

Thriving in the Superintendency: Female District Leaders Share Their Journeys

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Women in education are strongly represented in the classroom but are much less likely to become school district superintendents. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how women who have been superintendents for at least 3 years experienced mentoring and role preparation as they worked to attain the position. A transcendental phenomenological research methodology amplified and highlighted the voices of interviewees. Prominent themes included the glass ceiling, family influence, career pathways, mentoring and sponsorship, representation, volition, and personality characteristics. The underrepresentation of women in the superintendency is not changing quickly enough and perpetuates gender inequality in educational systems.

Keywords: superintendent, women superintendents, female superintendents, representation, superintendent gender discrepancy, superintendent career pathway, superintendent mentoring, superintendent glass ceiling

School leaders significantly influence the quality of education in public schools, so it is imperative that an equitable representation of the most qualified candidates can access the superintendency, the top position in school district leadership (Miles Nash & Grogan, 2021; Wyland, 2016). The role of the superintendent is pivotal in determining and implementing the vision and mission of an organization, as well as maintaining an organizational culture that supports high achievement for all (Allred et al., 2017). Consequently, only the most prepared and exceptional educators should aspire to this position. As females make up over half of the teacher leaders in public schools, understanding how successful female superintendents experience mentoring and preparation for the position may inspire more women to consider pursuing the superintendency and reduce the significant gender disparity associated with the role (Fuller et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2020; Muñoz et al., 2018).

Research is consistent over several decades regarding the majority representation of females in both educational leadership and teaching roles (Wyland, 2016). Women hold most teaching positions nationwide yet are much less likely to be superintendents (McCord & Finnan, 2019; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2012). This disparity continues, despite the rising number of females enrolled in superintendent preparation programs and deliberate efforts to encourage women in the principalship or engaged in other applicable career paths to consider pursuing the district leadership role (Allred et al., 2017). This trend is consistent when examining the representation of women in leadership roles. For example, female teachers are considerably less likely to enter school administration than similarly prepared and qualified male counterparts (Bryant et al., 2017; Connell et al., 2015; Miles, Nash, & Grogan, 2021).

There are many key elements that influence the pursuit and attainment of the superintendency. Preparation, personal volition, mentoring, and professional networks all contribute to the decision to pursue the role and to providing access to the position (DiCanio et al., 2016; Grossane & Tatum, 2019; Howard et al., 2017; Wyland, 2016). Understanding gender differences in career pathways, professional opportunities, volition, mentoring, and superintendency hiring trends will inform systems and promote equitable access and preparation for district leadership (Hill et al., 2020).

Problem Statement and Significance of the Study

This study examined how female superintendents experienced mentoring and preparation for the role of school district leader. Statistics provide trends and describe prevalence, but a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the path to the superintendency requires rich description if personal topics are to be explored and authentic experiences understood (Janesick, 2019; Wiczorek & Manard, 2018). In-depth interviews with current or recently appointed female superintendents allowed for an examination of the diversity of experiences related to career pathways, leadership opportunities, mentoring, and the hiring process. Connell et al. (2015), Liang et al. (2018), and Muñoz et al. (2018) investigated these elements to discover important supports and barriers to the superintendency for women. This study examined how female superintendents understand and describe these elements as well as the additional influences of volition and personal support systems, while remaining open to any themes that emerged as the female educational leaders described their unique experiences. Ultimately, a more comprehensive understanding of how women have successfully entered the superintendency

can support qualified female educators and inform preparation programs to address gender disparity in this critical position (Miles, Nash, & Grogan, 2021; White, 2021).

Women in educational leadership roles often agree that their experiences are different from those of male counterparts (Weiner et al., 2019). Furthermore, these differences are even more pronounced for females identifying as part of non-majority racial and ethnic groups (Liang et al., 2018; Weiner et al., 2019). To better understand the experiences of successful female superintendents, Wyland (2016) investigated the barriers and supports to the superintendency for female leaders in Minnesota. Participants in the study identified gender bias and familial responsibilities as significant challenges to attaining the position, while recognizing the positive influence of professional mentoring and the personal characteristics of resiliency and tenacity. Hill et al. (2020) explored the same themes in their interviews with female superintendents and had similar findings.

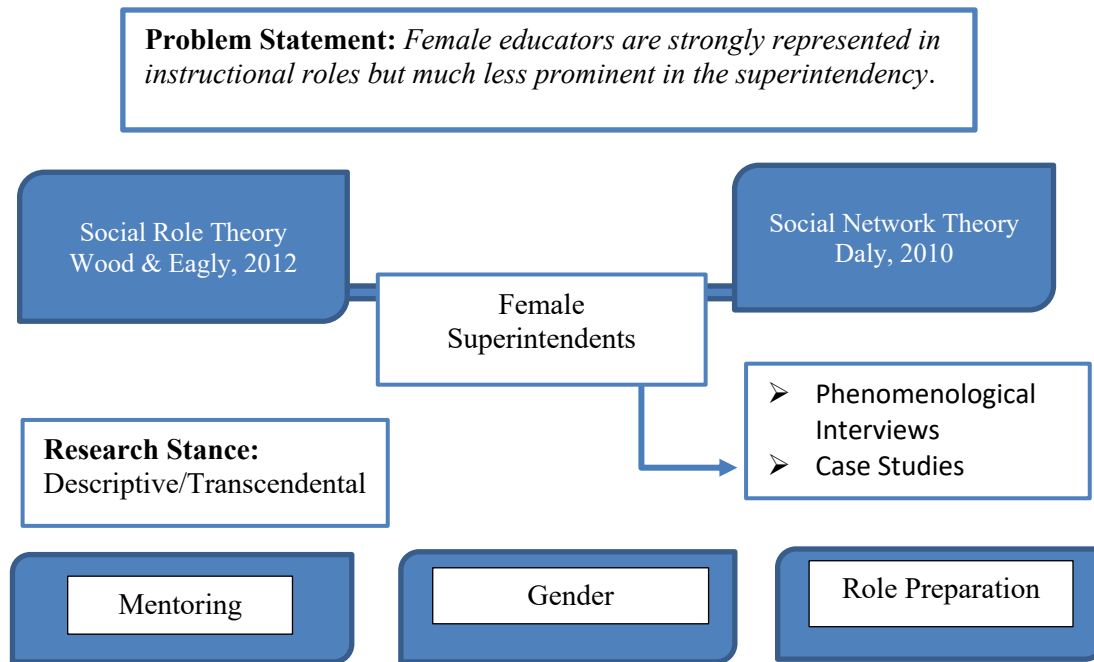
The aforementioned studies notwithstanding, current scholarship regarding the experiences of female superintendents is limited (Janesick, 2019). More prevalent in recent literature is the exploration of gender differences in attaining the principalship, and the supporting influences that contribute to a more equitable representation of women in school building leadership (Fuller et al., 2018; Lee & Mao, 2023). This is a critical step as it is difficult to address gender disparity in the top district leadership role if there is a scarcity of highly qualified female principals. Furthermore, Wallace (2015) posited that at current rates at the time of the study, it would take more than 80 years for women to achieve equity in attaining the superintendency. This makes the focus of this study timely and relevant as there is a need for more understanding of how successful female superintendents prepare for the role and attain the position.

Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Framework

Understanding the unique and rich experiences of female superintendents as they reflect on attainment of the position, the role of mentoring and sponsorship, and gender-related differences in these experiences (Drake, 2023; Muñoz et al., 2018), allows for exploration of the unique journeys of women aspiring to the highest levels of educational leadership. Grounded in social role theory (Wood & Eagly, 2012) and social network theory (Daly, 2010), the influence of mentoring relationships and gender-based social norms could be investigated thoroughly through thick descriptions of the personal experiences of female superintendents. This deep understanding of the critical role of mentoring may present a clearer pathway to the superintendency than experienced by this investigator and support the professional development of female leadership in education.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework of female superintendent experiences.



Purpose of the Study

Female superintendents bring a unique perspective that is needed if the educational system is to reflect the demographics of a community and meets the needs of all learners (Allred, et al., 2017; Janesick, 2019). This viewpoint represents the diversity of experiences and strengths that mirror those of students and the greater community. It is certainly not possible for one woman in district leadership to speak for all female constituents, but it is critical that collectively, educational leaders resemble all members of society, and women are represented proportionally (Weiner et al., 2019). Therefore, upward mobility for women is a social justice issue when those most qualified are restricted from accessing key leadership roles based on gender or other marginalized categories, and the children served by school systems are witness to this discrepancy (Connell et al., 2015; Muñoz et al., 2014; White, 2021).

This study is significant as it addresses important gaps in the literature related to the current experiences of female superintendents in more diverse geographical locations. Much recent scholarship is focused on superintendents from only a few parts of the United States, which may not represent the experiences of female district leaders in other locations (Allred et al., 2017; Rohwer, 2018; Wyland, 2016). Additionally, the unique career pathways of women and their experiences of mentoring relationships, need further exploration if a successful roadmap to the superintendency is to be identified.

Research Questions

This phenomenological study deepened understanding about the experiences of female superintendents as they prepared for and aspired to the top educational leader position at the school district level. Inquiry was grounded in these essential questions:

R1: How do female superintendents experience mentoring throughout their professional pathways?

R2: How do female superintendents experience preparation for attaining a superintendency?

Review of the Literature

Understanding the experiences of women as they aspire to and attain the role of superintendent begins with clarity regarding current female representation rates (McCord & Finnan, 2019) and the influence of social roles and networks (Daly, 2010; Wood & Eagly, 2012). It is with this foundation that the importance of mentoring, sponsorship, and professional preparation can be explored and pathways to top educational leadership positions identified. These interwoven influences contribute to the desire of female educators to pursue the superintendency and are the primary themes explored in this synthesis of research (Bryant et al., 2017).

Consideration of the unique professional journeys of female superintendents is grounded in previous literature related to the topic as well as research in the areas of mentoring and leadership. Additionally, the minimal existing data regarding the prevalence of females in the superintendency must be analyzed. No central agency is required to keep hiring statistics, so studies including this information are rare. The School Superintendents Association (AASA) is the only source of current data in the United States, which consistently estimates the ratio of male-to-female superintendents as slightly less than four to one (McCord & Finnan, 2019; U.S. Department of Education (USDOE), National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). The low percentage of female superintendents makes understanding the unique perspectives of female educational leaders critical if more women are to pursue and attain the top educational role.

The literature related to the experiences of female superintendents as they attain the position and successfully navigate the role is limited, especially regarding how these leaders experienced mentoring and professional preparation. Studies that are quantitative and mixed methods in nature provide some foundation for understanding the prevalence of female superintendents and demographic information, but current data is limited by the lack of governmental agency responsibility for tracking superintendent hiring (McCord & Finnan, 2019). Consequently, the AASA is the main source of information related to superintendent hiring trends (McCord & Finnan, 2019). Qualitative studies provide more depth of understanding related to the experiences of female superintendents, but more current research is needed. Based on this review of literatures, which is founded in a theoretical framework using social role theory and social network theory to understand the experiences of female superintendents, there was sufficient reason for thinking that an investigation examining the influence of mentoring and role preparation would yield socially significant findings.

Research Methodology

The methodological approach of a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological study was used to explore the detailed and personal experiences regarding mentoring and role preparation of female superintendents in the Pacific Northwest. Therefore, the sample was limited to a select group of female superintendents who possessed the attributes of women who have successfully navigated the journey to the role of superintendent. This limited sample allowed for thick and rich description throughout the interview process, resulting in a deep examination of the experiences of every participant.

Phenomenological research explores a specific phenomenon through the lived experiences of people, developing deep understanding through a perspective that is free of bias and presuppositions (Beck, 2021). Phenomenological methodologies are varied but are generally categorized as descriptive or interpretive (Beck, 2021; Vagle, 2016). Transcendental phenomenology is a descriptive approach that asks the researcher to transcend their own consciousness to study the experiences and perceptions of others without preconceptions (Giorgi, 2012; Vagle, 2016). This study follows the Moustakas (1994) approach to transcendental phenomenology through overtly bracketing, or setting aside, the presuppositions and biases of the researcher to deeply understand the lived experiences of participants. Ultimately, a transcendental phenomenological study will culminate in a synthesized statement of meaning regarding the essence of a phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). This approach was most appropriate for this study as the research questions are centered on developing a rich understanding of the journeys and experiences of female superintendents.

This study was founded in the three-interview protocol detailed by Seidman (2019), an appropriate data-gathering methodology for the qualitative, transcendental phenomenological approach of this research (Moustakas, 1994). The three interviews, each unique in focus, allowed for the personalization of the experiences of each participant while rapport with me was developed. A quantitative or mixed-methods research design would have constrained the opportunity to hear the personal stories and experiences of the participants and focus attention on the details of their unique journeys, which was the foundation of this study (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Design

Seidman (2019) detailed a protocol for conducting a series of three consecutive interviews that allows for a rich exploration of participant experiences, as well as an opportunity for participants to make meaning of their reflections and check for researcher understanding. Ultimately, this study culminated in a greater understanding of the pathway to the top educational role for many women aspiring to the position (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The interview protocol in this study was selected to elicit detailed and personal reflections on the lived experiences of participants. The rationale for multiple interview sessions was to help the interviewee organize their recollections and to develop rapport with me as more probing questions were introduced (Seidman, 2019). Interviewees first described their personal and professional journeys, then expanded in the second interview section to sharing their current experiences in the superintendency and concluded in the third portion by making meaning of their reflections and experiences.

The interview protocol was semi-structured, meaning that each participant had an opportunity to answer the same questions, and a general timeline for each of the three interviews was adhered to (Seidman, 2019). Interviews each had some structure to maintain consistency, but intentionally remained open-ended and flexible, allowing individuality of responses and removing constraints that might impede a rich understanding of the unique experiences of each participant (van Manen, 2015; 2016). I recorded the interviews, transcribed them for analysis, and also kept detailed field notes that contained my reflections and observations during the interview process. The field notes were an additional source of data that could be shared with participants for their feedback if necessary.

Participants for this study were women serving in the role of superintendent in the Pacific Northwest. The Pacific Northwest was defined as the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. A representative sample of women in the superintendency in the Pacific Northwest gave more meaning to this study, therefore potential participants were recruited, then assigned to the study based on school district size and tenure in the role.

Geographical residency is important as the essence of the phenomena captured may be different based on regional considerations. The attribute of tenure in the superintendency is essential as well since the length of tenure, or time serving in the superintendency, shapes the understanding of role preparation and the influence of mentoring. Consequently, participants were required to have at least three years in the superintendency to participate. These three attributes allowed for a sample that can best capture the lived experiences of women serving as superintendents in the Pacific Northwest.

Table 1

Superintendent Demographics

Pseudonym	Tenure <i>Years as Superintendent</i>	School District Size <i>Student Enrollment</i>	School District Location <i>Geography</i>
Jordan J.	< 5 Years	Small	Rural
Angela L.	>10 Years	Large	Urban/Suburban
Jessica J.	5-10 Years	Midsized	Urban/Suburban
Kelly A.	>10 Years	Midsized	Rural
Jamie R.	5-10 Years	Midsized	Rural
Samantha M.	5-10 Years	Large	Urban/Suburban
Hailey S.	< 5 Years	Small	Rural

Data Analysis Procedures

The process for analyzing the data associated with this study was founded on the recommendations of Moustakas (1994) and Seidman (2019). Specifically, I implemented the modification of the VanKamm method of analysis of phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994). Grounded in a transcendental phenomenological approach, the interview transcripts and field notes related to each participant were analyzed for statements of interest, employing horizontalization to give each segment equal consideration (Seidman, 2019). When all notes of interest were identified, I implemented a winnowing process to ensure remaining statements were relevant to the study and were invariant constituents of the experience (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2019). These remaining notes of interest were examined for commonalities and grouped into clusters of meaning, which became the elements embedded within larger thematic groups (Moustakas, 1994).

The aforementioned process included two rounds of coding. Both rounds utilized the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) system NVivo. The first cycle of coding used an *in vivo* coding method to capture the authentic voice of participants by using quotes and explicitly deriving labels from these phrases (Saldaña, 2021). Second cycle coding followed the pattern coding methodology to coalesce the first cycle categories into a more concise list of thematic groups (Saldaña, 2021).

I engaged in *epoche*, the bracketing of personal experience, throughout the data analysis process by transparently identifying, noting in journaling, and setting aside any preconceptions (Moustakas, 1994). This was essential in order to focus on prioritizing the voices of participants and their lived experiences throughout the development of categories and themes (Seidman, 2019). From these thematic groups I developed individual textural and structural descriptions for each participant as well as a description of the essence of their experience. Finally, these individual descriptions were synthesized into a composite statement describing the essence of what it meant for these female superintendents to experience mentoring and role preparation as they aspired to the top school district leadership position (Moustakas, 1994).

Limitations

The experiences of participants are the main focus in studies with a transcendental phenomenological approach, but the primary limitation of this methodological design is the influence of the researcher. *Epoche* keeps the primary investigator aware of personal bias and preconceptions, but it is not possible to fully eradicate this influence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I included weekly journaling of analytic memos to guide personal reflection throughout the investigative process. This overtly bracketed personal experience and made any biases easier to identify.

It is important to note that the geographical location of the study was a considerable delimitation. All participants were recruited from the Pacific Northwest, specifically Washington State. This delimitation was purposeful, as previous scholarship related to this study topic in the Pacific Northwest region is very limited. Understanding the lived experiences of purposefully sampled participants in this specific geographical area will inform regional institutions that prepare superintendents and the school districts that support women aspiring to the top

leadership role.

Results

Throughout the data analysis process, the theoretical frames of social role theory (Wood & Eagly, 2012) and social network theory (Daly, 2010) were considered. This grounded the analysis in the foundations of this study, connecting the experiences of participants to the research that supported the commonality of their experiences. Some events or impacts were very individual in nature, while many were more universal. The limited research in this area so far has not been specific to the Northwest region of the United States. There may be regional differences in experiences, so it is important that a more varied understanding of professional journeys is explored.

There were seven current superintendents who participated in this investigation. All of them have served in the role of superintendent for at least three years. These leaders have been in the role for a variety of tenures. Some were in smaller districts and others were in moderate or very large districts across the Pacific Northwest region. Regardless, they share many common reflections, as well as some very unique experiences. All of them participated because this topic is very important to them personally, and they recognized the significance for the profession.

It was evident that some of the questions were easy to address while others elicited significant emotion. Each superintendent had their unique level of initial transparency, but as rapport developed, they were all willing to share many details that impacted their lives and their careers. Upon assurance that all identifying details would be removed, both from their identities and past places of employment, these women bravely gave witness to what they had been through and what they are experiencing currently. They engaged in this process for different reasons, but each person expressed a deep desire to pave the way for future female educational leaders.

Six main themes emerged during the data analysis process. The themes were: 1) mentors, sponsors, and representation make the difference; 2) readiness and volition; 3) career pathway; 4) family influence; 5) hitting the gender-related glass ceiling; and 6) grit, hope, joy, and optimism. There were subthemes for each major category, and these subthemes were more distinct elements of participant experience that related to each primary theme. Subthemes were common elements relating to a broader category that did not have enough detail on their own to emerge as a theme but were consistently addressed in multiple interviews. It has been the sincere hope throughout this investigation that the voices of the participants would lead the way, illuminating the journey to and throughout the superintendency in a way that demonstrates the richness and depth of their unique stories. Sharing their insights and experiences with their own words and finding commonalities within the sisterhood of the superintendency seems the most authentic way of ensuring this priority is realized as results are considered. Table 2 displays the themes and subthemes in relation to the research questions. One theme, readiness and volition, relates to both research questions so appears in the table twice.

Table 2
Themes and Subthemes Aligned to Research Questions

<p>Career Pathway <i>Atypical Journey</i> <i>Building Administration</i> <i>To Teach or Not to Teach</i></p>	R2
<p>Grit, Hope, Joy, and Optimism <i>Personality Traits and Job Satisfaction</i> <i>I Would Do It Again in a Heartbeat</i> <i>Physical and Emotional Impacts</i> <i>Relationships and Sustainability</i></p>	N/A
<p>Family Influence <i>College Expectations and Educators in the Family</i> <i>Importance of Family Support and Examples of Service</i></p>	R2
<p>Hitting the Gender-Related Glass Ceiling <i>Work Ethic and Women Leaders</i> <i>Who are the Superintendents?</i> <i>Discrimination, Access, and the Token Female</i></p>	R2
<p>Mentors, Sponsors, and Representation Make the Difference <i>Female Role Models, Mentors and Sponsors</i> <i>Representation Matters</i> <i>Tapping and Considering the Superintendency</i></p>	R1
<p>Readiness and Volition <i>Self-Talk, Self-Doubt and Jumping In</i> <i>Motherhood Comes First and Too Many Trade Offs</i></p>	R2

Career Pathway

There are differences and similarities between participants in terms of their journeys to the superintendency. Four interviewees have followed a fairly typical path. Three of the four have had decidedly atypical journeys, either by skipping expected career steps or because of credentialing. One superintendent is in the role and does not hold a state superintendent credential. In Washington State, the superintendent certificate is not an official requirement. Samantha M. was so valued in her district that she was invited to apply for the superintendency without the credential, even though it was understood that she was not willing to pursue the certification at that point in her life. She has been so successful and respected in the role that it is unlikely she will engage in a superintendent preparation program at this point in her career.

Several participants had a fairly typical career pathway to the superintendency, with all but two spending time in the role of principal or assistant principal, and all serving in some central office position. Kelly A. was a principal but had that first experience as a superintendent/principal of a small district for two years. This dual role was very taxing. Kelly A. shared:

I mean, I was burnt ragged, and by the time you try to do principal stuff during the day, and then at 5 o'clock, you're trying to have the brain power to do whatever superintendent work you're supposed to be doing. Yeah.

Grit, Hope, Joy, and Optimism

The participants had many characteristics in common yet had a variety of personality types. Kelly A. identified herself as an introvert and acknowledged that many superintendents are charismatic males. She described her leadership stance as one of humility and servant leadership. She also shared a sense of overarching fatigue and a decision not to pursue another superintendency whenever her current role ends. In contrast, Angela L. has had periods of time in her career where she needed a break and took some time away from work, but does love the job. She shared:

I jokingly say that I'm kind of hardwired to be happy, and I think my parents were really happy people, just hard-working but happy. They had a lot of fun, a lot of joy in our house, a lot of laughs. So, I think that that, you know I've always been inspired by them.

Similarly, Samantha M. described herself as a very positive and happy person who is generally optimistic. This influences her work significantly:

I just have a general I guess maybe attitude, or that I've loved every one of my jobs. I've never left one of them that I didn't like and so I've really loved. And I think that's just kind of my personality that I will- if I can't find joy-it. You know it's probably my perspective because everything about this is - this job isn't about me.

Family Influence

Nearly all participants noted that they were expected to go to college rather than having an overt conversation with family regarding their intentions. As Angela L. said it, "...*this was just the water I swam in.*" None of the superintendents expressed pressure to go into any particular field of study, but going to college was a foregone conclusion. Jordan J. reflected:

The through line was you will go to college. There was never a conversation about college. It was what college are you going to? So? Um not a choice. It's just not a choice at all. And not even a conversation like, 'Oh, what are you gonna do after high school?' It's like, well, what college are you going to?

Each interviewee expressed that they had the loving support of their parents. Several named the support of other family members as well. However, when asked if they would have been supported in their decision if they asserted that they did *not* want to attend a higher education program, several were unsure. In fact, the analytic field notes included several notations of surprise that the question was even asked.

Family influence, for all participants, was significant. What was unexpected was that regardless of an educational background in terms of career, family members instilled a sense of

duty and a heart for service in these inspirational female leaders. These characteristics, along with parental work ethic as mentioned by Rohwer (2018), strongly influenced their development personally and as leaders. For each one of them, the work is bigger than themselves. They do it to make a difference and as an act of the service to which they have dedicated their lives.

Hitting the Gender-Related Glass Ceiling

There is both a recognition of the work ethic expected of female leaders, and the acceptable practice of male leaders leaving critical work undone while they maintain a reasonable work schedule. Participants recognized that some of the expectations came from within themselves, but most are sure that they must do more to compete for top leadership, or even to keep positions similar to male counterparts. Not as many participants as expected overtly, or even through suggestion, addressed competition with men as causing them to hit the glass ceiling. Three participants did state directly that they were competing with male colleagues who were doing less than they were or were less qualified. Sometimes this was within the same organization, while other times it was when they were applying for jobs in other school districts.

Mentors, Sponsors, and Representation Make the Difference

Each participant recognized how crucial it has been to have strong and supportive role models, mentors, and sponsors. Male colleagues or supervisors have been instrumental in encouraging female leaders to progress along the career ladder, and many have helped pave that way by mentoring them and overtly sponsoring them. Every superintendent in this study agreed that without strong mentors, they would not have the skills or dispositions to be successful in the role. This corresponds with the findings of Anderson and Wasonga (2017) regarding the perspectives of mentees regarding role preparation. It is interesting that two experienced participants noted that when they were entering the superintendency, or beginning credentialing programs, there were not very many female superintendents practicing in the districts around them. It is hard to envision yourself in a role when you have not met any women in the superintendency personally. It was over a number of years that there started to be more women in credentialing programs attended by participants, and none of them were in cohorts where women outnumbered men.

Readiness and Volition

Determining readiness for the role of superintendent is a complicated and important decision. What does it mean to be “ready,” and is anyone ever ready? Several superintendents have said that no one is ever fully prepared, and that one just has to jump in and do the job. Upon evaluation of the interviews, it was evident that there is a connection between a person feeling ready and volition. A woman must first want to be a superintendent to attain the role, and there is a real lack of educational leaders who wish to become superintendents. In fact, Angela L. teaches in a superintendent credentialing program and has had more than one cohort where no one wishes to be a superintendent. She explained, *“We all know that the party line is to say the superintendency is the best job in education. And it is, but lately, students are telling me I will need to give some evidence to back that up.”* The dearth of candidates wanting to enter the

superintendency is a real concern among many educational leaders.

The participants interviewed for this study gave unfiltered, raw accounts of their experiences as they aspired to and attained a superintendency. They shared how their lives and careers were influenced by their experiences growing up, by their families, and by their professional colleagues. The interview experiences were semistructured and flexible enough to allow each participant to share what they found most relevant and important. It was hoped that the research methodology would give space for their authentic voices and accounts to lead the study, and that is why their words are so prominent in the results section of the full study. They shared a hope that studies such as this one will shine a spotlight on this critical issue and lead to some considerations for school districts and their school boards, search firms, and school administration credentialing programs.

Implications for Practice

Implications for practice include four important considerations. The first priority is for school administration credentialing programs and universities who administer them to include in their curriculum, direct conversation and guidance related to addressing obstacles connected to gender, race, and the intersection of these factors. Women in these programs would benefit from specific conversations about the inequality of female representation in the superintendency, particularly for women of color. Discussion about these topics should be commonplace. Candidates for the superintendency enter credentialing programs to receive strong preparation so they can be successful in the role. This preparation should include direction on managing the challenges to access that women face along this journey.

A second implication for practice is a change in how search firms engage in the leading school boards to select superintendents. Engaging more women to lead superintendent searches and the vetting of candidates will help address the unequal influence of White, male former superintendents leading many of the searches. These search leaders could play a powerful role in changing the perception of what a successful, powerful superintendent looks like. It is never the intent that women are promoted over men as an exclusive criteria, but search firms can advance qualified female leaders as exciting candidates when they are equally, though perhaps differently, qualified for the job.

Another key implication for practice is the training and education of school boards in the process of hiring superintendents. School board members do not all understand the important characteristics of effective superintendents, sometimes working from stereotypes and their own personal experiences. Prior to beginning a superintendent hiring process, it is critical that school board members are given information about the underrepresentation of certain leaders. They must be given a chance to understand which technical, personal, and social characteristics could serve their district best. With some clear guidance, school board members could become more inclusive and open to a diversity of leadership styles.

Lastly, improvements to formal mentoring programs could make a significant difference in the structures of support that make success in the role of superintendent sustainable. State superintendent organizations often have an established program in which they assign mentors to new superintendents. Unfortunately, stories of mentors who signed up to assist new superintendents not taking their phone calls or supporting them in any way are commonplace.

Ensuring mentors who commit to participate in these programs engage meaningfully with their assigned mentees is very important, as is the careful matching of mentees with mentors. Improvements in these formal programs would provide an important safety net for those newest to the profession.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research in this area of study could contribute to the body of knowledge by investigating this topic in other geographical areas, such as other states, or even internationally. There is little qualitative research that investigates female superintendent experiences deeply, and more scholarship is needed. It does not seem that there are any states where there are significantly more women in the superintendency compared to others, but a more geographically diverse collection of recent studies could illuminate regional differences that might be important. Similarly, a larger sample size would enhance this research, and could be an important extension of this investigation in the future. It should be noted that studies such as this one are challenging to conduct with a large sample size due to time constraints. Consequently, it could be that a team of investigators could replicate this study at a larger scale to analyze the transferability of these findings and potentially discover other important themes.

It would also be beneficial to consider research questions related to sustainability and the superintendency, the retention of superintendents, and the elements of job satisfaction in the role of superintendent. Analyzing these elements of the experience could result in better longevity, as well as inspire potential female leaders to consider the position. A few participants shared that they loved their work, and those superintendents were actually thriving professionally and personally. There are still too many superintendents, male and female, who are struggling to meet the demands of the job while maintaining their own wellbeing. Until this improves, the role is not very desirable to many potential candidates.

One area of promise for future research is the intersection of female educational leadership and women who lead in the field of business. Kroll (2017) explored the role of mentoring female leaders in business, investigating the perceptions of female executives engaged in formal mentoring programs. These findings could support the value of formalizing group mentoring experiences and opportunities more specifically than what is currently commonplace for educators. Similarly, finding opportunities to engage female leaders across sectors in experiences that allow them to share resources and ideas could expose those in the field of education to innovative and new perspectives.

It is possible that there are elements in place in other occupational fields that could support the retention and development of female educational leaders. If women who lead corporations and organizations in other sectors have identified and developed the required characteristics to sustain their work and find personal and professional satisfaction, it may be possible to incorporate these practices into the training of female educational leaders. This possibility is supported by Hill and Wheat (2017), as they found that female leaders in university systems were often engaged in mentoring with mentors who were male, non-traditional, or in other professional fields. Further investigation into these cross-sector partnerships could benefit women in a variety of professions.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to understand how women in the superintendency experienced mentoring and role preparation on their journeys to the superintendency. The participant stories have been the source of the six primary themes, and the context of their professional pathways that have provided important nuance and detail. Their honesty and vulnerability resulted in common subthemes that are not only relevant but give witness to some of the most personal and significant findings in this study. There were many commonalities of experience, some of which were congruent with previous scholarship, while others were more surprising.

The significance of this investigation is that through the words of these women leaders, there can be an illumination of how female superintendents can be better encouraged, prepared, mentored, and supported along their pathway to district leadership. It starts very early in a professional career, and there is a role for all educators to play in encouraging those with the talent and characteristics to be powerful leaders who move up the ladder to roles of greater responsibility. Organizational leadership matters, and it matters most for the children being served in schools everywhere. They need to see people who look like them in positions of power and be encouraged to accomplish whatever they wish. The issue of the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency is much bigger than just professional achievement, as young people take notice when leaders are not a diverse and inclusive group.

In phenomenological research, there is often a synthesized statement of the essence and meaning of the phenomena studied. This is a culmination of the structural and textural descriptions of each participant, integrated into a statement representing the experience of the whole group of participants. This synthesized statement for this study is:

Female superintendents need each other, role models, mentors, and sponsors to make access to the job possible and the work sustainable. Celebrating unique pathways, skillsets, and contributions of families elevates the profession by adding a wonderful diversity to the educational leader field. This can overcome the glass ceiling and bring opportunity to future leaders. Developing grit, staying grounded in hope and optimism, and finding joy in the work make it a position that can fulfil and inspire over time.

This study is about thriving in the superintendency, rather than just surviving it. Attaining the position, if it is not work that brings joy and fulfilment, will be disappointing and lead to continued superintendent attrition. Women who lead school districts hope to make a profound impact but want to know they do not have to sacrifice their wellbeing and most important relationships to do the work. A holistically meaningful life is possible while being a superintendent, if the intentional development of mentors and role models who can light the way becomes a priority. May more women thrive in the superintendency in the years ahead.

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