saying, "Come on, [Gwen], you can ride next to me." But then she said, "I was like I was always being taken care of, too, and I hated that." In her case, the effort to assimilate reinforced the patriarchal structure and females' stereotypical role as weaker than their male counterparts.

After sharing several of their stories of assimilation and trying to fit in, most of the women came to acknowledge that their efforts were silly and ill-advised. Instead, they offered, "just be yourself" and "trust your instincts." Beth advised: "Make sure to say what you believe." Erin stated that women "don't have to take on the characteristics of someone else." She also called on female leaders to "be authentic in who you are as a leader, do not try to match [male leadership styles]." Holly talked about the struggle to be herself: "I was hesitant around some things and maybe even had an apologist attitude around, oh, maybe I don't really deserve this or something, or maybe I'm not really qualified to be asserting myself in this way." Gwen shared:

I think the most important thing is know who you are and be that person. Be you because

you are the leader they need, not somebody else you're trying to aspire to be. Just be

yourself and don't make mistakes of buying a Harley or learning to play golf because you

need to fit in.

Regardless of the words used, these women learned over time and through experience that

emulating male culture did not feel authentic. Though Beth felt that it is necessary, the price of

playing the game to be included, others thought it was selling out. The result of this gameplay

was a resounding statement of "Be yourself."

Hard Work

The job of the superintendent is multifaceted and demanding. These women felt that their

path towards and work within the position was complicated and required great dedication. Most

referenced the need to work hard throughout their careers and felt they worked harder, longer,

and more efficiently than men in most cases. Erin said, "Working hard and working long came

easily to me . . . the district became dependent on me." Ann's reputation for working through and

solving problematic situations helped her be successful. "Find something hard and do it well,"

was Ann's advice to aspiring female superintendents. They all described the superintendency as a

24/7 job. Their work approaches included strategies such as being prepared, being strategic, and

doing some dirty work. Tactics of assimilation and effectively addressing sexism were also

examined.

Be Prepared

The participants were clear that female leaders must be thoroughly prepared. Because

women are not given the same level of trust and acceptance as men when taking on leadership

positions, it is of utmost importance that women know their topic, deeply understand the issues,

and deliver that knowledge in a consumable way. Carol suggested that women learn all they can.

Ann believed that being prepared "is one of the most important skills I think you can have." She

shared her thoughts on being prepared for board meetings as follows:

> I felt like, when the Board asked me something, they weren't asking for kicks, and our
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> communication needed to be sharp and on point and answer their questions. I have, in my
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> career, seen more men than women joke around.

Carol talked about a female leader she learned from and whose motto she adopted: "Be over-

prepared, anticipate everything, take care of everything." Another retiree said she trained herself

always to ask, "How could this go bad?"

Beth recalled the deep desire to "be seen as someone who tries to understand the issues."

She discussed how important learning and understanding were, especially when racial issues

arose. As a White woman leading in a community of color, she had to work hard to earn trust.

Several of the women posited that female leaders need to read and write a lot. Carol

shared stories of formative professional development opportunities in which she participated,

often involving topics on which she had no expertise, such as world trade and global economics.

One woman currently serving as a superintendent in Colorado stated: "Every opportunity is an

opportunity to learn. Good or bad, really being able to assess--that is something."

Diane recalled a male superintendent who tried to take advantage of her knowledge. He

approached her and asked the following:

> Can you tell me something you've read from these books? I haven't read any of these
>
> books. And tell me something that sounds intelligent that I can put in my next newsletter.

And I would help him do it. As I would do it, sometimes I would go, "You might want to read one of these books for yourself."

To Diane, this was another way men were not held to account and did not have to be as prepared as women.

Be Strategic

The strategies shared here are ways in which to accomplish various professional goals. The women discussed the strategies of gameplay and code-switching. Beth argued, "It's a game. Take yourself out of the situation and look at the pieces on the board, and the parent or whoever it is, that employee has just made this move." She believed that attacks and other challenges feel less personal when the situation was perceived as a game. Asking provocative questions was suggested by the women, too. Beth expanded on this concept:

If somebody's coming at you . . . they just want to give you both barrels. Ask questions to see if they have anything else. Any other ammunition. Or is it just both barrels, and they are unloading on you?

Beth found that asking questions allowed her to get to the bottom of the issue eventually. Similarly, Ann shared that her style was to ask question after question to make sure she had finally gotten to the root of the concern. Both women were thoughtful and strategic about how they approached difficult people and situations.

Code-switching helped sell one female leader's intended message to different community groups. One woman offered the following:

I made sure that we had stories to tell that would relate to . . . the Rotary Club because the Rotary Club was made up of doctors and attorneys and people that had professional

careers. And then, I would go to the PTCO mom and dad meeting; my analogies and

stories were different.

Beth said code-switching was a major strategy she implored to garner her community's and her

staff's support. She implied that the personalization of the message helped her capitalize on what

was most important to specific groups, while avoiding getting bogged down in details they found

monotonous or distracting.

In addition to playing the game, depersonalizing the situation, and code-switching, the

women also shared that they willingly took on unpleasant tasks assigned by others. They

believed that male leaders delegated the jobs they did not want to do saying, "The less desirable

jobs always fell in my lap," and "I had to take care of it even though I wasn't his direct

supervisor and the principal was." Ann thinks men are good at delegating but sometimes do it for

the wrong reasons, whereas women are much less likely to delegate their work, good or bad. Ann

also added, "There was always work to be done, and I stand by believing that doing difficult

work well is the key to advancement." In referencing the dirty jobs assigned to her, she said, "Do

them so well you are the backstop that nothing gets by you." Though they questioned the pattern

of being appointed to manage unpleasant situations, these women spoke of the work as a badge

of honor. Five of the women believed they learned a lot from doing messy jobs and solving these

sticky situations helped them advance in their careers.

Addressing Sexist Behavior

Addressing sexist behavior directly took many forms. Some asked questions such as,

"Tell me about the intent and tone of this conversation." Others stated, "This behavior has got to

stop." Ann found that sexist comments came up more frequently in social settings, but Beth

found that she needed to address male colleagues in the teachers' lounge: "These comments can't

occur anymore in the lunchroom. It's going to stop." When addressing bad behavior, Iris

suggested being careful to maintain professionalism and model the way for others. She believed

that creating a climate and culture void of retaliation was critical. She also discussed the

importance of setting boundaries after working with a man who condescended to women,

including her.

Faye remembers telling someone, "You're clearly talking about a female leader . . . there

is clearly a bias when you're talking about a female leader's appearance." She said, "He backed

right up and said, 'You're right, you're right. You're absolutely right. That is gender bias, and it's

not ok.'" Faye feels that it is best to be direct when dealing with sexist behavior in this day and

age.

Gwen recalled that, in her younger days, she would leave uncomfortable situations while

thinking, "That was just a bunch of crap." Now, having matured, she said:

> I don't do that anymore. I'm much more if you don't want to hear what I say, don't
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> ask me the question, because I'm going to tell you the answer. I think it is right. So, if
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> you don't want to hear it, don't ask.

As previously explained, several of these women expressed having experienced sexual

harassment in their careers. Whether directly or indirectly, they had to find ways to manage the

need to address what was happening while not jeopardizing their livelihood. The two primary

strategies that emerged from the interviews' analysis were using humor and calling the situation

out directly.

Two of the women mentioned making a joke about sexist behavior earlier in their careers.

Faye said, "I would try to joke it off or be like, 'Really? Did you really just say that? Do you

know what you just said?' Whereas today it's probably more like, 'You cannot say that.'"

Another retiree said, "I think I used to just giggle at it or laugh, and then I'd be angry like,

'Really? That's not funny. It's not funny that they all look at me a certain way when I walk in the

room.'" The women agreed that sarcasm and jokes call out the behavior without being too

aggressive but acknowledged that being direct is a more appropriate way to handle the situation.

The participants in this study felt that indirect strategies such as using humor or ignoring the

situation are occasionally useful, but the best advice is to directly handle sexist behavior. When

discussing this tactic, most of the examples were of situations the interviewees witnessed

occurring between others. However, their stories indicated that these women had plenty of

personal experiences with sexist behavior. Interestingly, while two women stated that they had

never experienced sexism, they offered examples of being minimized or objectified.

Support Systems

According to the women in this study, having strong mentors, creating a network, and

surrounding yourself with a solid team are critical to success. These women believed that it is

essential to be able to talk to someone trustworthy. Leadership is hard, and the higher up the

ladder one climbs, the more isolating the job becomes. Support systems are key for female

superintendents.

Mentors

As suggested in the literature review, these women identified the role of mentors, both

female and male, as essential to their career success (Brunner, 2008; Craig & Hardy, 1996;

Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Eagly, 2007; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015; Wyland, 2016).

Some mentors were found within their organization or the educational field, while others came

from other organizations and industries. Ann said, "It's very important to have a mentor in your

culture, but if you can find a mentor outside of your culture," it is also beneficial. She believed

that outside mentors might help identify unhealthy parts of the organization because they do not share the same professional investment. She also found that female leaders must take responsibility for finding mentors. Organizations sometimes try to assign mentors, but Ann found that those relationships do not usually feel authentic or provide the desired support. One of the newer superintendents discussed going to different mentors for different situations, recognizing a need for "motherly" advice at times, while at others seeking a male perspective. Regardless of the need, Diane stated, "Mentors are those people you can trust with your life."

Male mentorship served these female superintendents well. Most of the women mentioned having strong male mentors who helped them, encouraged them, and often gave them access to opportunities that set them up for success. In discussing a male mentor of hers, Carol said, "I learned so much from him because he included me in everything. He was very inclusive in his style of leadership. So just by watching, I learned so much." She said this man always asked if others were getting what they needed, how he could help, and how to support staff and communities. Faye, too, benefitted by watching and learning from good male mentors. Ann said that one of her male mentors gave her a great deal of professional access, although the social circle access to "games and the drinking, not so much."

Several of the women identified the same male mentors. These mentors were well-known male superintendents in Colorado at one time. The women described these men as gentle, wise, and strong. They would not give their mentees answers directly but guided them to their own understanding. They focused on developing others by checking in, asking questions, pushing back, and encouraging the women to persist in difficult times. Carol shared a story of struggling to fix a statewide policy issue that was devastating her district; she knew she had to get the support of metro-area communities to have a chance at making any change. She called one of

these men and asked, "You got a little time? He said, 'What do you want?' And I said, 'Well, I'd like to talk to you about it.' And he goes, 'Well, can we do it over drinks?'" They met, he supported her, and ultimately, she was able to get the legislation changed. She said, "He pulled it off for me."

Female mentorship was less prevalent because fewer female leaders were available at the top who could mentor those coming up behind them. Faye was influenced by watching the female head of schools in her district become a superintendent. She said she remembered, "watching her and seeing this female role model." Other women talked about female principals or assistant principals who were their mentors as they came up through the system. Building-level leadership positions are much more available to women, and so the opportunity to see women in those roles is more common. Erin found mentorship from one of her cabinet members. The woman had been in finance in private industry before joining Erin's team and had more experience navigating a male-dominated industry. Erin often looked to her for advice. Carol reminisced about being inspired by the female president of a national education group. The woman "was assertive without being bitchy. And was perceived as strong without being domineering or over the top." Several of the female superintendents named a specific former female superintendent as a great role model. Like the well-known male mentors described above, this female leader was perceived by the participants in this study as smart and prepared and as reaching out to up-and-coming female leaders. She's a friend to retired female superintendents, a mentor to current female superintendents, and a role model to aspiring female leaders. The women in this study recognized a limited amount of close female mentorship as their organizations typically have few females at the top.

Over half of the women also discussed being deliberate about who they mentor. Two are consultants now who mentor and coach new leaders. Carol said, "I think women should look for their mentor because I think in most cases . . . the women who have done the job would say, 'Absolutely, I'd love to help you.'" As a veteran superintendent, Gwen said that she is interested in mentoring young women and has noticed that "women are more interested in being mentored." Three of the retirees are now acting as mentors, emulating the mentorship they benefitted from, and becoming the female mentors they wish they'd had.

Networking

Networking is a known strategy that female leaders value (Carli & Eagly, 2016). The women in this study were no different. Networks can be large professional organizations like the National Education Association (NEA) or Colorado Association of School Administrators (CASE). In terms of professional networks, Beth commented that women network professionally; they talk about ideas, what others are doing, what they have read, and how challenges are approached in different districts. She found networks to be wonderfully helpful. As a result of there being so few female superintendents in Colorado, some women joined national organizations to work with women across the country.

They can also be a small group of friends that are trusted and held close. Iris called her small group her board of directors. Holly offered:

> Networking is huge, huge, huge, huge. I'm absolutely the beneficiary of my network and the great relationships I have, and then also, not only having the networks but not being afraid to call on them and use them when we need them. That is a huge piece because I think men are very good at speaking on each other's behalf all the time and putting each other out there and talking to each other up.

She suggested that networks are a way to become known and get recognized as a skilled leader. Word of mouth frequently benefits men, according to the participants. Gwen said her network was valuable because they didn't judge her and accepted her for who she was. "They would come in and say, 'Here are the things I think you're doing really well. Here are some areas you might consider for growth.'''

Beth noticed that women seem to gravitate to professional organizations like the NEA and the CASE, especially when they lack mentorship and role models. Carol shared a story about a lack of support from a male colleague when working with CASE and trying to find ways to support female leaders in the organization. The gentleman said, "Well, why the hell do we need a women's retreat? Why are we spending money on that? And by the way, when is the men's retreat?" In response, a female colleague stood up, put both her hands on the table, leaned forward, and said, "'Listen,' with her finger almost up in his nose, 'We'll quit having them when women quit coming. Next question . . . as long as they're in need, we're obligated to fill it.'"

Regardless of the size and scope, networks played a role in the success of female superintendents. The women connect to others, learn from others, and find a support system that helps them flourish. Whether that's to build friendship, change policy, or generate ideas, networks are valuable in leadership.

Building a Professional Team

A strong leadership team that supports the superintendent professionally is essential. The superintendency is high-profile and highly criticized, so a supportive leadership team can help fortify a leader to do their work. Gwen's advice is to "surround yourself with people who believe in you and who you believe in, you will listen to, and that love you and you love them." Diane relied heavily on her cabinet when she was struggling to deal with difficult community issues.

She said they were an unbelievably talented and loyal group that laughed together frequently. According to a couple of the women, people who don't always agree but tell the truth are invaluable. According to these participants, part of a professional team can also be peers and colleagues in other districts. Holly has Gwen and another female superintendent in Colorado on a daily text string with jokes, questions, and affirmations.

Holly said one mistake she made upfront was not taking charge of building her team as quickly as she should have. She said to build rapport and learn about people, she took too long making new hires and replacing people she knew in her heart were not going to work out. Beth discussed being sabotaged by a team member and how utterly devastating the whole experience was for her professionally. She said the saboteur was someone she trusted and who had vacationed with her family and whom she never expected to hurt her professionally. Beth said it took a long time to get over the anger and hurt, which is why she suggested you must have a strong supportive team.

Similar to their professional teams, personal teams of family and friends are vital, too. Beth found her husband to be supportive during difficult times. She believes that women must know that whoever they talk to will keep their secrets. Iris spoke about a group of people she called a board of directors, but they were confidants she had acquired along the way and who offered counsel on many topics. Almost all the women alluded to the need to have people you can trust and blow off steam with because the nature of the job is so stressful.

Regardless of size, proximity, or focus, a stable, thoughtful professional or personal support system is critical to success. Mentors can model successful strategies and help women gain access and opportunities they might otherwise not have. Networks can connect women to other people who are driven by the same goals and dreams. Support systems help women

conquer their personal and professional lives by helping with domestic demands or defending them when they come under fire publicly. They may also provide opportunities to laugh and unwind with trusted confidants. Support systems increase the chances of a female leader reaching and flourishing at top leadership positions.

Research Question 2 Summary

The strategies employed by these women helped them navigate the gendered path to the superintendency. Collaboration and relationship-building proved useful as these women learned to lead and, more importantly, to get people to follow. Hard work and dedication added to others' perceptions that these women were skilled and valuable in their leadership roles, especially when difficult situations were resolved with favorable solutions. These women expressed that they learned to associate with male colleagues when needed to gain an advantage. They also shared that they learned to stand up for what they believed in and use their voice to garner support. The women also spoke of navigating sexist behaviors without risking their careers. Their hard work let others know they could be trusted to do a good job and that they were worthy of the next opportunity. Finally, because a female leader's work is so challenging, they intentionally built robust support systems that allowed them to learn, make mistakes, and continue to grow. These supports reinforced their resolve to continue making a difference for children and communities, even during times of conflict and challenge. Collectively, these strategies aided the women in plotting their path to the superintendency.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

Given that women are still underrepresented in the role of school district superintendents both nationally and in Colorado, I became interested in learning more about why this pattern exists. I wondered how the women who attained the role managed to succeed in this male-dominated space. Therefore, my specific purpose in the study was to discover whether women who had taken the superintendent's job perceived their career experiences to be gendered and which strategies they used to ultimately attain the top leadership position. The research questions that guided my study were as follows:

Q1 How do past and present Colorado female superintendents perceive that their gender influenced their path towards and experiences within the superintendency?

Q2 How do past and present Colorado female superintendents navigate their gendered experiences?

Constructionism philosophy and a multi-case study research design were used to explore several female superintendents' experiences in Colorado. Constructionism provided the structure to look at several cases within a single ethos, in this case, female superintendents in Colorado. The multi-case design also supported gathering the women's individual stories and sharing them in a way that recognizes both their uniqueness and their similarities. The participants were

selected using purposeful sampling. I work within this same industry, and as a result, the snowball method helped me find willing participants. When completed, the participant sample included nine women--four retirees and five still leading school districts today.

The women participated in a semi-structured interview process. The audio recordings of their responses were transcribed. Local newspaper articles written by and about the women and follow-up interview questions were also collected. The interviews, news clipping, and follow-up email responses were all coded and analyzed. The methods suggested by Creswell (2015) and Lichtman (2013) guided the coding process. The text was uploaded into NVivo, a quantitative data management system, to help manage the multiple pages of data and streamline from over 500 codes down to the significant themes described in Chapter IV. Care was taken to ensure the women's and their districts' anonymity, as the pool of female superintendents in Colorado is small.

Regarding the first question that addressed how past and present female superintendents in Colorado perceived their career path to be gendered, the themes of gendered discrimination, gendered leadership, and motivation arose. The themes of collaboration, hard work, and support systems dominated how the women navigated their gendered experiences in response to Research Question 2.

In this final chapter, I will synthesize and discuss the previous chapters. I will offer comparisons to the literature and discuss where this study differs from others. The goal is to give insight into the experience of becoming a female superintendent and offer recommendations about how to become a contender when seeking the top position.

Interpretation of Findings

The themes found in this study align with those of previous studies. The literature review described the treatment of women seeking top leadership positions throughout the last couple of centuries. It is apparent that there has been some progress; however, this study's participants still experienced discrimination and bias in the workplace. Although these female superintendents successfully reached the top spot, they acknowledged that these barriers limit women's leadership opportunities and have created challenges that they must overcome to succeed.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the female superintendents interviewed for this study work in education, in which most employees are women. However, most women do not rise to the top positions at the same pace and as frequently as men. Women represent more than 80% of the teaching workforce; however, they make up only about 20% of superintendents nationally (Badura et al., 2018; Bailey, 2005; Eagly, 2007; Schock et al., 2018; Thorpe, 2018; Wyland, 2016). Colorado sits at approximately 25% of its superintendents being female, but two women left their districts mid-year, as this study concluded. A male interim superintendent replaced both.

The literature review revealed that most female superintendents take a career path that focuses on teaching and learning rather than school district operations. Grogan (2005, 2008) found that female superintendents often spent more time in the classroom than their male colleagues and focused on improving things for kids. That pattern was reflected by the career paths of the participants of this study. They were teachers, instructional coaches, assistant principals, principals, and cabinet-level supervisors before attaining their jobs. Sanchez and

Thornton (2010) found that most superintendents had high school principal experience on their resumes. Similarly, more than half of the female leaders in this study served at the secondary leadership level before becoming a superintendent.

Gender Discrimination

The nine female superintendents in Colorado who participated in this study perceive their career path and their work within the superintendency to be gendered. They were able to identify the challenges and expectations they faced as they ascended to the top due to sexist behaviors and the American education system's dominant patriarchal culture (Blount, 1998; Tyack, 1974). Examples of sexist treatment, including being treated like a child, receiving unequal pay, being singled out, and feeling isolated, were shared. The women also described having to address sexual harassment directed at other women as well as themselves. That type of treatment aligns with prior research findings regarding women in leadership (Kanter, 1977; King et al., 2010; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Schoen et al., 2018; Torchia et al., 2011; Young & McLeod, 2001). Whether trying to break paternalistic barriers or address sexist innuendo, the participants faced many challenges, yet they overcame gender discrimination and still succeeded.

The one topic that emerged that was not discussed in the literature review with any depth was the sexist treatment some women received from other women. The concepts of polarization and isolation explained by researchers described similar treatment; however, most of the examples included in this study described the adverse treatment of women by men more than women (Kanter, 1977; King et al., 2010; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Torchia et al., 2011). Crabs in a bucket is the analogy of human behavior that suggests members of a group try to achieve success beyond others out of envy, resentment, spite, and conspiracy (Crab mentality, 2021). It describes what the women experienced, although not expressly outlined in the literature review.

Evidence of such conflicts are when Ann was told she was sitting in a female colleague's seat when attending her first cabinet meeting, though there were no assigned seats. Beth shared stories of being sabotaged by a female subordinate who undermined the board of education's belief in her leadership. Gwen talked about being in meetings with women who were catty about other females' looks and abilities though they barely knew them. Similarly, Holly spoke about avoiding looking tired on Zoom calls by making sure her make-up and hair were done. These are examples of the conflict or competition sewn between members of marginalized groups such as women. This kind of behavior focuses the marginalized group on internal fighting rather than collective efforts to improve everyone's treatment and opportunities. It can also keep conflict and competition from challenging the dominant culture's norms that create barriers to marginalized groups' success.

Gendered Leadership

The gender role expectations of female leadership also created obstacles in these nine female superintendents' career paths. The women shared the feeling that they needed to establish themselves as confident and capable in ways not expected of men. The different expectations of men and women were prevalent with staff, the community, and the board of education. Similarly, previous studies found that women were not taken seriously because the power structures in education leadership lean towards male traits and cause barriers for women (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan, 2008). According to the participants, gender bias can impact a woman's path to the top, yet they were also successful in navigating their way.

Gendered career paths left the women with holes in their work experience as most ascended from the classroom up through the system and missed the chance to learn about the operational side of education. The lack of these experiences proved challenging for the women.

Carli and Eagly (2016) found that women could not access high-level networking, which was most glaring for women who were the only female on their teams. A couple of participants had access to the superintendency's broader scope, granted by male superintendents for which they worked. Without that direct experience, the female leaders interviewed felt holes in their repertoire that they had to compensate for in the first few years of serving as a superintendent. Access to networking, professional development, and strong mentors helped the female superintendents in this study gain access, as Yoder (2001) suggested. According to Young and McLeod (2001), there is a perception that leadership equity has been achieved, meaning that women have more access to top leadership roles today than ever before. The issue of being underprepared for the daunting role of superintendent may be universal for men and women, but it is gendered in terms of the types of experiences had by this study's participants. They not only tackled the challenges of the job, but they also faced gendered leadership expectations as well.

Almost all the women in this study talked about working with male colleagues they found utterly unprepared for the superintendent's role. The literature review indicated that women often have more experience and academic credentials than their male counterparts, yet that does not give them favor in hiring (Badura et al., 2018). They felt that the men had gained favor by being charismatic and merely showing up in spaces with preferred male characteristics. Conversely, as discussed in the literature review, the women felt they had to be well-versed in all aspects of the job. They had to present well; they had to balance being confident and humble, trying not to be perceived as bitchy or overbearing (Schock et al., 2018).

Another interesting trend from the interviews was the women talking about dealing with sexist behavior and expectations. Most of the examples offered were when other females were being treated inappropriately or dismissed. Five of the women described stepping in to confront

the issues and address the behaviors. Most discussed dealing with sexist treatment as being outside of their personal experience, yet as was stated earlier, many felt the need to look the part by dressing up and making sure their makeup and hair were on par with community expectations.

Studies cited in the literature review found that women are expected to be warm-hearted and attractive while projecting a sense of control of their system (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Wallace, 2015). Those same characteristics were expected from these female superintendents in Colorado. They talked about being the community's face, wearing heels, wearing jewelry, wearing makeup, and needing to look the part. Another similarity was when Beth chose to have her husband go to an out-of-state interview with her so she would appear to be a happily married woman, even though she and her husband had already planned to divorce. That story mimicked one in a case study by Grogan (2008) when a community seemed to have concerns that the woman's husband had not relocated with her. A community member wrote about Faye in the newspaper, suggesting that she was a great candidate but wouldn't "steamroll" anyone. Balancing the need to be presentable, soft at heart, and having a backbone of steel while managing not to upset anyone's role expectations is a challenge the study participants faced.

I would suggest that dealing with these gender role expectations is a form of sexism, though more subtle than the blatant sexual harassment discussed by some. It appears many of the women felt the need to balance being attractive and kind-hearted while also compensating for shortcomings and portraying themselves as influential leaders, as was suggested in the literature review (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Motivation

Regardless of the experienced difficulties, the women felt that they always returned to their core beliefs about public education and kids when trying to lead in their communities. They

were motivated to continue their fight due to deep-rooted beliefs in serving students, staff, and community, believing firmly in public education, just as Grogan suggested (2005, 2008). The women thought they differed from their male peers, expressing that many male colleagues sought power and money rather than service to the community.

Being driven by making a difference in students' and families' lives aligns with the belief that women are more communal in their gender role actions. In the literature, women were historically caregivers rather than leaders (Schock et al., 2018). These female leaders seemed to have merged the two roles by gaining top leadership positions while being driven by improving the community rather than gaining power and influence.

**Collaboration and
Relationships**

Collaborating and building relationships within an organization were of utmost importance to the participants. By collaborating and taking the time to get to know people, they believe they strengthened decision-making and made others feel valued in the process. Collaboration aided in moving people along and helped the women garner support in their careers. Eagly and Karau (2002) discussed the concept of transformational leadership and how this style of leadership is more communal in nature. Communal traits such as collaboration and building relationships aligned with the sex-role stereotype and helped the women succeed. These skills make people feel included and cared for in a more nurturing way than the traditional transactional leadership style. Building deep relationships with people seems to be how the study's women built trust with others in the organization. Conversely, according to six participants, men seem to be accepted for just showing up, generally. In contrast, women were required to prove themselves in knowledge and capability to lead others successfully.

Several of the women acknowledged playing the assimilation game and trying to fit in with the guys. Some learned to golf or rode Harleys on the weekends, while others just made themselves available for any happy hour or social gathering so they could be included in the backroom conversations and decision making that is often made in social settings with men. Previous research found that tokenized people assimilate to fit in with their organization's dominant culture (Kanter, 1977; King et al., 2010; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Schoen et al., 2018). While most of the participants now suggest assimilating was ridiculous, and aspiring female leaders just need to be themselves, one retired superintendent was adamant that trying to hang with the boys in some fashion is critical to being included. In her mind, it helps buy the access women need to be included in high-level discussions. Researchers warn that women trying to assimilate can face backlash, losing other women's friendships and creating resentment from men when seeking promotion (Kanter, 1977; King et al., 2010; Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Torchia et al., 2011). A few examples shared in the study suggest that some women felt that kind of pressure from others as they ascended within the organization.

According to the participants, building meaningful relationships with staff, students, families, community, and board members was pivotal to success. Collaborating with all these constituents helped the women drive new initiatives, solve complicated issues, and pass bond and budget campaigns at times. Collaboration and being relational seem critical to female leaders' success as they tried to establish trust within their community and organization.

Hard Work

The superintendent's job is always a challenge and has become increasingly difficult in the last few decades, requiring an immense skill set (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). To succeed, these female superintendents suggested

that women must be willing to take on tough tasks and execute them well. To be taken seriously, the female superintendents in this study worked hard to prepare for each situation, feeling as if females do not have the opportunity to apply minimal effort or just wing it.

Examples of when the females in this study took care of the unpleasant tasks that others, namely men, did not want to do are detailed in Chapter IV. Whether addressing sticky human resources issues, closing schools, or managing difficult community issues, the women studied here were willing to do the hard work. A couple of the women warned against over-delegating as you ascend in leadership roles, particularly with unwanted tasks that were difficult or contentious. They suggested passing off the undesirable jobs was a practice for many men they worked with in their careers.

The women in this study navigated the male-dominated culture of educational leadership by working hard and doing others' dirty work. They also had to navigate paternalistic treatment from many men associated with their educational organizations. To gain success, they took on tough tasks and tried to assimilate with male leaders to help them gain access to the networking they felt they needed to be successful. The female superintendents interviewed for this study accomplished their goals while looking the part and making sure they did not come across too strong. Craig and Hardy (1996) suggested gender stereotypes might be the most challenging hurdle for female superintendents. Based on the findings of this study, I believe this statement is still valid 24 years later.

Support Systems

Mentorship, networking, and building a supportive team were all supports used by the women as they navigated their career paths to the superintendency. Regardless of whether the mentor was male or female, these superintendents all discussed people in their careers who

noticed them and helped them move to the next level. Having mentors within and outside the organization was suggested to help think about the organization from multiple perspectives. Sometimes, according to three participants, people from the outside are not invested in the history and cultural norms that limit thinking about possibilities and needed changes.

Because women struggle to be included in personal social networking, many gravitated to national networking opportunities, according to the participants. These professional networking opportunities allowed for meaningful professional conversations and inspired these female leaders. Some women fought to be included in men's social networking habits by joining them at their game. That included grabbing a drink to discuss a current topic, going golfing to ease stress, or being willing to join in or tolerate the colorful language not usually associated with proper female leaders. It appears, once a woman earns the top spot in a district, the position can be incredibly lonely. Several participants discussed having other participants on speed dial to have someone to talk to about their unique jobs. Having someone in your professional circle that you can trust and be vulnerable with is vital to success.

Building a supportive professional or personal team is also critical to success. Having a cabinet that tells the truth and demonstrates support is pivotal. Similarly, having family support is equally important as women try to navigate their expectations of being a strong school leader and a mom or partner. The literature review indicated that many women do not pursue leadership positions because of the internal battle that finds them balancing family life and careers (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Interestingly, the women in this study did not discuss their families, other than acknowledging they were married or single and had or did not have children. One talked about her husband's support during a dark period of her career, but

none spoke of shying away from the role because of family. One paused her ambition temporarily while taking care of a sick family member, but none seem deterred by family expectations.

The women interviewed managed their personal life and work obligations. However, they did discuss the endless hours and constant need to be available. Although the "motherhood penalty," the "maternal wall," and other metaphors are prevalent in studies about females in leadership, I was surprised that the challenges of being a mom or partner did not surface at all (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Kanter, 1977).

Women need support from colleagues, peers, and professional networks as they navigate their careers. Not only is the superintendency a difficult job that is becoming more and more complex (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Craig & Hardy, 1996), women must traverse gender role expectations as well. A trusted support system is needed to conquer the challenges they face successfully. Although the number of female superintendents in Colorado has surpassed 20%, these female superintendents still face challenges because of geographic isolation and the lack of networking with other male colleagues. Without this kind of support, women can quickly become isolated and lonely at the top.

Limitations

This study's limitations include the sample size and the geographic area to which it was limited. One could ask if the result would differ if the sample represented women from across the United States and was more extensive in scale. Colorado is politically considered a purple state but is recently more liberal leaning. One could ask whether these Coloradans' experiences might compare to those in the political backdrop of the deep south or the northeast region of the country.

The insights yielded from this study are from nine female superintendents in Colorado. Consequently, this study is limited in depicting a complete portrait of women looking to become a superintendent of schools. However, it gives the reader an insight on the participants' gendered journey and an introduction to strategies they used to succeed.

One of the unique limitations, however, was conducting this study during the COVID-19 outbreak. The in-person interviews switched to a video conference format. While the ultimate goal was achieved, the technological complications made the process more difficult and may have impacted the stories' depth and breadth. As a researcher, I could not read body language, and the ice-breaking conversations intended to help build rapport with participants seemed less authentic. One call was interrupted by the video and audio freezing up numerous times. In another interview, the participant could only see me. I could not see her at all and had no chance to respond to the cues one might typically get from a face-to-face interview. While all the women willingly participated and engaged as best as possible, I wonder what the impact of not meeting in person had on the study. Regardless of the difficulty, however, each interview lasted for approximately an hour, and each one provided great information.

Finally, another possible limitation of the study was my closeness to the topic. Currently, I am in my 24th year as an educator. I followed a similar career path to the women studied here. I am poised to be a superintendent before the end of my career. I have had experiences both similar to and different than the participants of this study. To adjust for bias, I tried to suspend judgment, and I wrote out my own story to help bracket the themes that existed for me. In addition, I was careful to treat each woman's story as equal to ensure that the themes dominant in my story did not inadvertently become the themes of the study. Though I used epoche, bracketing, and horizontalization, it is not possible to completely eliminate bias.

Recommendations

The women made several recommendations that I can also make based on each story's individual and collective review. Most are associated with the strategies the women used to succeed in their careers. All the study's participants attained the positions that remain elusive to others, and thus the strategies shared should be considered consequential.

Recommendations to Practitioners

According to these experienced female superintendents, aspiring female superintendents should "just go for it," "take the plunge," and "dive in." There is no reason to wait. As discussed in the previous chapter, they believe that men apply for a superintendency, assuming that they will figure it out later. Women limit themselves by thinking they need to know everything before they apply. Based on the job demands, no one can ever be completely ready, according to the participants.

Other strongly suggested advice was for aspiring leaders to be themselves, know their core beliefs, and stay true to those beliefs while navigating the way. Diane said, " You 've got to be strong, you've got to have a pretty strong constitution, pretty thick skin, but not so thick that you can't access your heart and soul while you are doing the work." She also talked about not avoiding concern about people that worry about how you dress or present yourself.

And finally, the advice for aspiring leaders is to be prepared and work hard. There are no short cuts for female leaders. They must take their jobs seriously and use the tools at networks at their disposal to effectively prepare for any challenge they face. They should be willing to take on any task, large or small, that helps the organization grow. A do it, and do it well, attitude was expressed by several of the women.

Educational organizations need to find ways to support female leaders with strong potential; however, Ann would also suggest that aspiring female leaders need to find their mentors and people they trust. She believes that even when school districts try to formalize mentoring relationships, the partnerships' forced nature often does not lead to authentic mentoring, which is not beneficial. As someone who currently serves at the top of my district, there have been many times I felt excluded from conversations that my male peers were having as they socialized together outside work. From my vantage point, it seems like female superintendents are doing a better job of reaching out to each other, but those below that level are not as well connected.

A possible solution might be to encourage women to gather informally on an ongoing basis, providing the opportunity to know more of the organization's women rather than being assigned, one specific mentor. This model allows women to find natural mentors instead of less authentic forced relationships. Another possibility is working with outside organizations to capitalize on meeting other women in or out of the industry. The partnerships could be beneficial for a small district with few women in leadership

Recommendations for
Future Research

Future research could include gathering a broader data set and diversifying the participants' geographic locations. This study could be replicated in multiple states and then compared to see the impact regional cultures and political leanings have on female superintendents' paths. Another possible approach could be to reframe this study with a quantitative methodology where a survey is used to sample a larger group of female

superintendents from across the United States. A survey could offer the opportunity to help further understand whether the identified themes remain true in other states and across geopolitical experiences.

I also suggest comparing male superintendents' experiences to female superintendents to explore which experiences are universal and gender specific. As a member of an oppressed group, it is hard for women to determine when they are being challenged simply because of the position and when their gender further intensifies that challenge. Deciphering between the two could help women grow in leadership and refine their responses as difficult situations arise.

All these possible studies could help further clarify the experience of being a female superintendent. Any clarity of potential career paths and advice that assists aspiring female superintendents stands to serve this underrepresented community of female leaders well. If the path to the top position in school districts are cleared of obstacles and systems of support are inclusive of females, there is greater potential for the disproportionality of female superintendents to end. Opportunities for women to reach the superintendency will likely increase through continued study and sharing of experiences of those women who came before.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

Institutional Review Board Approval

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO
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Institutional Review Board

Date: 05/04/2020

Principal Investigator: Jennifer Perry

Committee Action: IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION - New Protocol

Action Date: 05/04/2020

Protocol Number: 2004000259

Protocol Title: Women in the Superintendency

Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(702) for research involving

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ji) Any disclosure of the human subjects(responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Compliance Manager, Nicole Morse, at 970-351-1910 or via e-mail at nicole.morse@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - ttp://hhs.gov/ohrp/ and https://www.unqo.edu/research/research-integrity-andcompliance/institutional-review-board/.

Sincerely,

Nicole Morse
Research Compliance Manager

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784