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Igniting Resilience During Critical Times: Reflections of Women Superintendents

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Igniting Resilience During Critical Times: Reflections of Women Superintendents

Cover Page Footnote

There are no conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Janice L. Taylor, Lamar University, P. O. Box 10034 Beaumont, Texas 77710. Email: jtaylor84@lamar.edu

Introduction

The most powerful and prestigious position in school districts is the superintendent, and it is a position dominated by men (Wallace, 2017). More than two-thirds of superintendent positions nationwide are held by men (ILO Group, 2022). In gender data from 2022, only 30% of females held the superintendent position in the nation's largest 500 school districts, which has contributed to the nationwide gender disparity in the position (ILO Group). In 2019 in Texas, the overall majority of certified superintendents were female (Texas Education Agency, 2019). However, in 2022 in Texas in K-12 public schools, "women accounted for just over a quarter of district superintendents" (Educate Texas at Communities Foundation of Texas, 2023, p. 7). As a result, the number of employed female superintendents in Texas remains low when compared to the number of employed male superintendents. The low number of employed female superintendents in Texas has also contributed to the notable gender inequities in the position across the nation.

A myriad of reasons accounts for the gender inequities and why fewer women serve in top-level leadership positions as superintendents in school districts. Some women superintendents in Texas cited the following reasons: difficult work-life balance, family obligations, time constraints, gender bias, subconscious preferences for men v. women, lack of mentors, a lack of guidance, self-imposed limitations to seek the senior-level position, a lack of encouragement to enter the field, and a lack of a support system (Texas Association of School Boards, n.d.). Additionally, the continuous act of failing to recruit and retain African American women in the superintendent role is another factor in the challenge of gender inequities at the highest level of school district leadership (Baker, 2018). Due to the variables listed, conceivable barriers exist at the intersectionality of the superintendency and gender. Women leaders may also find themselves leveraging their gendered positionalities as insight to inform their decision-making practices. A backdrop consisting of the myriad of aforementioned reasons can lead to gender-battle fatigue for women and (a) negatively influence their career trajectory, or (b) diminish their desire to remain in the highest-level position in school leadership. Additionally, culture war fights, political polarization, divisive rhetoric, and escalating tensions in school districts may also be contributing to why some women are currently choosing not to pursue a superintendent position (Governing, 2022).

According to Reed (2018), globally women in leadership positions face common disruptive challenges during times of crisis. As mandated assessments, increased state accountability, and decreased funding, some leaders succumb to the pressures, while others demonstrate resilience by forging ahead with a renewed strength (Reed, 2018).

To successfully balance their personal and professional lives, women superintendents must possess the endurance to overcome the challenges associated with their roles. Furthermore, to remain in the superintendent position and withstand the mounting pressures during critical times, compels women superintendents to be resilient.

Purpose of the Study

The work of a superintendent is broad in scope and varies greatly across contexts. The nature of the position is complex and demanding and requires superintendents to confront challenges daily. School environments today require a superintendent to work in climates that are fast-paced, intense, and increasingly rigorous (Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018).

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the world and disrupted the education system in ways that many of us could not envision (Dorn, et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to superintendents who had no similar experience. Superintendents had to make decisions that impacted all aspects of their organization. Decisions of paramount importance consisted of the following questions: how children would receive the required technology to continue learning in a virtual setting; how teachers would become trained to keep students academically engaged; and how all the school district's stakeholders would be impacted personally, including physically, financially, socially, and emotionally.

In March 2020, nothing was known about the impact that a pandemic would have on learning. Disrupted or unfinished learning could take years or a lifetime to overcome. "The US education system was not built to deal with extended shutdowns like those imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic" (Dorn, et al., 2020). Providing for the needs of historically marginalized groups of students who lived in underserved communities with limited access to resources was exacerbated by the pandemic. Achievement disparities between socio economic groups and between white students and Black and Hispanic students were already troubling (Dorn et al.). The consequences to their emotional, mental, academic, and physical well-being loomed large.

The undeniable exposure of systemic inequities, in addition to the civil unrest, political pressures, and social injustices throughout the nation, added more dimensions to the decision-making and problem-solving of superintendents. Both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were superintendents without formal professional development training to guide their leadership in navigating through and overcoming adversity (Reed & Patterson, 2007). The purpose of this research is to provide insights into how some women superintendents in Texas were able to sustain their commitment to their leadership role and meet one of the most critical, complex, evolving, and historical moments in a generation.

Review of Literature

Multiple definitions of the word resilience exists in the literature, and the definition has evolved over time. Greene et al., (2002) shared that resilience originates from *resiliens*, a Latin word meaning pliant or elastic quality. Additionally, resilience may also be defined as a trait or quality, process, or outcome (Southwick et al., 2014). Resilience may exist on a continuum to varying degrees during altering circumstances of one's life (Pietrzak & Southwick, 2011). Within the context of leadership, Ledesma (2014) presented resilience as the leader's ability to regain his/her disposition from experienced adversities and frustrations. It is the act of 'bouncing back' and moving forward regardless of the circumstances. Bouncing back refers to coming back stronger from significant adversity (Hoegl & Hartmann, 2020). According to Baker (2018), the superintendency is a demanding profession and requires the leader to self-identify as having the skill of resiliency. Also, in relation to the role of leadership, Reed (2018) suggested that resilience does not have a ripple effect, wavering back and forth differently on each occasion but forms a pattern based on the current ability to withstand adversity and predictions of future success leading through critical disruptions.

Pursuant to this study, and deemed most relevant to its purpose, four definitions of resilience were applied. Walsh (2006) defined resilience as one's capacity to become strengthened and more resourceful when faced with adversity and responding to challenges. Luthar and Cicchetti (2000) defined resilience as a two-dimensional construct that implies positive adjustment outcomes demonstrated despite exposure to negative life circumstances. Additionally, Luthar et al. (2000) referred to resilience as positively adapting within the context

of significant adversity. Further, the ability to be successful despite exposure to high risks while overcoming adversity, was defined as resilience by Fraser et al. (1999). Finally, Bernard (1991) defined resilience as having a set of qualities that allows one to adapt successfully during the course of development, even in the presence of high-risk factors. For the purpose of this study on women superintendents in Texas, a combination of the definitions described above was used to define resilience and was therefore applied to the study: resilience is having a set of qualities that allows one to adapt successfully when faced with adversity and responding to challenges.

Women in Leadership: Challenges, Progress, and Future Directions

Gender diversity in leadership is a critical component of a progressive and inclusive society. However, the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership roles raises questions about the factors inhibiting their advancement and the broader implications for organizations and society. Numerous challenges inhibit women's access to and progression within leadership roles. Gender bias, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices continue to be pervasive obstacles that hinder women's professional growth (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Catalyst, 2020). In researching Black women superintendents and women of color in the position, Kingsberry and Jean-Marie (2022) found job promotion and advancement to be barriers causing underrepresentation in the superintendency. Some women superintendents have faced rejection and negative perceptions because of their Black race and their status as a woman (Kingsberry & Jean-Marie). In addition, hidden racism, and stereotypical perceptions that women are not strong enough to do the job that is traditionally held by a male continue to block opportunities for advancement (Kingsberry & Jean-Marie). The lack of female role models, limited access to mentorship opportunities, and unconscious biases further contribute to the glass ceiling phenomenon (Derks et al., 2016; Hewlett et al., 2008). Additionally, work-life balance challenges, particularly those related to caregiving responsibilities, often impact women's career trajectories (Hunt et al., 2018).

Efforts to address gender disparities in leadership have gained momentum in recent years. Organizations are increasingly recognizing the value of diverse leadership teams in driving innovation and performance (Smith et al., 2019). Progress has been noted through current research. Initiatives such as mentoring programs, leadership development workshops, and diversity quotas have been introduced to facilitate women's leadership advancement (Catalyst, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2021). Notable success stories of women breaking through barriers, such as Sheryl Sandberg and Angela Merkel, serve as inspirational examples for aspiring female leaders (Sandberg & Scovell, 2013; Rubin, 2020).

Research consistently highlights the positive outcomes associated with diverse leadership teams. Gender-diverse boards and executive teams are correlated with enhanced decision-making, increased financial performance, and improved corporate social responsibility (Erhardt et al., 2003; Catalyst, 2020). Kingsberry and Jean-Marie (2022) noted the importance of aspiring superintendents fostering relationships with the gatekeepers of the districts and community to gain internal support as well as building strong communication with board members. While some women superintendents rely on the communication coming from their named communication's officer, others trust their connected allies. It is important to listen to the voice of women superintendents to better understand the challenges and needs of the position. The inclusion of women's perspectives fosters creativity, broadens problem-solving approaches, and promotes a more inclusive organizational culture (Huang & Rundle-Thiele, 2020).

To further advance gender diversity in leadership, a multifaceted approach is necessary. Educational institutions, corporations, and governments should collaborate to create supportive

policies, mentorship programs, and leadership training designed to address gender biases and promote equitable opportunities (World Economic Forum, 2021). Encouraging male allyship and challenging traditional notions of leadership can also contribute to a more inclusive environment (Hunt et al., 2018). Kingsberry and Jean-Marie (2022) found participants in their study reported having successful relationships with their mentorships and gained helpful guidance in navigating complexities related to the superintendent pathway.

While history indicates the need for gender diversity, Reed (2018) found no gender differences in the area of resilience, which is the focus of this study. Critical for future research is the need to understand resilience thinking while investigating a leadership resilience profile (Reed, 2018). The profile further provides capacity building for courageous leaders. According to Reed, the profile is aimed at evaluating resilient thinking skills, resilience capacity-building skills, and resilience action skills. The action skills combined to develop the profile our understanding of reality and optimism, values, efficacy, well-being, support base, courageous decision-making, perseverance, personal responsibility, and adaptability. Reed's study found resilience increased with age, although the sample was small. Additional research is suggested to examine the development of professional development targeting resilience.

Simmons (2011) examined female superintendents in Georgia with at least five years of experience to better understand resilience, the skill sets needed, and the ability to overcome adversity and challenges. All participants rated themselves high in the area of resiliency but low in well-being. With more than one participant sharing specific comments regarding personal needs to pray, a theme that rose from the study was a spiritual connection to the job and role (Simmons, 2011). Being able to flourish while encountering adversity and hard challenges and learning from the experience are expectations Simmons suggests. Using the Leadership Resilience Profile questionnaire, Simmons was able to report in the findings, the voice that passionately spoke to the resilience quality contributing to successful pathways for female superintendents. Essential to strengthening resilience is the ability to seek wisdom, receive guidance, and develop positive relationships with mentors who include men and women of all ethnicities, races, and experiences with varying backgrounds (Kingsberry & Jean-Marie, 2022). The Georgia study (Simmons, 2011) was small; however, the findings may create increased awareness for aspiring superintendents regarding lessons learned while identifying strengths needed to achieve goals prior to pandemics, adversity, and disruptions.

The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles remains a complex challenge with far-reaching implications. While progress has been made, there is still much work to be done to create a more equitable and inclusive leadership landscape in which resiliency is observed and recognized by hiring authorities. By recognizing the systemic barriers, such as a lack of mentors, and promoting the benefits of diverse leadership, organizations and society can collectively strive towards gender parity, leading to an increase in female superintendents with a high level of confidence in the quality of resilience they bring to the table.

Theoretical Framework

This research is framed on the theoretical work of Ellene Polidore's Resilience Theory (Polidore, 2004). Polidore's resilience theory was premised on two different perspectives - developmental and ecological. Developmental perspective is based on the premise that adults develop resilience over a lifetime through relationships, while ecological perspective is based on the theory that adults develop resilience and adapt to external processes such as their environment.

Polidore's study on resilience was conducted with three retired schoolteachers, where she examined their career experiences in education in the segregated rural South for the purpose of gaining perspective and seeking a deeper understanding of how the women sustained their long careers in adverse conditions surrounding that era in history. Eight themes emerged from Polidore's study as qualities of resilience that sustained the women and include the following: religion, flexible locus of control, an individual's ability to view adverse situations positively or optimistic bias, autonomy, commitment, change, positive relations, and education viewed as important. Polidore's findings led to the development of Resilience Theory, an original theory about resilient educators.

Using Polidore's Resilience Theory as a frame posits that one or more qualities of resilience are required for women superintendents to successfully endure the challenges presented during critical times.

Eight Qualities of Resilience

Polidore's (2004) eight qualities of resilience are described in this section. Also included is the graphic conceptualization of resilience as originally developed by Polidore (2004) and later modified by Taylor (2009) as shown in Figure 1.

Religion

The three terms religion, spirituality, or faith may be used synonymously. According to Walsh (1998), many of our fundamental beliefs are founded in religion and spirituality, which can be powerful therapeutic resources of resilience. Walsh also stated that spirituality can be experienced either within or outside of organized religion. Faith, according to Walsh, is inherently relational and begins in childhood, a time when most fundamental meanings about life are shaped.

Flexible Locus of Control

The concept was originally developed by Rotter (1966) and contrasts the external locus of control with the internal locus of control. Individuals with a belief in external locus of control perceive that what happens to them is primarily due to luck, fate, or the power of others, and are less likely to change their behavior. Internal locus of control refers to the ability of an individual to gain motivation from within (Rotter, 1964). Individuals with internal locus of control do not blame outside circumstances for the position they are in. Instead, they look for areas of growth or weakness within themselves to put effort into improving. Rotter (1966) stated that individuals with internal locus of control are more likely to change their behavior with a positive or negative reinforcement if it has meaning or value to the individual. Having a flexible locus of control is beneficial for resilient individuals (Walsh, 1998).

Individual's Ability to View Adverse Situations Positively or "Optimistic Bias"

This resilient quality can be learned, as Seligman (1990) stated, when individuals come to believe that their efforts can yield success. Individuals with optimistic bias detach from negative thinking. Having a healthy optimism is a ray of hope during dark and tough times. Werner and Smith (1989, 1992) stated that resilient individuals can remain optimistic even when they are faced with adversity or challenges.

Autonomy

This quality is important for an individual to function in a competent manner when dealing with adverse situations (Walsh, 1998). Resilient individuals take responsibility for their own thoughts, feelings, and actions, while also respecting the views and qualities of others (Walsh). Additionally, resilient individuals are self-aware, explore options before making a decision, have self-compassion, and can detach from their own ego.

Commitment

In the lives of resilient individuals, commitment, faith, or religion are often interwoven. The results of a study conducted by Higgins (1994) stated that resilient individuals value relating to others and are dedicated and determined to make the world a home for themselves and others. Resilient individuals persevere and do not take “no” for an answer; they fight for what they believe in.

Change

Change may be the most important in the development of an individual's resilience when adapting to adverse situations. The ability to change is facilitated by improvisation, which keeps the brain active and seeking solutions. This resilience quality also stimulates a growth mentality. The capacity to change, when necessary, fosters high functioning in resilient individuals (Walsh, 1998).

Positive Relationships

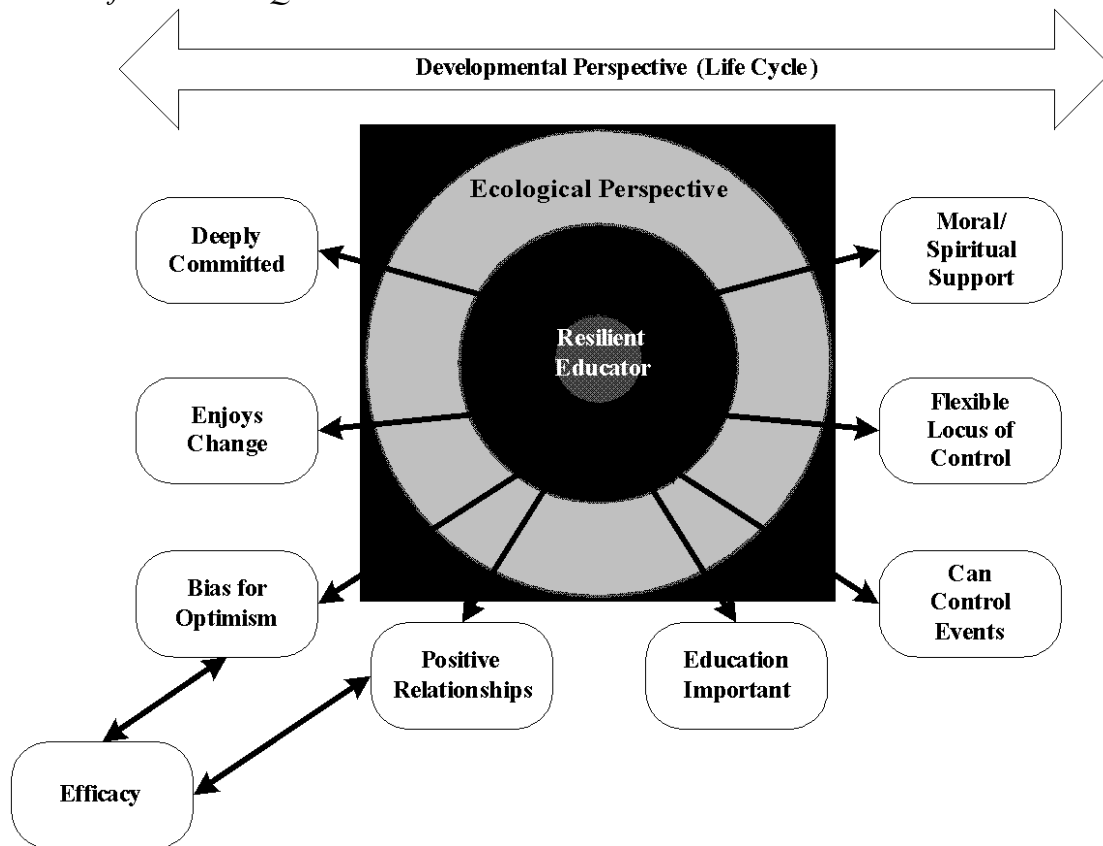
Resilient individuals who are subjected to adverse situations, even as children, can thrive and become successful if they have at least one unconditional relationship (Werner, 1993). In a study conducted by Higgins (1994), participants stated they had faith in something better, and they were able to sustain their faith through human relationships. Resilient individuals have a support system consisting of caring family and friends.

Education Viewed as Important

Polidore's study concluded that both ecological and developmental factors contributed to a resilient teacher's ideology that education was not just a concept that one pursued personally or encouraged others to pursue, rather, viewing education as important was a way of life.

An Additional Quality of Resilience – Efficacy

Taylor (2009) conducted a qualitative study using Polidore's Resilience Theory as one of the constructs or frameworks when she studied the teaching experiences of four African American female teachers before, during, and after the desegregation of schools, also in a rural community in the South. Taylor's study resulted in the emergence of an additional theme of resilience - efficacy. The resilience theme, efficacy, was undergirded by the two other resilience themes, positive relationships, and optimistic bias. As indicated by the female teachers in Taylor's study, their sense of efficacy helped to shape their worldview and consciousness, validated their roles in society, and helped them to determine where they fit in their teaching careers. The teachers believed they were competent, which allowed them to empower their students and uplift their communities. The ninth resilience quality, efficacy, is also found in resilient individuals. Efficacy is defined as the belief that one is competent and can be successful. Resilient individuals perceive problems as an opportunity to grow, and they possess the competence and the confidence in their ability to find meaning in the ordeal they are facing. Reed and Patterson (2007) found resilient superintendents possess the maturity and sense of efficacy that acknowledges when they have made a mistake. An individual whose life has been influenced by positive relationships and optimism can develop the resilience quality, efficacy.

Figure 1*Model of Resilience Qualities in Educators*

Note. This graphic conceptualization represents the modified resilience in education theoretical framework from Polidore, E. (2004). *The teaching experiences of Lucille Bradley, Maudester Hicks, and Algeno McPherson before, during, and after desegregation in the rural south: A theoretical model of adult resilience among three African American female educators* (p. 28) [Doctoral dissertation, Sam Houston State University]. Copyright 2004 by E. Polidore. Adapted with permission.

Methodology

The present study was conducted to examine the perspectives of current female superintendents related to how they endure the challenges of the position and the qualities of resilience that sustain them and may ultimately influence their retention in the position. The primary research question used to guide the study was: *How do female superintendents endure the challenges of their position?*

The researchers sought a purposive and representative sample of current female superintendents in Texas. A convenience sample of 11 female superintendents served as informants in this qualitative study. The female superintendents were members of the Texas Council for Women School Executives during the 2021 calendar year. Nine superintendents were from rural school districts, and two superintendents represented suburban school districts.

The researchers utilized a phenomenological approach to understand and describe the lived experiences of the female superintendents (Creswell, 2014). In this case, the phenomenon

studied was how female superintendents experienced the challenges that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021.

Two different techniques were used to collect qualitative data. A focus group interview was conducted with five female superintendents from rural school districts. Six superintendents, which included two superintendents from suburban school districts, provided written responses to the interview questions. Though limited in nature, the interviews served to provide valuable viewpoints and first-hand accounts from the women superintendents who experienced the challenges associated with the phenomenon explored by the researchers.

Qualitative researchers use participants or informants to establish validity of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Therefore, the 11 superintendents who participated in the study established validity. The validity strategies, member checking, triangulation, and credibility were also applied. Credibility is used to establish that there is trust between the researchers and the informants. All four of the researchers and the eleven informants were members of the same professional women's organization, which provided a safe space for the informants to share information during the data gathering process. To gain in-depth insights and understanding from the superintendents, a total of six open-ended interview questions were developed. The questions are as follows:

- a. Describe specific characteristics or qualities female leaders must possess to be successful in the superintendent position.
- b. Describe specific characteristics or qualities you possess that help you to remain in the superintendent position.
- c. In your role as superintendent, describe the impact relationships have on your ability to lead successfully.
- d. What are the best ways to successfully navigate adversity and respond to challenges?
- e. What, if anything, has surprised you about the ability of female superintendents to adapt when faced with adversity and/or challenging times and how they are perceived by their stakeholders?
- f. Reflecting back, describe how your upbringing, personal, and professional experiences prepared you to become strengthened and resourceful in your role of superintendent.

After the focus groups were complete, the researchers transcribed the data and applied member checking. The qualitative data were analyzed to identify the themes of resilience as identified in each superintendent's responses to the interview questions and to establish patterns or themes that were grounded in the context and theoretical framework of Resilience Theory.

Validity and reliability of the data were determined when the researchers triangulated the data from each superintendent's responses in the focus group and individually written interview responses. This was used to internally validate the nine themes of resilience as identified in the modified Resilience Theory Model (Polidore, 2004). One of the researchers is also a former superintendent, and her knowledge base allowed an additional layer of understanding based on her prolonged time in the field (Creswell, 2014).

Analysis of Data

One research question was developed to ascertain qualitative data pertaining to the research question - *how do female superintendents endure the challenges of their position?* From the 11 participants in the study, the qualitative data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to determine the presence of nine themes of resilience as identified in the modified Resilience Theory Model (Taylor, 2009). Table 1 is a tally of results of the themes of resilience.

Table 1

Tally of Resilience Themes from Participants' Responses

Themes	No.
Religion	1
Flexible Locus of Control	8
Optimistic Bias	4
Autonomy	5
Commitment	6
Change	6
Positive Relationships	7
Education Viewed as Important	2
Efficacy	5

Summary of Results

Research Question One

Qualitative data taken from the five focus group participants and the six written responses provided by other participants were used to respond to the research question *"How do female superintendents endure the challenges of their position?"* All nine resilience themes emerged from the analysis of data. Verbatim quotes are provided to support the recurring themes of resilience shown in Table 1 and to also provide a deeper meaning and understanding of the responses that resonated throughout the responses from the women superintendents.

Resilience Theme 1: Religion

The definition of faith and/or religion consists of a wide spectrum and carries different connotations. An individual's definition may be informed or shaped by his or her life's experiences, including both challenges and triumphs, and their current station in life. When one superintendent was asked *to describe specific characteristics or qualities that help her to remain in the superintendent position*, she stated, "remaining hopeful, calm, and having confidence in a higher power" take her through times of adversity.

Resilience Theme 2: Flexible Locus of Control

Superintendents are accustomed to traversing a variety of issues daily, and the COVID-19 pandemic only reinforced the need to exercise internal locus of control. To address the historical and extraordinary situation at hand, in addition to the myriad of other daily challenges of the position, superintendents had to harness and apply self-motivation to lead their school districts effectively and efficiently. When asked the question, *what are the best ways to successfully navigate adversity and respond to challenges*, one superintendent stated the following, "I do not take things personally. Whenever possible, I take time and gather input before making decisions; I always stay calm and focused."

Resilience Theme 3: Individual's Ability to View Adverse Situations Positively or "Optimistic Bias"

With little doubt, the women superintendents had never faced any situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. This type of uncertainty exposes the sheer vulnerabilities that one encounters when there has been no formal blueprint developed for the actions to be taken to address all facets of the unknown during any crisis. However, even in the direst situations, as the COVID-19 pandemic was forecast to be, the women superintendents had to remain optimistic and forge a path forward. When asked to *reflect on her upbringing and describe personal or professional experiences that prepared her to become strengthened and resourceful*, one superintendent stated,

I was raised to not make excuses, to work hard, and to be independent. My teaching experiences at all levels - special education, regular education, and gifted and talented education - prepared me to adapt my mindset to meet the challenges of my assignments. These experiences gave me the fortitude and optimism required to meet the challenges presented by the pandemic.

Resilience Theme 4: Autonomy

As the superintendent of a school district, there is an expectation and a requirement that she must possess the knowledge, skills, and mindset to serve the constituents of her district effectively. While many decisions made by a superintendent require the stamp of approval of the school board, a superintendent must also be able to demonstrate the ability to self-govern. When asked *what, if anything, surprised you about the ability to adapt when faced with adversity and/or challenging times and how you are perceived by your stakeholders*, one superintendent responded,

Given a crisis, you stand firm, and you follow through. You cannot let anything shake you from the moment that you realized that what was taking place was not a drill. It was real life, and you have to quickly pivot and make the necessary decisions.

Resilience Theme 5: Commitment

Visioning, developing, collaborating, and orchestrating plans for an entire school community includes many moving parts. The trajectory to accomplish the tasks may be multifaceted and multi-dimensional, which requires a high level of commitment. The following was the response provided by one superintendent when asked to *describe a specific characteristic or quality female leaders must possess to be successful in their superintendent position*.

I made sure that I clearly communicated with my parents and staff. Never in my career have I reached out to parents more, to solicit their input, to make them aware of the decisions I was considering, and the factors that were influencing my decisions at that specific time. I made sure that my commitment to doing what was best for our district during the COVID-19 pandemic was inclusive of all stakeholder voices.

Resilience Theme 6: Change

Change is one of the most important qualities found in resilient individuals. The ability to change is foundational to what an individual can both endure and achieve during difficult situations. The ability to change also contributes to the successful navigation of obstacles or barriers and does not prevent resilient individuals from securing successful outcomes. As stated in Washington, et al. (2022), this resilience quality builds mental toughness, determination, strength, grit, and tenacity within an individual. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to change was simply referred to as the ability to “pivot.” When asked to *reflect and describe her upbringing, personal and professional experiences that prepared them to become strengthened and resourceful in their role as superintendent*,

As a brand-new superintendent, I went through a financial crisis. That was a game changer for me. It taught me so much, and it made me resilient. I lost 20% of my staff, and I had to make important financial decisions just so my district could survive. Additionally, I did not want to sacrifice a quality academic experience for my students. My skills became sharpened in a way they may not have before the financial crisis.

Resilience Theme 7: Positive Relationships

Relationships that emanate from a place of positivity allow one to fulfill her promise in a meaningful, purposeful, and uncompromising way. Being surrounded by a sphere of people in our lives - parents, siblings, other relatives, friends, and colleagues - who support us, love us unconditionally, and respect us may add value to our lived experiences, contribute to our self-esteem, boost our self-efficacy, and facilitate building a positive legacy. Leaving a positive legacy is especially important to educators. Many educators work tirelessly to fulfill their mission of leaving an indelible influence and impact on the next generation of learners. During the COVID-19 pandemic, positive relationships were vitally important to superintendents. When asked the question, *in your role as superintendent, describe the impact relationships have on your ability to lead successfully*, the responses included the following:

Trusting relationships are core; they can be a lifeline. It is much easier to implement needed changes when you have trusting relationships with stakeholders. I was amazed at how much we shared with one another, how much support was extended, and how much we listened to each other.

Resilience Theme 8: Education Viewed as Important

The value of an education becomes the cornerstone of one's purpose, especially when the field of education is pursued as a profession. That value may be instilled from a very young age when one's parents express to their children that they want them to have opportunities that they could not attain for themselves, primarily in the form of a formal education. These same parents are completely aware of the value of obtaining an education. Two participants in this study expressed the following when asked, *"reflecting back, describe how your upbringing, personal, and professional experiences prepared you to become strengthened and resourceful in your role of superintendent?"*

My father wanted nothing more than to get an education. Poverty and the need to work made it impossible. He's made his life's goal to ensure his children and grandchildren receive a higher education. I dedicate my work to him. He is my strength." "My mother passed away in January 2021. My mother did not graduate high school. She was born in Mexico and married my dad and came to live in this country. She always pushed education on us, and she wanted her daughters to go to school. She wanted us all to become teachers because she thought that was a safe job. She would attend parent conferences. She did not know English, but she was there. She advocated for us (Washington, et al., 2022, p. 22).

Resilience Theme 9: Efficacy

Believing in one's own abilities to put forth the effort, apply the skills, stay the course, and endure the time required to effect and influence positive change are key characteristics of self-efficacy. During the most difficult days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the women superintendents had to have confidence in their abilities to produce and sustain their efforts to achieve their goals. Using their lived and/or vicarious experiences, emotional and physiological stamina, and effective communication skills, the women superintendents had to be efficacious to master the threats and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to the academic

experiences and well-being of their students. When asked to *describe specific characteristics or qualities female leaders must possess to be successful in the superintendent position*, one superintendent said it best when she said, “I am courageous, I have great communication skills, I have confidence in my abilities, and I have skin made of Teflon.”

One Voice of Resilience

One of the co-authors, who served as a rural superintendent, shared her lived experiences of specific adversities that reflect resilience, through the lens of evocative autoethnography (Reed & Patterson, 2007). Additionally, reflexivity, a process used in qualitative research to consciously examine one’s own subjective point of view was used but was not explicitly applied by the one co-author in any meaningful way in this study. Neither nuanced judgements nor subjectivity were relied upon throughout the research process and were therefore of no context influence in shaping the study. The co-author simply reflected on Polidore’s Resilience Theory (2004) and framed the resilience qualities within the scope of her leadership competencies and architecture. Her reflections are summarized in this section, appropriately titled “*One Voice of Resilience*.”

Literature defines resilience in various contexts. When I look at female school district superintendents from personal experience, I bring a collective definition from the work of my sister superintendents. Represented in poetry is our contribution to literature knowing resilience defined can be the portrait of a woman.

Resilience Defined

Resilience defined is taking a hard look at me.

It is more than a skill and more than an inner quality.

Resilience is my reflective thinking, the action I did not take...yet.

Resilience is formulating the next step...to see where the highest leverage action is set.

Resilience is my bouncing back, my getting up, and sometimes my never falling down.

Resilience is my capacity, in adversity, to create for others, more than their reality.

As the co-author reflected on each quality in Polidore’s resilience theory, she described the qualities in the female superintendents she had worked with in the past. The co-author explained that she was able to discern how these qualities were used to improve self-worth and self-efficacy of each superintendent.

There were many unforgiving challenges, hurdles, barriers, and roadblocks. I could hear one of my mentors saying, ‘Let it roll off your back, like water off a duck’s back.’ My belief system espoused the views from the shoulders of greatness who imparted wisdom in sayings. ‘Watch my smoke’ I silently chanted, and ‘if they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair,’ from the voice of Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm. Disruptions, such as the pandemic, became opportunities for learning and growth. Promoting best practices to ensure stronger self-efficacy through the lens of resilience is our commitment to female superintendents of Texas. We are relentless, I am relentless, and in alignment with Polidore’s nine qualities of resilience (as summarized in Table 2), my resilience sustained me throughout my superintendency. *I am but one voice of resilience, and I am resilient by choice.*

Table 2

My Reflections as One Voice of Resilience

Polidore’s Resilience Theory	One Voice of Resilience
-Religion	Acknowledged the higher one first; He directed my path
-Flexible Locus of Control	Stayed calm and focused

-View Adverse Situations Positively or Optimistic Bias	Challenges and adversity became opportunities for growth
-Autonomy	Unwavering decision-making
-Commitment	Made the organization and stakeholders better
-Change	Communicated THE WHY
-Positive Relationships	Started before first day of contract
-Education Viewed as Important	Communicated as the most important in growing up
-Efficacy	Sought what was needed for my own personal growth

Significance and Implications of the Study

The study's findings provided insights into the qualities of resilience that sustained women superintendents in Texas during challenging and adverse situations, including the COVID-19 pandemic. All nine resilience qualities were identified by the women as being important throughout various aspects of both their personal and professional lives. Through an awareness of the intersectionality of resilience and gender, the women remained focused throughout the pandemic. In an ever-evolving society, the acquisition of the nine resilience qualities is required to balance the complexities and associated dynamics of school leadership. This study underscores the importance of possessing and/or developing resilience qualities to be an effective school superintendent. Ledesma (2014) suggests a critical component for leaders to survive and adapt to challenges, crises, and adversities, is career resiliency.

The implications of this study are far-reaching and note-worthy for educational leadership more broadly. The results from this study may positively enhance the experiences, retention, sustainability, effectiveness, and longevity of both women and men in one of the most important roles in a school district - the superintendency. It is important to note the massive shortages in many different positions in the education profession, including the superintendency. In Texas, a pre-COVID-19 pandemic survey administered by the Texas Association of School Boards found that as of 2018, superintendents remained in their position for an average of four years (Governing, 2022). In 2022, Texas had more than 40 superintendent vacancies (Governing). Factors influencing some who choose to exit the position are directly related to economic, social, and political pressures. Howard and Irving (2013) found that lessons learned through hardships, obstacles, and adversity increased the competencies, capacity, and development of leaders. Therefore, encouraging the development or acquisition of resilience qualities may aid in the support and retention of some superintendents, both women and men, for a longer period of time.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research

Although this study provides critical insight into the phenomenon of resiliency in female superintendents during critical times, it was limited due to the small number of participants. The issue of generalizability to the greater population is sometimes questioned when a smaller sample size is used in research; however, in qualitative research, generalizability of the findings is not an expected trait. Rather, qualitative research helps to compare the results to other results from similar situations and not to the broader population but to understand the phenomenon (Leung, 2015). A suggestion for future research would be to conduct a quantitative study to discover the phenomenon of resiliency in female superintendents using an electronic survey. The aim of using an electronic survey would be to collect data from a larger sample of female superintendents, which would garner a broader perspective about resiliency in the role of the superintendency during critical times.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic inspired this study about how women superintendents navigated and endured the challenges of their position during such an unprecedented and historic time. While the pandemic was the catalyst for the pivots and ensuing decisions that women superintendents experienced to address countless issues, the research found that the women superintendents possessed all nine of the qualities that are found in resilient individuals. The findings support the premise that undergirds Polidore's Resilience Theory (2004). The women's resilience may have been influenced over their lifetime through both an ecological and developmental perspective. The research highlighted that the nine qualities of resilience sustained the women throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and may continue to influence them when confronting political pressures, social unrest, and economic circumstances that challenge all educational leaders today.

Additional research is needed in multiple areas to build ladders for a successful climb to the top position in K-12 leadership for females. A review of the significance of the study and a focus on the acquisition of resilience qualities suggests an opportunity to explore the perceptions of self-efficacy when evaluating meaningful professional development opportunities for superintendents. Throughout the study, as researchers who are always in search of furthering work that will add value to the experiences of others in a meaningful, practical, and purposeful way, wonderings surfaced related to two primary areas: the small number of female superintendents in Texas and superintendent preparation programs.

Superintendency preparation programs should explicitly include curricula on how to lead during time of crisis and the intersectionality of resilience qualities. Additionally, school boards should become more intentional about seeking skilled, talented, and diverse women candidates and offer them a 'seat at the table,' thus increasing the number of women superintendents in the nation. A large number of certified women superintendent candidates exists; the number of opportunities for women to lead districts should correlate. Further, educational researchers, executive coaches, and educational consultants who recruit aspiring superintendents should consider collaborating on projects aimed at developing a 'leading during a crisis survival toolkit' that can be used to provide agency and ignite the resilience qualities needed to sustain them during challenging times. In the meantime,

“Do not judge me by my successes,
judge me by how many times I fell down,
and got back up again” - Nelson Mandela

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