CAREER PATHWAYS OF FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS: 
PERCEIVED BARRIERS AND SUPPORTS

A Dissertation in
Educational Leadership

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this particular study was to investigate the career pathways of women toward the superintendency and to examine the perceived barriers and supports that may have influenced their attainment of this position of educational leadership. Using the lenses of new data from interviews with fifteen women who are currently serving as superintendents or who had previously served as superintendents in public school districts in Pennsylvania, this study sought to expand upon and strengthen previous research depicting a critical trend in the field of educational leadership related to inequitable representation of women in the superintendent’s position. The study also attempted to provide information that graduate programs in educational leadership and mentoring programs for professional organizations can use to help identify the skills needed for women to succeed in the superintendency. The study aimed to not only assist women aspiring to the ranks of these top leadership positions but also to benefit individuals hiring school leaders. Using a methodology of portraiture, the study focused on five essential features including context, voice, relationships, emerging themes, and aesthetic whole. The analysis primarily concentrated on variations in demographics, educational preparedness, and job clusters. Conclusions from the study reflected common themes that included: intentions, accountability, work ethic, mentors and networks, politics, timing and fit, and personal and professional preparedness. Finally, the limitations of the study are offered.

Keywords: career paths, career pathways, female school superintendents
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

“As researchers studying women superintendents, we are “crawling through the window of a dream, [and] we desire a window of opportunity for women like ourselves—women who have dared to dream differently.”

~C. Cryss Brunner, “Crawling through the Window of a Dream”

Many women authors and researchers meet mirror images of themselves when they conduct research with women superintendents (Brunner, 1999). Oftentimes, they begin their research with vague curiosity that transforms into deep outrage that abides in the soul of women who have faced overt gender bias (Brunner, 1999). As they continue to research the superintendency, they quietly become mainstream feminists who believe in fairness and equitable treatment for all people. They continue to knock on the old weathered door of the position of the superintendency, only to discover that it still remains largely closed to them. Instead of relinquishing their quest, they search for alternate entries, looking for those windows of opportunity in order to realize their dream.

According to Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, and Ellerson (2011), females continue to be underrepresented in the superintendency. Their presence in this office does not accurately reflect either the diversity of the total population of the nation or the total student population in public schools. Acknowledging the fact that there has been limited attention to the experiences of women in the superintendency before the 1980s, Kowalski, et al. (2011) note an increased effort to understand the uniqueness of their practice and to provide role models for other women aspiring to the position.

With the multitude of women represented in the profession and preparation programs, it is essential to retrace the historical events that have resulted in the rather surprising
underrepresentation of women in these top positions of educational leadership. After the 
conception of the superintendent’s position in the mid 1800s, nearly 60 years passed before Ella 
Flagg Young was hired as the first female superintendent in Chicago in 1909 (Blount, 1998). At 
that time period, women represented approximately 9% of all superintendents (Blount, 1998). The 
years between 1900 and 1930 are commonly referred to as the ‘golden age’ of women in 
school administration when thousands of women succeeded in attaining school leadership 
positions (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). By 1930, the numbers had increased and women held 
nearly 28% of the nation’s superintendent positions (Blount, 1998). As schools created more 
administrative layers, women became lead teachers, teaching principals, supervisors, mid-level 
administrators, and sometimes, superintendents (Blount, 1998). Despite three decades of 
expansion for women in the field of educational leadership and Young’s landmark appointment, 
the number of female superintendents fluctuated in the ensuing years. Following World War II, 
the number of female superintendents fell to just 3% in 1970, the lowest level of the century 
(Blount, 1998). During the years between 1970 and 1990, women’s representation in the 
superintendency realized only modest improvement, increasing their representation from 3 to 5 
percent (Blount, 1998). In 2007, only 21.7% of public school superintendents across the nation 
were women, fewer than the number of female superintendents in 1930 (Kowalski et al., 2011). 
Notably, Glass and Franceschini (2007) predicted that by 2010 women would account for 
approximately 25% to 30% of all superintendents. The number of female principals and central 
office administrators was cited as the most likely factor contributing to the rising number of 
women superintendents. Whereas the number of women superintendents appears to be 
increasing, women are only now reclaiming the positions they once held.
Table 1 depicts the percentages of female superintendents in the United States since 1980 as reported by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA); although, it is important to note that discrepancies and lack of consistent data collection and maintenance of records contribute to the difficulty of conducting studies on female superintendents. Clearly, while percentages have increased during the past thirty years, there still remains a disproportionately low number of women superintendents.

Table 1

Percentages of Female Superintendents in the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>0.1 – 0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the late twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century, the majority of the research relating to the district superintendent focused on male superintendents, giving little if any attention to women in this top leadership position (Grogan, 2000). Generally speaking, the majority of the researchers focused on the superintendency, as well as the practicing superintendents themselves, have been male; consequently, the focus of the literature on the superintendency provides only a partial understanding of the role and the people who occupy the position. Brunner (2000) further indicated that very little of the previous research
focused on the actual experiences of women superintendents, and the lack of reliable data in this area is a major hindrance to improving the situation for women who aspire to the superintendency. Certainly, the inverse relationship between qualified female candidates and the rate at which they achieve the superintendency may be exacerbated by a lack of accurate statistics of the number of women superintendents.

The lack of female superintendents should be a critical concern in education. Many researchers assumed that since women in educational administration were on the rise at the beginning of the twentieth century, more and more women would continue to progress to leadership positions in schools. However, approximately the same number of women who served as superintendents in 1930 led schools at the end of the century (Brunner, 2000). Though numbers have increased between 1930 and 2000, women still lead only a relatively small number of districts today. According to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the lack of female superintendents is a major issue, especially as school boards increasingly receive fewer and fewer applications from women seeking the position (Witmer, 2006). At the current rate of change, Kowalski and others (2011) reference the prediction of Derrington and Sharratt (2009) that it will take at least three additional decades before the percentage of female superintendents approaches an equitable level of the percentage of male superintendents.

With limited research on female superintendent leadership, even fewer studies have been conducted on the career paths taken by women who aspire to the superintendency. Because women remain underrepresented in the superintendency, a need continues to exist for research concerning female superintendents’ perspectives, the perceptions of the supports they received, and their perceptions of the barriers to their success and the strategies they used to overcome these barriers (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). While there is evidence of research that seeks to
identify the barriers that women in leadership positions in schools face, very little research transcends simply identifying the barriers (Grogan, 1999; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Hill & Ragland, 1995; Tallerico, 2000). To invoke real change in a field so largely dominated by men, Grogan and Brunner (1995) suggest that researchers critically think about why so few women lead public school systems with a renewed sense of vigor.

Recently, more research on women in educational leadership positions such as the superintendency has moved past simple studies of gender—yet, unanswered questions remain. Why are women superintendents such a rarity? Do others perceive females as being incapable of successfully performing the duties of this top leadership position? Do many women lack the personal characteristics or the drive to become a superintendent? Do family responsibilities require too much time and energy for a woman to be successful in this demanding job? Does discrimination or bias in hiring decisions play a vital role in the scarcity of female superintendents? Since society needs quality leaders to guide schools, it is important that potential female candidates gain a better understanding of the successful ascension to the superintendency. Certainly, there have been some empirical studies examining the profiles of female superintendents, their career paths, the barriers and challenges female superintendents face, experiences, and successful strategies for ascension to the superintendency; however, there are fewer empirical studies examining any changes in these factors during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, Brunner (2000) stated that the investigation of women superintendents has been a previously neglected area of research. This study seeks to begin to fill that gap by focusing on the career pathways of women who have attained the superintendency and what they perceive as supports and barriers in their quest for the superintendency.
To create a common understanding of the term “career pathway” used in the study, the following information is provided. Traditionally, a career pathway has been characterized by Bledstein (1976, p.172) as a pre-established pattern of organized professional activities, with upward movement on the steps of preparation of the administrative ladder and advancement based on merit (Shakeshaft, 1987, 1989). “Patterns” often refers to research that examines career paths to the superintendency, mobility from one incumbency to another, and other issues related to aspirations, access, opportunity structures, gatekeeping, selection, mentoring, sponsorship, retention, and exit (Brunner, 1999). For the purposes of this study, a career pathway refers to the positions held prior to obtaining the position of superintendent. Typical superintendent career patterns involve moving through the “chairs” and gaining experience as teachers, supervisors, and leaders (Bjork, Glass, & Brunner, 2005). Career pathways are often defined in terms of prior service in particular administrative roles (Tallerico, 2000). Bjork and Keedy (2001) report that there are two major paths to the superintendency:

1) Teacher, assistant or associate principal/principal, central office, superintendent

2) Teacher, assistant or associate principal/principal, superintendent

Tallerico (2000, p. 75) extends the term when she references Glass (1993) who describes the “natural” superintendent career path as “a sequence of positions and experiences [that] tends to occur in a logical and ordered progression of positions of increasing responsibility and complexity.”

Rationale for the Study

There is relatively little information about women and the superintendency. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) has published data on the position every ten years since 1920 (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). However, the information about
women contained within these studies is limited, providing little more than frequency counts of the women in the position rather than exploring any deeper issues concerning equitable representation. This lack of information demonstrates that a gap in the literature about women’s experiences in seeking out and successfully claiming the superintendency continues to exist. Brunner & Grogan (2007) explain that research that is focused solely on women in the superintendency is relatively new. While this genre of literature grew in the 1970s and 1980s, few empirical studies specifically addressed experiences of women in the superintendency until the 1990s when researchers began to write, think, and publish on the topic. Therefore, there is a need to examine the career pathways of female superintendents, the supports they received in their ascension to this top position, and the barriers they faced and overcame to access the superintendency.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Through most of the twentieth century, women dominated the field of education as teachers. Most of these women who entered education as teachers remained in those positions throughout their careers. Some transitioned from the classroom to successful careers as assistant principals or principals. Yet, these women seldom were promoted to the central office positions that carry the most responsibility and influence and constitute the highest salaries. Indeed, superintendencies are still largely dominated by males. According to the 2007-2008 Schools and Staff Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, women represented only 21.7 percent of the superintendents in public schools across the nation (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, university preparation programs in educational leadership are thriving and schools are populated with many qualified and talented female leaders. While growing numbers of women are actively seeking certification for the
superintendency, there is evidence that women continue to be underrepresented in this top leadership position. There is a perplexing disconnect between a seemingly abundant supply of qualified female educational leaders seeking the superintendency and the relatively small number who actually succeed in obtaining the position. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the career pathways of women who succeeded in obtaining the superintendency and to identify the perceived barriers and supports they encountered.

During the past three decades, many researchers and recognized authors in the field have attempted to explain the gender gap in educational leadership. In her book, *Women in Educational Administration*, Shakeshaft (1989) identified several models used to describe the barriers which prevent women’s ascension to the superintendency, including the Woman’s Place Model, the Discrimination Model, the Meritocracy Model, and the Self-Confidence Model. Respectively, these models suggested that either society, in general, discouraged women from becoming educational leaders, or women did not get such positions because they were incapable of handling the demands of the position, or women lacked the self-confidence needed to pursue positions in educational leadership (Shakeshaft, 1989). Indeed, numerous researchers have studied the topic of women in the superintendency, and many have sought to explain the underrepresentation of women in these top leadership positions; yet, questions remain unaddressed. Furthermore, there have been few studies conducted from the female superintendent’s perspective, resulting in limited guidance for women toward seeking supports, removing barriers, and developing strategies for a successful career pathway toward the superintendency (Grogan, 1996).

This purpose of this study will be to investigate the career pathways of 10-15 women who are either currently serving as a superintendent or who have recently retired from the
position in districts across Pennsylvania and to examine the career pathways of these notable successes, including the perceived barriers and supports that may have influenced their attainment of this position.

**Research Questions**

For the purpose of this study, I will select to interview women who are currently serving as superintendents as well as those who have previously served as superintendents. Existing research provides a foundation for practitioners to consider the following questions:

1. What are the important experiences in the career pathways of former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania, and why are they essential?
2. What do former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania perceive as the barriers they faced in their ascension to the superintendency, and what are the strategies they employed to overcome these barriers?
3. What supports do these former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania report in attaining this position, and why are they important?
4. From the perspective of these women, what are the “best advice” pieces of wisdom they can offer other female candidates seeking the superintendency?

**Significance of the Study**

This study will attempt to expand upon and strengthen previous research that depicts a critical trend in the field of educational leadership relating to the inequitable representation of women in the superintendent’s position. Researchers (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 2000; Glass, 2000; Grogan, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1999; and Tallerico, 2000) who are prominent in the study of women in educational leadership have yearned for more extensive research on the topic of inequitable representation of females in the superintendency. While research on the position of the
superintendent has existed for more than 150 years, the research has been primarily limited to the study of white, middle class men who served in the role of superintendent (Blount, 1998).

This study is significant for several reasons. The primary aim of this study is to clarify the issues and problems associated with the inequitable representation of female superintendents. This study may provide insight to women who aspire to the superintendency in Pennsylvania. Information yielded through the study could be critical in helping women understand what is needed to obtain the top administrative position in education and to inform women of the perceived barriers toward advancing to the superintendency. The study may provide information that graduate programs in educational leadership can use in helping to identify the skills needed for women to succeed in the superintendency. The study may provide valuable material for in-service and mentoring programs for professional organizations that can use the findings to develop leadership skills in women who are seeking a superintendency. While women aspiring to the ranks of these top leadership positions may find this study valuable, those hiring school leaders may benefit from examining differences that exist among women superintendents, their career pathways, the perceived supports they received, and the perceived barriers that may have limited their careers.

These are important questions to increase one’s knowledge of how women ascend to the superintendency. Few, if any studies, have attempted to depict or comprehend the experiences of female superintendents from the viewpoints of the women themselves (Bell, 1988). To understand why and how some women reach the superintendency, it is critical to hear their voices and to appreciate the stories from their perspective. Referencing the work of Bloom & Munro (1995), Harris, et al. (2004) tout the use of stories to promote an understanding of women’s issues, from family concerns to gender, and to reveal strategies that women use to
negotiate barriers and opportunities in their lives. As women become the focus of study, research begins to move away from comparisons of women and men and to move toward understanding women from their perspectives. To fully understand women’s perspectives, it is necessary to learn about them from women and not to measure them against men’s experiences (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). In referencing the work of Brown and Irby (2005), Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) recognize the correlation between learning more about women in leadership roles, about how they obtain their positions, and about how they have become successful and increasing the number of women in the field.

The information listed heretofore and a review of the literature combine to highlight the importance of this study and to raise the critical questions for which I am attempting to seek answers. Perhaps an understanding of the complexity of the career pathways of female superintendents, as well as their perceptions of the supports they have received, and the barriers they have faced may lead to an increased understanding of the dynamics of how women successfully attain a superintendency by crawling through the window of opportunity to realize their dream.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Before conducting any research about women in the superintendency, it is necessary to review the literature. While there is abundant research written about women serving in other supervisory roles in school administration such as the assistant principalship and principalship, the literature describing women in the superintendency is more limited, and research pertaining to women’s perceptions garnered through personal interviews with female superintendents is even rarer. Thus, this review of the literature is designed to provide a summary of the current research about women in the superintendency. Because of the relative scarcity of women in the superintendency, their voices are rarely heard and broad pronouncements about the superintendency are more likely to be based on male participants.

The primary purpose of this study is to better understand female superintendents’ perceptions of the career paths they took to the superintendency and the barriers and supports they encountered in their attainment of this position. Secondarily, this study will also examine the strategies they employed to overcome these barriers, how they made the most of supports, and the wisdom and advice they would offer to those women currently aspiring to such positions.

This literature review is presented in four sections. First, the historical context of women and the struggle for gender equity is presented as it relates to women in the superintendency. The second part of the review focuses on the varied career pathways of female educational leaders and the factors that influence the different stages of a career. Third, the barriers and challenges women face as they attempt to access the superintendency are analyzed. The final part of the review examines the professional and personal characteristics of female
superintendents. To begin to understand the depth of the problem requires an exploration of the historical perspective that has served as a precursor to contemporary issues.

**Historical Context**

Historically, women have experienced many social injustices that have resulted in lack of equity and limited access to opportunities including voter inequity, wage inequity, and gender inequity in the workplace. Since the early days of the United States of America, educational leadership has been represented by male-dominated roles such as ministers, lawyers, and businessmen. In the 1800s, teaching made the shift from a male-dominated field to a female-dominated profession (Blount, 1998). During this era, women were going into the teaching profession so they could educate their sons, and education was considered well suited for women as an extension of childcare. Women were also deemed appropriate for the profession because of their willingness to accept lower wages. By the 1900s, Blount (1998) remarked that women dominated the profession by comprising seventy percent of the teaching positions. Due to the dramatic increase of women in teaching, the profession became less desirable to men who viewed teaching as women’s work. As this shift occurred, males interested in continuing in education looked to positions of power and supervision that included coaching, vocational education, and the superintendency (Blount, 1998). In a traditional educational organization, there is presumed to be a proper, hierarchical order in which women take care of and teach the children while men take charge in administrative roles, and research has referred to this hierarchy as a patriarchal system (Young & Skrla, 2003). Young and Skrla (2003) maintain that society still views tough, logical, hierarchical control as necessary attributes in top educational leaders. These societal views about proper roles for men and women may still extend into the
educational realm, thereby creating structural inequities and barriers for women in the superintendency.

**Female Pioneers**

Despite the inequities and discrimination, women have become superintendents. To fully understand the historical context of the problem requires an examination of the life and times of the first female superintendent who blazed the trail for other women to follow. On July 6, 1874, Sarah Raymond Fitzwilliam became the first woman in the history of the country to hold the position of superintendent as she was elected to serve the Bloomington, Illinois Schools at an annual salary of twelve hundred dollars (Noraian, 2009). The 18 years that she capably served as the top educational leader in the district oftentimes were challenging and difficult, but she earned the trust of her colleagues and members of the school board through her tenacity and fairness (Noraian, 2009). Although she was reappointed by the school board after a four-to-three vote in July 1892, Sarah Raymond realized there would not be the cooperation on which she had come to rely through an all-inclusive vote, and she resigned her post as the superintendent of the Bloomington, Illinois Schools (Noraian, 2009). Sarah Raymond was an excellent example of the “New Woman” who had an enhanced sense of self, gender, and mission and who was a leader in early efforts in curriculum, instruction, and administration (Noraian, 2009). Sarah Raymond Fitzwilliam served as a pioneer for the subsequent emergence of women’s leadership in educational administration, and her biography aptly describes her experiences as the first woman in American society to hold the top position of educational leadership (Noraian, 2009).

Nearly 25 years later, Ella Flagg Young followed in the footsteps of Sarah Raymond Fitzwilliam when she became the first woman superintendent of the Chicago city schools in 1909, challenging the traditional, patriarchal school system in which men dominated positions of
power and in which women accounted for only 9% of all superintendents (Blount, 1998). Ella Flagg Young boldly proclaimed that women were destined to rule the schools, and that future generations would see more women than men in control of the vast majority of educational systems (Blount, 1998). However, Ella Flagg Young’s prediction never came to fruition, possibly for two reasons. Firstly, the powerful superintendent groups, led by men, lobbied for the appointment of male superintendents to replace most of the elected women (Blount, 1998). Secondly, societal expectations denoted that women should discontinue employment either after marrying or after becoming pregnant (Blount, 1998).

**Struggle for Equity**

In the first 30 years of the twentieth century, a new era coined the “golden age” for women by Tyack & Hansot (1982) emerged in which the bureaucratic structure of schools was transformed, creating new administrative positions for women who were able to take on new leadership roles such as lead teachers, principals, supervisors and superintendents. Yet, challenging days soon followed that were not so golden for women leaders in education. Following the 1940s, women exited public school administration to allow men returning from war an opportunity to pursue teaching and educational administration with retraining and support from the GI Bill (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Consequently, from World War II to about 1970, the number of women in the superintendency dropped from 9% to an all time low of 3% (Blount, 1998). During this time in education, a profession numerically dominated by women, male superintendents demonstrated their character by marrying in great percentages, thus affirming their authority in the private realm where women were expected to obey while receiving economic support in return (Blount, 1998).
In 1972 Title IX of the Civil Rights Act had a significant impact on women in educational leadership, because it prohibited gender discrimination in any program or agency receiving federal funds, and the legislation catapulted a period of observation, analysis, and debate about the changes needed for women to advance in positions of educational leadership (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). With the power of this legislation emerged a trend toward equalizing representation of men and women in the administration of public schools. The Women’s Educational Equity Act of 1974 that followed Title IX designated federal funds for the purposes of researching and correcting sex-based inequalities in the nation’s education system; yet, women’s representation in the superintendency significantly lagged behind men’s representation (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Nearly one hundred years after Sarah Raymond Fitzwilliam served as the first female superintendent, a reform movement in education began in the 1980s that sparked vigorous restructuring of schools throughout the country (Skrobarcek and Stark, 2002). At the same time, a parallel movement to the restructuring of schools occurred with women gaining momentum in their ascent to the top levels of educational administration (Skrobarcek and Stark, 2002). Yet, through the restructuring one question remains unanswered. As growing numbers of current superintendents begin to retire, will women see greater opportunities to choose the role of superintendent or will they face more barriers? One of the national issues plaguing education is the equitable hiring of women for top school leadership positions. While women’s efforts to attain the superintendency have been sincere and concerted in the last century, gender remains an ever-present barrier. In their research Kowalski, et al. (2011) find that women superintendents are more prevalent in large urban districts than they are in small, urban districts. The most recent statistics indicate that women account for 24.1% of superintendents nationwide (AASA, 2010).
Though this number is higher than in recent decades, underrepresentation of women in the superintendency clearly persists.

**Career Pathways**

Skrobarcek & Stark (2002) cite Natale’s (1992) statement that there are advantages to methodical career pathway planning. If so, then how does a candidate acquire her first superintendency? Most women enter the top position in a district through the assistant principalship (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Through Natale’s (1992) study, Skrobarcek & Stark (2002) indicate that the path to the superintendency most often went through one of two major channels and was indicative of the size of the district: (1) from the principalship directly to the superintendency (in smaller districts), or (2) from the principalship to central office administration to the superintendency (in larger districts). Women tend to be older than men when applying for leadership positions (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). A candidate’s level of experience and length of time spent in each administrative position are important, and secondary administrative experience is viewed as more lucrative than elementary administrative experience (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Citing Brunner (2000), Bjork, et al. (2003) contend that women more often reported having served as elementary teachers, district coordinators, assistant superintendents, and high school teachers, respectively; while men reported having served as high school teachers, junior high/middle school teachers, assistant superintendents, and directors or coordinators, respectively. Furthermore, women more frequently bypassed the principalship by moving from the classroom to central office positions to superintendent.

**Influential Factors**

Researchers agree with well-established findings that individuals tend to follow career paths where they enjoy success; thus, individuals choosing the superintendency continue to
follow this career path if they perceive themselves to have been successful (Kowalski, et al., 2011). Career pathways vary among educational leaders and are influenced by a multitude of factors that include, but are not limited to, an individual’s demographic characteristics such as age, family concerns and mobility, gender, sexism, mentors, networks; educational preparedness; and job cluster or path (Bjork, et al., 2003). Kowalski, et al. (2011) reference a previous study by Kowalski (2006) to note that the traditional career path for most superintendents reflects state certification requirements and involves entering the education profession as teachers and moving through the organizational hierarchy of a public school district to become building-level administrators. Typically, the most commonly held positions by females are district-level director/coordinator/supervisor, elementary school teacher, and elementary school principal (Kowalski, et al., 2011). Yet, these common career paths may also be barriers to the superintendency. Statistics show that higher percentages of females are found at the elementary principal level than at the secondary level (Kowalski, et al., 2011; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006), and less than a third of superintendents comes from an elementary administrative background. Glass (2000) found that only 18% of all female superintendents possess secondary administrative background, and the study reported that 60% of female superintendents spent 10 or more years in the classroom teaching, compared to five years for male superintendents. Both groups of consultants/headhunters and school board members reported that prior experience as a high school principal was more highly valued than was elementary principalship experience, probably because the high school role is viewed as more complex and is characterized by more visible pressures, more difficult problems, and more high-stakes decision making (Tallerico, 2000).

Beyond recruitment, Tallerico (2000) indicates that there are several more parts of the search and selection process that reinforce more male career pathways to the superintendency.
such as consultants’ surveys depicting previous positions, size and type of school or district, and number of years in each position. These practices focus on the centrality of previous positions and deflect attention from leadership skills acquired through diversity of administrative roles (Tallerico, 2000). Gilmour & Kinsella (2009) reference the work of Glass and Franceschini (2007) who noted that prior to the superintendency, many women serve as an assistant or associate superintendent of instruction. Once they decide to attain the position, Kowalski, et al. (2011) report that a majority of females become employed as superintendents in one year or less after making their first application for the position.

Tallerico (2000) explained that women’s access to the superintendency is controlled by forces such as norms, ideologies, and sociocultural values that are associated with positions of educational leadership through a gatekeeping analogy. She observed that gates to the superintendency often are closed or only partially ajar to candidates who have experience mainly as elementary principals but are wide open for candidates whose roles have been largely situated as high school principals (Tallerico, 2000). Gates to the superintendency also appear to be open or closed based upon the recruitment strategies and hiring practices of local school boards who tend to use professional search consultants to fill available positions, and these firms typically favor male candidates (Tallerico, 2000).

For many years, Thomas Glass has been conducting research on the school superintendency and has made significant contributions to the field of educational administration. In his article, Glass (2000) states that women comprise more than 50 percent of educational administration and/or leadership programs and 50 percent of doctoral programs. Thus, women are interested in pursuing roles in educational administration and advancing their careers. Furthermore, Brunner & Kim (2010) concur through the 2007 Brunner and Grogan
study that 40 percent of women central office administrators are interested in the superintendency.

In practice, women play many roles and travel many roads in their journey to the top leadership positions in school districts (Gilmour and Kinsella, 2009). That is, there is no one-size-fits-all career pathway to follow. Generally, career paths of superintendents: are varied, sometimes begin in a classroom, sometimes are planned but develop over time and with opportunity to allow candidates to develop necessary personal and professional skills and abilities, are sometimes nurtured by one or more mentors, are often supported by a network of colleagues focusing on leadership, and provide a vehicle for a fulfilling professional life (Gilmour and Kinsella, 2009). Yet, many former and practicing educational leaders will acknowledge that the career path to the superintendency can be impeded with barriers and obstacles that are difficult to overcome.

**Career Barriers**

Educational professionals who are current or retired public school superintendents likely will acknowledge that barriers exist when accessing and entering this top leadership position. They might also confirm that the role of superintendent is multifaceted and that challenges abound everywhere. Moreover, many current or former female school superintendents can confirm that being a woman increases the difficulty of successfully overcoming barriers and meeting these challenges (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Skrobarcek & Stark (2002) remark that the barriers for women are markedly different than those for men, and that they are divided into three general classes of theoretical explanations: (1) society has not encouraged women to aspire to or prepare for administrative positions, (2) the structure of school systems naturally excludes women from administrative positions, and (3) male dominance in society results in sex
discrimination that limits women to subordinate positions. Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) reference the work of several authors (Shakeshaft, 1987; Brunner, Grogan, & Prince, 2003; and Kinsella, 2004) to indicate the following as barriers to women’s entrance into and advancement in educational leadership positions: pervasive male administrator attitudes against hiring women, women’s lack of motivation to seek administrative positions, discriminatory practices used in hiring and promoting women, bias in the search process, male-dominated professional networks, and the conflict between personal and professional responsibilities.

Research has identified a number of both internal/intrapersonal and external barriers that women face in aspiring to the superintendency that contribute to the problem of underrepresentation. Internal or intrapersonal barriers typically include issues that relate to the internal aspects of a person including emotions, motivation, self-efficacy, role conflict, and gender-specific attitudes. Brunner & Grogan (2007) indicate that the internal barrier of role conflict related to making a choice between the roles of wife-mother and career woman can create great anxiety given the tremendous time that each takes. Gender-specific barriers include lack of aggressiveness; waiting to be selected, discovered, persuaded, or asked to accept the position; reluctance to take risks; and lack of self-confidence (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Shakeshaft (1989) noted that external barriers can include organizational barriers and influences such as androcentrism, in which practices are centered or focused on men, often to the neglect or exclusion of women. Gender role expectations and the structure of traditional bureaucratic organizations can be additional external barriers obstructing women from educational leadership positions (Shakeshaft, 1989).
Age

Because they tend to spend more years in the classroom before pursuing administrative positions, women are often older candidates for the superintendency. The tendency toward a schedule more conducive to childrearing may also contribute to women remaining in the classroom longer than men (Shakeshaft, 1989). Brunner & Grogan (2007) cite Marshall’s (1985) notion that the age norms associated with the steps in women’s careers conflict with their roles, because men make their crucial career moves while they are in their late 20s and early 30s, while women tend to enter into their career moves later to avoid overload and the conflict associated with balancing work and family responsibilities. Brunner & Grogan (2007) also reference Grogan’s (1999) study in which most women identified that when they could finally consider the superintendency, they were embarking on the end of their careers. Skrobarcek & Stark (2002) cite Paddock’s (1981) findings that career paths for men and women superintendents were similar with the exception that women entered administration at a later age and had more discontinuity in their careers. Tallerico (2000) indicates that the perspective on age is particularly disadvantageous to females; that is, if women are older than men when they apply for their first superintendency, then overt or subtle age discrimination will affect them more significantly. Brunner and Kim (2010) reference the earlier study of Brunner and Grogan (2007) in their finding that 80.6 percent of male superintendents entered their first administrative positions before 36 years of age, while only 50 percent of female superintendents and administrators aspiring to the superintendency were in their first administrative roles before the same age. Brunner and Kim (2010) also reference a previous study by Kim and Brunner (2009) in their finding that the average age for men entering their first superintendency is 42.7 years while the average age for women is 47.3 years, a difference of slightly over five years.
Role Models and Mentors

Additional barriers for women who aspire to the superintendency may be the lack of female role models and mentors. In a 2006 study, 39% of superintendents reported not having any type of mentor (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Glass et al. (2000) surveyed the nation’s superintendents on barriers to attainment of positions in educational leadership in *The 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency*. The female participants reported the following as important barriers: lack of active recruitment, family responsibilities, lack of professional networks, perceptions of women as managers, and lack of peer mentors.

Research shows that women gravitate toward companies or organizations that are led by women and that provide mentoring by other women. A study conducted on 1,000 female executives reported that only one in five women has a mentor (Chang, 2012). Mentorship is a stronger trait of women because they naturally want to help other women grow in their careers (Chang, 2012). Similarly, Bjork (2000) reported that mentoring has served as a powerful influence on human potential, and that mentoring is a key component of successful induction programs in many schools across the nation. Tallerico (2000) touts the wisdom of seeking and finding mentors from outside a familiar circle for specific purposes, such as assisting in the development of particular communications skills or gaining familiarity with financial procedures. Dana & Bourisaw (2006) remark that having one or more mentors is essential because each individual brings his or her own strengths and informative experiences to the relationship. Yet, Witmer (2006) reveals that finding a mentor is difficult for most women because they usually begin their administrative careers later in life and are not positioned to seek a mentor who might be younger in age. Oftentimes, sponsorship is rooted in previously developed relationships with individuals who have served as mentors that may include esteemed
superintendents in other school districts or successful retired superintendents who possess solid expertise, valuable experience, and keen insight (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). While family members have a vested interest in the success of their loved ones and frequently serve as sponsors, mentors outside of the family have an interest primarily because they recognize the potential and demonstrate a willingness to work with an individual. Dana & Bourisaw (2006) add that a good mentor provides insight, advocacy, and support to the welfare and success of the individual.

Many successful candidates talk about the key role their mentors have played in their quest for the superintendency. Indeed, finding the right mentor can be a daunting task, but it is a critical one in the process. When choosing a suitable mentor, there are at least three ideas to keep in mind. First, the mentee should engage in a mentoring relationship with an individual who shares similar values and goals and who possesses the skills and knowledge that the mentee needs to achieve his or her goals (Gilmour and Kinsella, 2009). Second, a true mentor makes time for the relationship and takes the responsibilities that are associated with the relationship seriously by providing ongoing access and connection to the mentee (Gilmour and Kinsella, 2009). Third, the nature of the mentoring relationship is that it is hierarchical; that is, the mentor is in the position of power based on his or her knowledge, access, position, etc. (Gilmour and Kinsella, 2009).

Mentors can be identified through many avenues, including from a wide range of positions or from informal and formal mentoring/professional development programs (Gilmour and Kinsella, 2009). Brunner & Grogan (2007) remark that the perspectives of both women and men mentors may be important if women are to feel confident enough to assume the masculinized role of the superintendency. Regardless of a candidate’s selection, the process of
mentoring should help the individual learn the skills needed to be successful and should develop
the person’s ability to become a more reflective administrator and instructional leader (Gilmour
and Kinsella, 2009). According to Dana & Bourisaw (2006), “mentoring is probably one of the
most important aspects of socialization and may be particularly relevant in helping women move
into higher levels of school leadership.”

As long as a low number of female superintendents persists, there will continue to be a
lack of female role models, resulting in a majority of mentors who are male. This trend is not
optimum for women as suggested by many researchers who believe that aspiring women need
role models like themselves who will encourage and support them through their ascension to the
superintendency (Glass et al., 2000).

Search and Selection Process

Many women perceive the practices of local school boards and the protocols of the
professional search firms they hire to be barriers to the superintendency. Brunner and Grogan
(2007) reported that 82% of women believed that the negative perceptions of school board
members toward women as managers was a barrier in the hiring process. Tallerico (2000)
reported on gender bias in the practices of consultants for search firms and a strong preference
for male candidates among these individuals. Several researchers (Brunner & Grogan, 2007;
Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Tallerico, 2000) have identified school boards and the professional
search firms they employ as the gatekeepers to the superintendency in that they play a significant
role in whether or not a woman even gets to be considered by a school board by controlling the
selection process through predetermined criteria that result in: (a) defining quality in terms of
particular job titles, (b) stereotyping by gender, (c) demonstrating complacency about taking
affirmative action, and (d) hypervaluing feelings of comfort and interpersonal relationships with the successful candidate.

Tallerico (2000) provided several examples of highly-qualified women who have either applied or who have obtained an interview for the position of superintendent, only to be denied because the school district was simply not ready to hire a female superintendent. Many school boards are comprised of mostly white males who seek to hire a final candidate who embodies their own ideals and views, thereby impeding diversity (Tallerico, 2000). Recent research confirms that the more diverse school boards are, the more likely they are to hire diverse candidates (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Tallerico (2000) suggests that members of local school boards participate in professional development to raise their awareness of the barriers to diversity in pools of potential candidates.

Oftentimes, interviews associated with the superintendent search and selection process are venues for subtle forms of bias that disadvantage women. Interviews are a significant part of the “weeding-out” process, so it is important for women to pay close attention to the intangibles described as the “chemistry” with the interviewers and the “fit” with the community (Tallerico, 2000, p. 102). Other intangibles include intuitions about appearance and age; perceived socioeconomic status and class; and ability to communicate with savvy stakeholders, state legislators, business owners, students, faculty, staff, and the media (Tallerico, 2000). Tallerico (2000) reinforces the notion that applicants should examine how informal systems of connections can influence access to the superintendency, by exploring the ways that common consultant practices shape the perspectives of school board members; by analyzing the power and influence of individuals involved in the process; and by inspecting the issues of dissensus, confidentiality, and communications during the search and selection process, the time it takes to interview and to
receive notification, the visitations, and the contract negotiations prior to appointment. Tallerico (2000) references Radich’s (1992) study and Grogan and Henry’s (1995) findings about gender biases in the selection process such as expressions of negative preconceived expectations and prejudicial questions in screening or interviewing situations. Typically, these preconceptions reflect assumptions that school boards and communities are usually ready for male educational leaders; whereas, the possibilities for the acceptance of females are questionable, exceptional, or unnatural (Tallerico, 2000).

In the study conducted by Tallerico (2000), interim superintendents were found to play a significant role in both directly and indirectly shaping superintendent search and selection processes; yet, few females were found to serve as interims. When consultant searches yield no one whom the board finds acceptable, interims sometimes make contacts of their own and recruit additional candidates for the board to consider and hire, or they serve the board by reading through the applications and selecting the strongest candidates for consideration. Indirectly or directly, interims can shape the superintendent search and selection process by (a) sharing opinions with the board on which consultant to select to run the search and on how it should be conducted; (b) offering assessments of what the district needs; (c) investigating candidates’ backgrounds and references; (d) generating lists of questions to ask of candidates during interviews; (e) serving as sounding boards during the evaluation process; (f) facilitating the board’s development; and (g) being a reference point of comparison (Tallerico, 2000).

Essentially, candidates should heed Tallerico’s (2000) advice and remember that there is nothing scientific about the search and selection process for a superintendent. Tallerico (2000) describes the process as both subjective as well as objective, and that the subjectivities are more likely to favor male rather than female, majority rather than minority, candidates. Despite these
subjectivities, Tallerico (2000) provides numerous illustrations of how search consultants and school board members open up the process by examining their underlying assumptions, values, and beliefs that drive commitments to equity; by creating structures for members of historically underrepresented groups to acquire additional leadership skills; by targeting recruitment of females; and by modifying common selection procedures.

**Marriage and Family Responsibilities**

After school districts lifted marriage bars in the 1940s, women finally enjoyed a fairer chance at employment (Blount, 1998). However, the numbers of women who held school superintendencies declined rapidly from 1950 to 1970, due to the consolidation of schools, the existence of low quotas on women applicants in university schools of education, and the strong gender role discrimination of women who chose female partners, rather than male partners, who could share the family responsibilities (Blount, 1998). A study by McDade & Drake (1982) cites a continued conflict that married women experience between home and career responsibilities and flexibility in moving to new locations. In her study, Pirouznia (2009) reports that family responsibilities constitute a powerful barrier that often blocks women’s pathways into administrative roles. Often cited is the factor that female administrators may not be as mobile as their male peers because of family situations that include their spouses’ jobs. Traditionally, women have assumed the primary responsibility for the rearing of their children; thus, employers often perceive conflicts between the child-rearing responsibilities of working mothers and their job responsibilities (Pirouznia, 2009). Marriage and family seem to augment a male’s qualifications, but these same credentials appear to compromise a woman’s career (Pirouznia, 2009). During the interviewing process parenting issues often are addressed with female candidates, while men are rarely questioned about these same issues (Pirouznia, 2009). Today’s
working women often report that they experience clearly identified tensions and ill feelings that result from the conflict arising between the roles of caregiver and career woman and concerns about their failure in the roles of wife and mother due to the difficulty in maintaining relationships and managing chores (Harris, et al., 2004). They maintain that they believe that the ability to advance in their careers would be negatively impacted by the conflict between their professional and personal responsibilities. The conflict in their role responsibilities also affects their aspirations to the superintendency, especially when relocation is expected (Harris, et al., 2004). Clearly, the influence of marriage and family responsibilities on a woman’s career can be extensive, and a husband’s support of a female superintendent may exert such a powerful effect that it can influence her level of success in that role (Harris, et al., 2004).

**Professional Networks**

According to Wheatley (1981), women may lack the access to extended professional networks that White males can take for granted (as cited in Tallerico, 2000). In a 1992 study, 56% of superintendents who responded believed that a “good-ol’-boy” or “good-ol’-girl” network existed in the superintendency (Glass & Franceschini, 2007, p. 36). When they were able to join a “good-ol’-girl” network, 76% of female superintendents believed that the affiliation helped their cause (Glass et al., 2000). However, some women report that they often are excluded from professional networks. Harris et al. (2004) offer that a barrier to ingrained cultural perceptions of leadership for women is that of networking.

Effective networking can be powerful for females aspiring to the superintendency, and establishing them and maintaining them are two keys to successful networks (Gilmour and Kinsella, 2009). From her interviews with female superintendents, Tallerico (2000) reports that it is as essential for women to develop and maintain connections within an established network
as it is for them to acquire the skills to do the job. Women aspirting to the superintendency should seek opportunities that might include state, national, and international conferences; state, national, and international organizations; civic connections; and networks that combine personal growth and professional affiliations (Gilmour and Kinsella, 2009). Interested individuals should develop networks for multiple purposes and in multiple modalities including face-to-face, electronic (e-mail, blogs, wikis, Google Docs, Skype, etc.), small groups for specific topics or emotional support, and extended networks for specific skills or visioning (Gilmour and Kinsella, 2009).

**Cultural Stereotyping**

Harris et al. (2004) reference Irby, Brown, & Trautman (1999) as they recognize that traditional, cultural stereotyping of leadership is a very important barrier to a woman’s success because it fails to address the female perspective. The traditional public perceptions of femininity and of women as effective leaders often are in conflict with one another (Harris et al., 2004). Consequently, women must have more credentials, be better prepared, and be more knowledgeable than their male counterparts, if they want to be seen as educational leaders (Harris, et al., 2004). In the conflict between the social construction of the role of public school superintendent and the social construction of femininity, society views the role of superintendent to be assumed by a more traditional, masculine individual who embodies corresponding leadership traits such as assertiveness and hierarchical, controlling behaviors. Yet, Harris, et al. (2004) cite Morgan’s (1993) idea that when women leaders adopt a male behavior such as assertiveness, it is not valued. Furthermore, a societal view indicates that female competencies are more closely aligned with the areas of teaching, learning, and curriculum; while more masculine competencies are more closely aligned with the areas of fiscal management, personnel, and other non-instructional issues (Harris, et al., 2004). To better understand the
culture of educational administration and to distinguish between feminization and masculinization, Brunner & Grogan (2007) cite Blount’s (1998) definitions of the terms as they relate to the proportion of feminization [women] in the teaching ranks as compared with a much larger proportion of masculinization [men] in the administration ranks. Women’s experiences in the classroom, as well as their formal and informal training, age, and other gender issues, can create the impression that women lack the proper leadership style exhibited by the familiar, accepted masculine persona (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Dana & Bourisaw (2006) reference the work of Bolman and Deal (2003) indicating that active sex-role stereotypes become barriers to equity because of their potential to reinforce discriminatory practices, and one of the most flagrant examples is the woman as primary family and home caregiver. The situation becomes exacerbated if women with children aspire to assume powerful leadership positions that entail longer hours outside the home and more responsibility, as male supervisors view women as employees who frequently leave work to tend to sick children or arrive late to work because of their children’s emergencies (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Truly, sex-role stereotypes and the nature of organizational structures have contributed majorly to controlling the number of women superintendents in this country (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006).

Over the past two decades, existing literature is filled with claims of sex-role stereotyping as a major barrier for women seeking entry to or advancement in educational administration (Pirouznia, 2009). Pirouznia (2009) references a study conducted by Sharp et al. in 2000 in which 57% of female superintendents agree that society regards the position of the superintendency as a field for males for reasons that include age-old prejudices such as a woman cannot manage as well as a man, a woman is more emotional than a man, or that a woman is
more prone to cry. Pirouznia (2009) also references the work of Coltrane & Adams (1997) in her findings that the male stereotype of leadership emphasizes attributes such as independence, competitiveness, focus, control, ambition, activity, and attention to specifics; while the female stereotype emphasizes attributes such as interdependence, cooperation, acceptance, receptivity, ethics, and perception of wholes. Only when women are afforded equal opportunities to secure equitable roles and responsibilities in policy will they be in charge of their own future.

**Personal Motivation Factors**

In an effort to assist potential aspirants, it is important to better understand the emotions and both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors that drive goal-oriented actions in female superintendents. Intrinsic motivation behaviors are enjoyable and rewarding in themselves, while extrinsic motivation behaviors are created by an outside force or person. Since intrinsic motivation leads to strong individual control over behavior and a desire to make responsible choices, it is anticipated that successful female superintendents possess strong intrinsic motivational factors. Of equal importance is the notion that motivation to perform on the job is about learning, and that some activities, like learning, are “autotelic” because they are naturally motivating and enjoyable (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 38). Beck (2004) states that motivation involves the control of behavior through the anticipation of rewards or punishers and that women who pursue and attain the position of superintendent maintain positive beliefs about their ability to accomplish the work and rely upon perceived beliefs of strong self-efficacy to achieve their career aspirations.

To better understand personal motivation factors requires an examination of women’s career aspirations. Brunner & Grogan (2007) reference Young and McLeod’s (2001) definition of career aspiration that depicts a three-dimensional concept comprised of a woman’s career
commitments, positional goals, and leadership orientations. A woman’s aspirations include what she hopes to accomplish during her career in education, the types of positions in which she is interested in pursuing, the goals she hopes to realize while she serves in those positions, and the leadership styles she envisions she must practice to reach her goals (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Worner (2010) references the work of Glass and Franceschini (2007) to explain the number one reason that individuals who have an interest in the position is because they believe they can improve the teaching and learning experience for students. Although the position is complex and challenging, the prospect of making a difference for students, staff, parents, and the community is still a noble and attractive incentive for those who seek the superintendency (Worner, 2010).

**Professional and Personal Preparedness**

Undoubtedly, the educational preparedness of school leaders has been a continued focus over the past several years, leaving opportunity for questions about what constitutes educational preparation, what comprises quality preparation, and how preparation should be delivered (Brunner and Kim, 2010). To clarify the idea of professional preparedness, Brunner & Kim (2010) divide the term into the following three distinct categories: (1) formal preparedness, which is defined by the advanced educational administration/leadership training received through collegiate and/or university coursework and programs; (2) experiential preparedness, which is characterized by a candidate’s career experiences, professional relationships, mentoring, etc.; and (3) personal preparedness, which is defined as an individual’s personal attitude toward the pursuit and acquisition of the role of the superintendency.

**Formal preparedness.** In their study, Brunner & Grogan (2007) report that education matters for women, and that a greater percentage of female (57.7%) superintendents than male (42.8%) superintendents hold either an EdD or a PhD degree. Skepticism about the efficacy of
academic preparation programs for superintendents has been a recurring theme (Kowalski, et al., 2011). Through a literature review about the quality of certification programs for the superintendency, Kowalski, et al. (2011) warn that a multitude of criticisms emerged, including low academic admission and completion standards, a general indifference toward instructional leadership, a distinction between theory and practice, inattention to research based in practice, an inadequate knowledge base, and a failure to differentiate between superintendent preparation, principal preparation, and doctoral degrees in educational administration.

A quality preparatory program is one that should be individualized for each individual with unique strengths and assurances of frequent encounters with diverse perspectives and should be designed to depict what is working for men and for women who are school leaders (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). For both men and women, access to a quality preparatory program should include well-designed syllabi with intellectually challenging issues and materials; current, practical curricula that is aligned with state and national standards; and other materials that are supported by good, gender-neutral research (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Hayes (2001) remarks that it is especially important for programs to help future superintendents develop a historical perspective to enable them to view current events as a part of a continuing saga and to develop a clear understanding of racial and gender history to deal with these current issues. While there is no national curriculum for superintendent preparation, Kowalski, et al. (2011) reference Glass, Bjork, & Brunner (2000) to offer that many superintendent preparation programs include similar courses in school finance, personnel administration, organizational theory, school law, and school-community relations, as well as internships. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) identifies eight Professional Standards for the Superintendency that include: (1) leadership and district culture; (2) policy and governance; (3) communications and
community relations: (4) organizational management; (5) curriculum planning and development; (6) instructional management; (7) human resources management; and (8) values and ethics of leadership (Chapman, 1997). The clear message to universities maintains that unless programs reflect current research and emerging professional standards, the programs will be inadequate. Furthermore, university preparation programs are continually challenged to provide authentic learning opportunities for individuals aspiring to the superintendency to enable them to acquire the requisite professional knowledge and skills to be effective leaders (Short & Scribner, 2000).

**Experiential preparedness.** Considering the complexity of experiential preparedness requires an individual to include variations in career paths leading to administrative roles, gender, and race (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Most professional occupations require an abundance of educational preparation that typically is included on an individual’s vitae or resume. But these documents rarely reveal whether a candidate is attitudinally, emotionally, or personally prepared to assume the position of school superintendent.

**Professional organizations and associations.** Many women belong to professional organizations and associations because of the opportunities they provide for training, professional development, and networking (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Among women (78.6%), one organization stands out as popular—AASA or the American Association for School Administrators, which is the national association for superintendents (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). In a study conducted in 2003, another popular association for women (68.2%) is ASCD or the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Tallerico (2000) warns that the issue of special group affiliations is an example of a subtler form of bias that may affect potential female applicants for the superintendency, because these choices and consequences apply exclusively to members of historically underrepresented groups. For
women, different kinds of affiliations are sometimes risky in similar ways as are digressions from the preferred career pathway to the superintendency (Tallerico, 2000).

When considering the complex topic of formal preparedness, it is important to consider the variation of preparation programs in terms of (a) the type of institution, (b) the nature of the curriculum, (c) the evaluation and selection criteria, (d) the amount of required coursework, (e) the type of system used to deliver the curriculum (online, face-to-face, a hybrid of the two, a cohort or individual program), (f) the cost of the program, and (g) the credentials of the faculty who deliver the program (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Regardless of the type of preparation program, Skrobarcek & Stark (2002) cite findings by Glass (1992) and Natale (1992) indicating that women superintendents were more likely to have and/or to be expected to have doctorate degrees than their male counterparts.

**Personal preparedness.** Worner (2010) discusses the importance of personal preparedness in terms of determining the best fit for an individual, and she includes the following hints: (1) anticipate the best time for seeking the position, and consider family responsibilities and mobility factors; (2) research districts of interest by gathering information from multiple sources; (3) become familiar with the district’s demographics, finances, strategic plan, and student achievement data; (4) prepare a list of questions to ask the school board or interview team; (5) prepare for initial interviews with basic knowledge of the district’s plan, goals, individual schools, enrollments, and size of the community; (6) draw upon prior experiences to illustrate examples; (7) determine the highest priorities of the district and the immediate expectations of the successful candidate; (8) talk openly and candidly about your leadership values and educational beliefs; (9) understand that both the candidate and school board are seeking a best fit; (10) listen to your “gut” feelings; (11) form opinions about working with
current school board members but recognize that those faces very well may change; and (12) let the district know immediately if you are not interested in the position.

In their interviews with nine female educational leaders, Harris, et al. (2004) offer that the following three major personal themes connected all of their stories: (1) leading with joy and finding a deep, abiding joy in serving others; (2) focusing clearly on standards of excellence for all; and (3) demonstrating a strong sense of power nurtured in spirituality. Similarly, in their interviews with eight female superintendents, Johnston, et al. (2002) propose that good leaders understand the use the power of stories to organize their thoughts, bring pattern and order to randomness, and to connect head and heart (Johnston, et al., 2002). The stories these women share represent a universality of experience about their perspectives on knowing the community, knowing the school board, knowing the organization and its people, and knowing the students (Johnston, et al., 2002). School districts are owned by the community and this community ownership is represented by elected school board members, so it is critical for aspiring superintendents to recognize the need to develop a positive, working relationship with all members of the school board (Johnston, et al., 2002). Critical to the success of women aspiring to the superintendency is to remember that every organization has a structure that is both formal and informal and to recognize some of the most important aspects of an organization, including communication systems and procedures, informal and formal networking, internal and external policies, norms for access and accountability, guidelines for setting priorities, evaluation systems, personnel practices, and policies for making decisions (Johnston, et al., 2002). As superintendent, Johnston, et al. (2002) strongly urge women to first know themselves to better know how interpersonal interactions affect the organization and what it takes to keep the organization focused on meeting the purpose of quality teaching and learning. Personal qualities
such as facing challenges with calmness and a sense of humor, giving and gaining courage, listening well, and being ethical are paramount to the success of any female superintendent (Johnston, et al., 2002).

In the lessons learned from their interviews, Johnston, et al. (2002) offer these suggestions to aspiring females before joining a new district: read the local newspapers; observe, listen, and record your observations about the community; learn the history and culture of the district and community; plan to communicate regularly with all members of the school board; serve as the chief advocate for every student’s best interest; treasure the past to inspire the future; and strive to become the kind of leader that others admire.

**Evolution of the Position**

The role of the superintendent has evolved into one of the most complex positions of leadership in existence (Short & Scribner, 2000). Kowalski, et al. (2011) concur that in the past forty years the position of superintendent has become more demanding and increasingly complex and contend that candidates who aspire to this top position be cognizant of the evolution of the superintendency to include the following roles conceptualizations that transcend the social, educational, and professional needs that affect practice: superintendent as teacher-scholar, business manager, states[woman]/political leader, applied social scientist, and effective communicator. Short and Scribner (2000) add that individuals aspiring to the superintendency be prepared to work effectively with multiple stakeholder forces that permeate a community; be responsive to political forces; to run an efficient, effective, complex organization comprised of students, staff, and administrators; and be committed to improving student achievement and learning from the standpoint of a position that is removed from the direct teaching and learning process. Referencing the earlier work of Brunner (1998), Short and Scribner (2000) urge aspiring
individuals to recognize that today’s superintendents must be transformational and instruction leaders, capable of building collaborative models for decision making and skilled in communication, public relations, organization and financial management, use of technology, strategic planning, problem solving, and consensus building. In their research, Short and Scribner (2000, p. v) offer two overall impressions regarding the superintendency: (1) currently, there are more leadership positions available than there are highly-qualified candidates who want to assume them; and (2) generally, school districts are looking for candidates who are dynamic; confident; visionary; experienced; proactive; articulate and skilled in interpersonal relationships; aggressive; highly motivated; collaborative; effective at problem solving; knowledgeable about instruction, long-range planning, and finance; and able to move districts and schools to the next level of achievement.”

**Summary of the Findings of the Review of the Literature**

In public schools across the nation, the position of superintendent is one that has been and still is dominated by males. Although the teaching profession is comprised of approximately three times more women than men, females in the superintendency comprise less than 21% of those in the position (AASA, 2010). To better understand women’s perceptions in the superintendency, this literature review was presented in four sections. First, the historical context of women and the struggle for gender equity was presented as it relates to women in the superintendency. Despite all of this legislation to ensure equity and prohibit gender-based discrimination, women continue to face barriers in the workplace and women in the superintendency remain dramatically underrepresented.

The second part of the review focused on the varied career pathways of female educational leaders and the factors that influence the different stages of a career. Career
pathways vary among educational leaders and are influenced by a multitude of factors during different stages of a career. Generally, career paths of female superintendents vary and progress along a continuum that begins in a classroom. Regardless of whether or not a woman’s career pathway is planned or it develops over time, it is essential that the journey provides an opportunity for her to grow necessary personal and professional skills and abilities, to enjoy nurturing relationships with one or more mentors, to receive support from a network of colleagues focusing on leadership, and to provide a vehicle for a fulfilling professional life.

The next part of the review explored the barriers and challenges women face as they attempt to access the superintendency by examining a number of both internal/intrapersonal and external barriers that women face that contribute to the problem of underrepresentation. Historically, women have faced additional barriers in their rise to the superintendency that include age, the lack of role models or mentors, the search and selection process, marriage and family responsibilities, limited professional networks, cultural stereotyping and personal motivation factors.

The final part of the review examines the professional and personal preparedness of female superintendents by exploring formal preparedness, which is defined by the advanced educational administration/leadership training received through collegiate and/or university coursework and programs; experiential preparedness, which is characterized by a candidate’s career experiences, professional relationships, mentoring, etc.; and personal preparedness, which is defined as an individual’s personal attitude toward the pursuit and acquisition of the role of the superintendency and her cognizance of how the position of superintendency has evolved into a complex leadership role.
Improving access of women to the school superintendency works toward eliminating biases about the face of leadership, questioning inequitable professional practices, shaping community belief systems, and creating opportunities that nurture the aspirations and achievements of a strong, diverse pool of female applicants. If women continue to exhibit the qualifications and leadership skills that are necessary to successfully perform the work required in the superintendency in this era of accountability, they may be embraced as more attractive candidates who are well-educated, highly motivated, and capable of leading districts in the future.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction to the Problem

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, university preparation programs in educational leadership are thriving and schools are populated with many qualified and talented female leaders. Yet, while growing numbers of women are seeking certification for the superintendency, there is evidence that women continue to be underrepresented in this top leadership position. There is a puzzling disconnect between the plentiful supply of female educational leaders and the demand for their service in the superintendency.

Many school districts and other organizations in the public sector are paying attention to the gender composition of their employees and are working to eliminate gender inequities in promotion rates to administrative positions (Ringel, et al., 2004). Consequently, heightened interest in the issue of career pathways of superintendents warranted further discussion and examination of the characteristics, career pathways, perceptions, barriers, and supports of women toward this role. In this study, I contended that career pathways for women are unique and argued that they should be investigated to inform current and future hiring practices and to guide professional development opportunities.

Statement of the Research Problem

Recognizing the scope of the problem, the purpose of this particular study was to investigate the career pathways of women toward the superintendency in several public school districts in Pennsylvania and to examine the perceived barriers and supports that may have influenced their attainment of this position of educational leadership. Perhaps, understanding the experiences in their career pathways, the barriers or obstacles these women have encountered
and overcome, and the perceived supports they have received may better prepare other women for the difficult journey to the superintendency.

**Research Questions**

For the purpose of this study, I selected to interview women who are currently serving as superintendents as well as those who have previously served as superintendents in public school districts in Pennsylvania. Existing research provides a foundation for practitioners to consider the following questions:

1. What are the important experiences in the career pathways of former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania, and why are they essential?
2. What do former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania perceive as the barriers they faced in their ascension to the superintendency, and what are the strategies they employed to overcome these barriers?
3. What supports do these former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania report in attaining this position, and why are they important?
4. From the perspective of these women, what are the “best advice” pieces of wisdom they can offer other female candidates seeking the superintendency?

These are important questions to increase one’s knowledge of how women ascend to the superintendency. Few studies have attempted to depict or comprehend the experiences of female superintendents from the viewpoints of the women themselves (Bell, 1988). To understand why and how some women reach the superintendency, it is critical to hear their voices and appreciate the stories from their perspective. Referencing the work of Bloom & Munro (1995), Harris, et al. (2004) tout the use of stories to promote an understanding of women’s issues.
Rationale for a Qualitative Approach

For this study, qualitative research was suitable because it allowed me to embrace an interpretive, naturalistic approach and gave priority to what the data contributed to the research questions. Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2007). Essentially, qualitative research and philosophy of meaning and meaning-making was an appropriate approach because it embodied several important characteristics that aligned with the research.

**Natural setting.** One distinguishing characteristic of most qualitative research is that behavior is studied as it occurs in the natural setting (Creswell, 2003). This characteristic was important to this study because I collected data by speaking directly with the superintendents in their natural settings; that is, most often in an office or district service center.

**Researcher as key instrument.** Another characteristic of qualitative studies is that researchers are the key instrument, in that they obtain information directly from the source by spending time in direct interaction with the settings, participants, and documents they are studying (Creswell, 2003; McMillan, 2008). As the researcher for this study, I obtained the data directly from the superintendents by spending time directly interacting and conversing with them most often in their own settings.

**Multiple sources of data.** Still another characteristic of qualitative studies is that the researchers consider every detail that is recorded as contributing to a better understanding of the setting, behavior, and complexity of human nature (McMillan, 2008). For this study, I gathered data primarily through interviews with the former and practicing superintendents and made sense
of all the data I recorded by organizing my audio recordings and visual notes into categories of themes.

**Inductive data analysis.** Qualitative researchers also want to know how and why behavior occurs by examining the process through which behavior occurs and the reasons for the results, instead of just exploring the outcomes or products (McMillan, 2008). Using an inductive analysis approach, I organized the responses I garnered from the interviews with the superintendents to build a strong foundation from the patterns and themes that emerged and collaborated with the superintendents to give them an opportunity to peruse the themes and shape the direction of the process.

**Participants’ meanings.** While conducting qualitative research, investigators do not apply predetermined definitions or ideas about how people will think or react; rather, they try to understand participants from their point of view by focusing on the meaning of events and actions as expressed by the participants (Creswell, 2003; McMillan, 2008). As a qualitative researcher, I focused on asking questions of the participants to discover what they were experiencing, how they interpreted their experiences, and how they themselves structured the social world in which they live (Slavin, 2007). With each interview, I set aside my own preconceived definitions, ideas, and experiences regarding how the superintendents would respond and attempted to understand their answers from their perspective by focusing on the meanings expressed by the individual participants.

**Emergent design.** Qualitative researchers attempt to disconnect themselves from their preconceptions and craft a plan or design for conducting the research and offering a full account of the methodology retrospectively, as it emerges after all the data have been collected (Creswell,
For this study, I collected the data and allowed the research design to emerge retrospectively following an analysis of the data.

**Theoretical lens.** Qualitative researchers often use a theoretical lens that becomes an advocacy perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change (Creswell, 2009). As a qualitative researcher, I assumed a critical theory perspective which allowed me to focus my concerns toward empowering women aspiring to the superintendency and to transcend the constraints placed on them.

**Interpretive inquiry.** In qualitative investigation, researchers interpret what they see, hear, and understand in relation to the context of their own background, history, and prior understandings (Creswell, 2007). As a qualitative researcher, it was important for me to consider my own moral, ethical, political, and emotional position about my research questions and to strike a balance by acknowledging my own positionality and by maintaining professional practice (Dahlberg & McCaig, 2010).

**Holistic account.** Finally, qualitative researchers attempt to develop a comprehensive understanding of the problem or issue under study by reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the multitude of factors involved in a situation, and framing the larger, holistic picture that emerges (Creswell, 2003). In this study, I gained a more comprehensive understanding of the career pathways of former and current female superintendents, the supports these female superintendents reported in attaining this position, and the barriers these women reported in their career pathways to their top leadership positions through the contours of the qualitative methodology of portraiture described in the next section.
The Methodology of Portraiture

The methodology of portraiture is a genre of inquiry and representation that attempts to blend art and science. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) define portraiture as “a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life.” While portraiture shares similar features to other qualitative research methods, it is separated from other ethnographic research by the purposeful integration of the investigator’s voice into the written documentation reflecting the researcher’s own experience (Free, 2009). Researchers use portraiture to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the subjects they are studying by documenting their voices and illuminating their visions (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) reference the work of Joseph Featherstone (1989) to describe the focus of portraiture on narrative, with its use of metaphor and symbol, as a powerful approach in which scientific facts gathered in the field provide voice to people’s experience. Citing the work of Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1983, 1997, 2003), Gaztambide-Fernandez, et al. (2011) remark that the methodology of portraiture is based on an inductive rather than a deductive orientation to research, in that the purpose is to explore participants’ experiences and the complexities of how meanings are produced in a particular context. In her study, Free (2009) attempts to extend herself to her audiences through portraits that include the voices of the research participants and to communicate her insights gained through her work. The art of portraiture is concerned with how well the artist can capture the “essence” of the individual (Free, 2009).
In the methodology of portraiture, there are five essential features: Context, Voice, Relationship, Emergent Themes, and Aesthetic Whole (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

**Context.** Context, or the physical, geographical, temporal, historical, cultural, aesthetic setting within which the action takes place, is crucial to a portraitist’s documentation of human experience and organizational culture. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) denote the following five ways in which portraiture addresses context: (1) internal context, or the physical setting; (2) personal context, or the researcher’s stance and perspective; (3) historical context, or journey, culture, and ideology; (4) aesthetic context, or symbols, and metaphors; and (5) shaping context, or visible and subtle changes. In this study, the internal context represents the physical, school or district office setting; the personal context signifies my own, individual attitude and perspective; the historical context reflects the institutional culture and history and the origins and evolution of each participant’s organization and the values that shape its structure and purpose; the aesthetic context depicts the metaphors I chose to use to symbolize the larger phenomena that emerge as significant in the narrative; and the shaping context represents the vibrant and subtle transformations in the setting and/or changes in the participants themselves.

**Voice.** In portraiture, the voice of the researcher is evident in the assumptions, preoccupations, and framework she lends to the inquiry as it is encompassed in the orientations of epistemology, ideology, and method (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Voice speaks about position and perspective, revealing the portraitist’s observations and reflections, as she progresses from thin to thick description through her interpretive voice to seek meaning (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Inevitably, the portraitist’s history, experiences, family background, cultural origins, intellectual interests, theoretical frames, and ideological
fixations inform and shape her voice. Finally, voice denotes the presence of the portraitist’s voice distinguishing the participants’ voices in dialogue with them. In this study, each of the modalities of voice reflected a varied level of presence and visibility for me as the researcher/portraitist. In each modality, the chosen stance was purposeful, conscious, and attentive; yet, my voice as the researcher/portraitist never overwhelmed the voices or actions of the participants. My work as the researcher/portraitist provided a window into my soul; but I also recognized the need to guard against producing a self-portrait.

**Relationship.** All the processes of portraiture require the researcher to build relationships with the participants through which access is sought and attained, connections made, agreements of reciprocity and responsibility developed, trust built, intimacy negotiated, data collected, and knowledge constructed (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Authentic findings will only materialize from genuine relationships developed in encounters that are comfortable, respectful, and benign. Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis (1997) indicate that at the center of relationships, portraitists hope to build rapport with the participants through the search for goodness; empathetic regard; and the development of symmetry, reciprocity, and boundary negotiation. In this study, I pursued a generous, balanced, probing perspective embedded in the complex and competing truths that combined to shape an authentic narrative. In listening and responding to each participant, I strived to develop an understanding of her perspective by empathically putting myself in each participant’s place and witnessing her perspective, her ideas, her emotions, her fears, and her pain. Free (2009) discusses the notion of reciprocity in portraiture as it refers to the relationship between the subject and artist. Recognizing that reciprocity between the researcher/portraitist and each participant is more likely to happen when the structure, boundaries, and commitments of the relationship are made

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explicit at the onset, I strived to be clear and honest about my expectations; to be open and responsive to each participant’s needs and desires; and to ensure that each participant knew my intents, needs, and wants for this study.

**Emergent themes.** Portraiture is an iterative and generative process in which five modes of synthesis, convergence, and contrast allow themes to emerge from the data and give the data shape and form (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). The portraitist (1) listens for repetitive refrains that form a collective expression of commonly held views; (2) listens for resonant metaphors in the form of poetic and symbolic expressions that reveal the manner in which the participants illuminate and experience their realities; (3) listens for themes expressed through institutional and cultural rituals; (4) uses triangulation to weave together the threads of converging data sources; and (5) constructs themes and reveals patterns among contrasting and dissonant perspectives (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

As a researcher/portraitist, I entered the setting with a perspective, a framework, and a guiding set of questions resulting from my previous experience, my reviews of the literature, and my conceptual and disciplinary knowledge. Before embarking on the collection of data, however, I engaged in an early self-reflective, self-critical exercise that increased my consciousness about the lens I brought to the research. During the process, I implemented the five components throughout the three stages of the portraiture methodology: from preparation for the site visit through the data collection to the final writing of the portrait perspectives (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). After each visit, in the ongoing analysis of data, I recognized the probability that emerging themes would be implemented in a new way. In the final writing of each portrait, I respected the idea that emerging themes and the interrelationships
among them would be used to illuminate the structure of both the site and the portrait which
represented the parts of the interpretation and their necessity to a view of the aesthetic whole.

Aesthetic whole. In developing the aesthetic whole, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman
Davis (1997) explain how the portraitist faces the tensions inherent in blending art and science,
analysis and narrative, description and interpretation, structure and texture. The
researcher/portraitist constructs the aesthetic whole while attending to four dimensions: (1) the
conception or development of the overarching story; (2) the structure or sequencing and
scaffolding of emergent themes; (3) the form which reflects the movement of the narrative; and
(4) the cohesion which depicts the unity and integrity of the story.

In this study, I attempted to develop the aesthetic whole by attending to the four
dimensions of conception, structure, form, and coherence. I sought to identify the overarching
vision by drawing emergent themes through the flow of perspectives and perceptions from the
participants. Just as conception expresses the overarching vision of the aesthetic whole, the
structure represents the themes that provide a frame, stability, and organization for the narrative.
As I built the structure, I was responsive to the emergence of the larger pattern. For me, as the
researcher/portraitist, form is the texture of intellect, emotion, and aesthetics that supports,
illuminates, and animates the structural elements. From the stories, examples, illustrations,
illusions, and ironies offered by the participants, I attempted to give life and movement to the
story, to provide complexity and nuance to the text, and to offer the reader opportunities to
identify with the participants. Finally, I strived to develop coherence by representing an orderly,
logical, and aesthetically consistent relationship of all the parts of the story. In creating the
aesthetic whole that considers the elements of conception, structure, form, and coherence, I
endeavored to capture insight and emotion and to develop a narrative that informs, inspires, and reciprocates the kindness of welcomed study in the gift of the final portrait.

**Site Description and Sample**

As a researcher engaged in qualitative research, I faced a few issues in the field when gathering data related to gaining access to organizations, sites, and individuals; convincing individuals to participate in the study; building trust and credibility at the field site, and getting people to respond (Creswell, 2007). Rist (1982) concurs that gaining entry, and the conditions under which it is granted, is one of the most critical phases of qualitative research. Two of the first steps included selecting the participants to study and identifying the setting (Lichtman, 2010). To understand the evolution of women’s career pathways, I interviewed fifteen former and practicing female superintendents who have provided past or current leadership in public school districts across Pennsylvania. I purposefully selected to observe and interview former and practicing female superintendents in several of the public school districts represented in Pennsylvania. I chose these districts because they were within a reasonable geographical proximity (three hours) to the locale where I reside and work; therefore, the sample was convenient. Furthermore, I selected these individuals because I have known some of them professionally for years, and because I have the utmost respect for the challenges they have faced or currently confront and for the successes they have garnered during their careers. Finally, most of these individuals were eager to participate in this study, to share their experiences about their individual career pathways toward the superintendency, to share their perspectives on perceived barriers and supports that may have influenced the attainment of their key leadership positions, and to offer the “best advice” pieces of wisdom to other female candidates seeking the superintendency.
Through the thirty invitational letters I sent, I identified fifteen individuals who were willing to be interviewed for this research. A sample of the invitational letter can be found in Appendix A of this study. After the invitational letters were disseminated, I followed up with phone calls and/or emails to interested individuals, scheduled mutually convenient appointments, and conducted the interviews. To facilitate this informational process, I conducted semi-structured, guided, in-depth, face-to-face, qualitative interviews with the superintendents to elicit their views and opinions to address the research questions. Personal interviews are useful when participants cannot be directly observed, when the researcher is interested in collecting historical information, and when the researcher wants to assume control over the line of questioning (Creswell, 2003). During the interviews, I posed the questions included in my Superintendent Interview Questions, which can be found in Appendix B of this study. In all the interviews, I conducted follow-up questions to clarify responses or to allow participants to elaborate on their initial responses. Following the interview process, I transcribed the interviews, and let the data emerge from the settings. During the interviews, I also asked permission of the participants to view related primary source documents that included public artifacts such as newspaper articles, minutes of meetings, and official reports or private documents such as personal journals, blogs, diaries, letters, and emails and other visual materials and to identify themes in the data.

Challenges in qualitative interviewing often focus on the mechanics of conducting interviews related to unexpected participant behaviors, phrasing and negotiating questions, dealing with sensitive issues, and completing transcriptions; and on the importance of the relationship that exists between the interviewer and interviewee (Creswell, 2007). As the researcher in this study, I did face a few challenges in convincing some individuals to participate in the study and in building trust and credibility with the women with whom I was less familiar.
Nonetheless, all of these individuals seemed eager to participate in this study, to share their experiences about their individual career pathways toward the superintendency, to share their perspectives on perceived barriers and supports that may have influenced the attainment of their key leadership positions, and to offer the “best advice” pieces of wisdom to other female candidates seeking the superintendency. There were no obstacles that prevented these women from meeting with me, including conflicting schedules, distance, location of the interview, or inclement weather. In many instances, the interviewee traveled at least half or all of the distance to meet with me at a mutually convenient setting. After they received the typewritten transcripts, I did face a few challenges in persuading some individuals to continue to participate in the study, so I referenced the IRB Policies and Guidelines to assure the participants of the confidentiality of their responses and informed them of the benefits of the research over the minimized risks of their participation.

**IRB Policies and Guidelines**

Qualitative researchers face many ethical issues that surface in relation to informed consent procedures, deceptive or covert activities, confidentiality toward participants, benefits of research over risks to participants, and participant requests that surpass social norms (Creswell, 2007). In this study, I recognized the importance of confidentiality for the participants because many of them know one another professionally and meet frequently to discuss the challenges and concerns related to their position. Before the interviews, I secured informed consent from the participants. During the interview process, I continually assured the participants of the confidentiality of their responses and informed them of the benefits of the research over the minimized risks of their participation. Throughout the study, I followed the guidelines and information for researchers, research participants and Institutional Review Board (IRB) members.
for conducting human participant research (“Conducting a human participant research study,” 2011). Ultimately, researchers benefit from greater human subject awareness if it leads to fewer withdrawals after research has begun (“Conducting a human participant research study,” 2011). In today's world, certain reasonable expectations exist for protection of subjects who participate in human research that include dignity for, disclosure to, and decision by subjects regarding participation (“Conducting a human participant research study,” 2011). To consent requires individuals to know and to know requires prior preparation by participants so they do not become dependent on presumptions (“Conducting a human participant research study,” 2011).

As the researcher, I had a responsibility to pay proper attention to subject protections and investigator responsibilities that can be expected to result in an optimal outcome for all involved. Furthermore, I was successful in preventing participants from retreating from opportunities to participate in my research for lack of insight into related issues and understanding how best to proceed or from participating for the wrong reasons. A complete listing of these policies and guidelines can be found at www.research.psu.edu/orp/humans.

Data Collection Procedures

When considering strategies for collecting data, it is important that the research design (1) provides for multiple data sources and methods of collection and (2) describes the techniques that were used to check and validate analyses as the research proceeded (Owens, 1982). Several procedures relevant to data collection were considered essential to the design of this study.

Gather data on site. Time immersed in an interview is important in that it provides a vehicle for the researcher to become accepted and trusted (Owen, 1982). Time also permits the researcher to check her deepening perceptions of what is happening and to examine her own biases and attitudes (Owen, 1982). In most cases, I spent between one and one-half and three
hours immersed in each of the interviews with the participants. The length of the interviews provided an opportunity for me to connect with each of the participants and to become more accepted and trusted. Ideally, I would have liked to have spent more time with each of these fascinating women, observing them interacting with different groups of constituents and leading their districts in their own unique styles.

**Triangulate.** As the researcher, I used a number of sources of information and data. As themes began to arise from the interviews, notes, and documents, I cross-checked them with other sources to verify them, to check the accuracy of information, and to test the perceptions of the participant to the given event. Whenever possible, I used multiple data-collecting techniques including telephone and/or personal interviews, document analysis, written notes and other approaches to ensure the potential for cross-checking and verifying data (Owens, 1982). One of the best approaches I utilized included sending the completed transcripts to the participants and receiving their feedback about the accuracy of the information presented in the dialogues.

**Collect referential adequacy materials.** As the researcher, I created and maintained a file of materials from each site that related to findings and interpretations. Documents included audio tapes; transcripts; interview notes; and photographs (Owen, 1982). In addition, I included links to public school district websites. These referential materials were invaluable as I began to compile the information and record the findings.

**Develop thick description.** In the course of the prolonged interviews, I carefully triangulated the data, corroborated information, and collected referential adequacy materials for the purpose of developing thick description (Owen, 1982). Reviewing a multitude of pages in each transcript permitted me to develop a rich, robust description.
Engage in peer consultation. In my current position as a supervisor of curriculum and instruction, I often had opportunities to reflect on the information shared in the interviews. Occasionally, I met with fellow colleagues on our administrative team to discuss the progress of my study, to share general findings with them, and to seek their opinions on matters. These consultations provided opportunities for me to check my own thinking, to raise questions and concerns, and to talk through problems of which I may or may not have been aware (Owen, 1982).

Mode of Data Collection

In this study, I utilized the mode of interviewing as one of the most important strategies that is central to qualitative research. Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant’s experiences and may be useful as follow-up to the responses to questionnaires or surveys to further investigate their responses (McNamara, 1999). To conduct a good interview is to hold an interesting conversation during which ideas and perceptions are exchanged, information is shared, and participants come to know more about each other in the process. The researcher should be knowledgeable and familiar with the topic; should practice structuring an outline of the procedures of the interview using clear, simple, easy and short questions which are spoken distinctly and understandably; and should demonstrate a gentle approach in which she is tolerant, sensitive and patient to provocative and unconventional opinions. A successful interviewer utilizes steering to control the course of the interview to avoid digressions from the topic and understands the critical importance of testing the reliability and validity of the interviewee’s remarks and of remembering or retaining the subject information from the interviewee. An adept interviewer provides interpretation of what is said by the interviewee, keenly observes what a person has done or is doing, and values what a person
thinks and feels about the topic. I used Kvale’s (1996) list of ten criteria of a successful interviewer. (1) As the interviewer, I was intimately knowledgeable and thoroughly familiar with the focus of the interview. (2) I structured and gave purpose to each interview and frequently asked whether the interviewee had any questions. (3) I clearly asked simple, easy, short questions; and used no jargon that was unfamiliar to the participants. (4) I was gentle, allowed people to finish, provided them with ample time to think, and tolerated pauses. (5) I was sensitive, listened attentively to what was said and how it was said, and was empathetic in dealing with each interviewee. (6) I was open, responded to what was important to the interviewee, and was flexible. I used a steering strategy to know what she wanted to find out. (7) I was critical and was prepared to challenge what was said to thwart inconsistencies in interviewees’ replies. (9) For the most part, I remembered what was said and related it to what had previously been mentioned. I interpreted, clarified, and extended the meanings of interviewees’ statements, without imposing meaning on them. (10) I utilized an appropriate sequence of questions to get the respondent involved in the interview as soon as possible.

Just as conversations may vary in duration, number of topics, depth, and structure; so the initial and follow-up interviews varied in this study. As the researcher, there were a number of interview options at my disposal that included formal interviews, informal interviews, questionnaires, and life history interviews. In each of these, the pattern of interaction and the amount of material covered varied. Furthermore, I did not always initiate these exchanges; rather, other persons in the field, friends, or acquaintances initiated conversations with me. In each instance, there was the opportunity for me to learn more about how the actors in the setting perceived their environment, understood their actions, and anticipated the views and behaviors of others. Since my interest was in learning more about what these individuals believe, the in-depth
interviews or the development of life-history interviews seemed to be the most appropriate. The choice among these strategies was governed by my decisions regarding what I already know, what I have yet to learn, from whom I could learn, and how best to gain the information. With this variability and flexibility, however, came the necessity to insure the appropriate meld between approach and need.

Qualitative interviewing differs from interviewing in quantitative research in a number of ways. The approach tends to be much less structured in qualitative research and there is an emphasis on greater generality in the formulation of initial research ideas and on interviewees’ own perspectives. In qualitative interviewing, there is much greater interest in the interviewee’s point of view and ‘rambling’ or going off at tangents is often encouraged—it gives insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important. Interviewers can depart significantly from any schedule or guide that is being used. They can ask new questions that follow up interviewees’ replies and can vary the order of questions and even the wording of questions. As a result, qualitative interviewing tends to be flexible, responding to the direction in which interviewees take the interview and perhaps adjusting the emphases in the research as a result of significant issues that emerge in the course of interviews. In qualitative interviewing, the researcher wants rich, detailed answers, so the interviewee may be interviewed on more than one occasion. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply. Questions may not follow on exactly in the way outlined on the schedule, and questions that are not included in the guide may be asked as they enhance information offered by interviewees. Generally, all of the questions were asked and a similar wording was used from interviewee to interviewee. The interview process was flexible, and the
emphasis was on how the interviewee framed and understood issues and events—that is, what the interviewee viewed as important in explaining and understanding events, patterns, and forms of behavior.

**Before the interview.** There were some practical details to attend to before each interview. As the interviewer, I needed to make sure I was familiar with the setting in which the interviewee worked to help me understand what she was saying in the interviewee’s own terms. As the interviewer, I secured a high-quality Sony digital recorder with a strong microphone. This procedure was important to complete the detailed analysis required in qualitative research and to ensure that the interviewees’ answers were captured in their own terms. As the interviewer, I took measures to ensure that each interview took place in a setting that was quiet and private, so there was no or little outside noise that might affect the quality of the tape recording and so the interviewee did not have to worry about being overheard. This protocol was more challenging for the interviews that were conducted in settings outside of the participant’s office.

**During the interview.** During qualitative interviews, the kinds of questions asked are highly variable. Kvale (1996) has suggested nine different kinds of questions. Most interviews contain virtually all of them, although interviews that rely on lists of topics are likely to follow a somewhat looser format. I used Kvale’s (1996) nine types of questions that included: (1) Introducing questions that were used to get the interview started and to encourage the interviewee to speak freely; (2) Follow-up questions that were used to extend the interviewee's answers to previous questions; (3) Probing questions that allowed me to probe the content of the interviewee's answers but without giving away which parts of the answers are to be taken into account; (4) Specifying questions that allowed me to gain further information about a particular
aspect of the interviewee's answer; (5) Direct questions that were often used in the later parts of
the interview; (6) Indirect questions that afforded me an opportunity to be projective; (7)
Structuring questions that allowed me to ensure that those areas relevant to the research
questions were covered during the course of the interview; (8) Silence that was a useful tool in
furthering the interview because it allowed me a chance to reflect on what had been discussed;
and (9) Interpreting questions that allowed me an opportunity to interpret a question, rephrase an
answer, or send it back to the interviewee in an attempt to clarify an answer. During each
interview, I asked one question at a time, attempted to remain as neutral as possible, and
encouraged responses whenever necessary. I was careful about my appearance when I took
notes, provided transitions between major topics, and took precautions against losing control of
the interview.

One of the main ingredients of these interviews was simply listening—being very
attentive to what the interviewee was saying or even not saying. It meant that I was active
without being too intrusive—a difficult balance. But it also meant that, just because the interview
was being tape recorded, I did not assume a lackadaisical approach. In fact, I tried to remain very
attuned and responsive to what the interviewee was saying and doing. This was important
because body language and nonverbal gestures typically indicated that the interviewee was
becoming uneasy or anxious about a line of questioning. I attempted to be an ethically sensitive
interviewer by not placing undue pressure on the interviewee and by cutting short the line of
questioning when it was clearly a source of concern. During the interview, I asked questions
regarding the interviewee's values, beliefs, behaviors, formal and informal roles, relationships,
places and locales, and emotions, encounters, and stories. As I progressed through several of the
interviews during the months of November and December, I became cognizant of several
patterns that were emerging through the data and began to look for similarities in the responses from the remaining interviews.

**After the interview.** Following the interview, I made notes about how the interview went by commenting on whether or not the interviewee was talkative, cooperative, nervous, well-dressed, etc.; where the interview took place; other feelings about the interview; and details about the setting. As soon as possible after each interview, I verified that the digital tape recorder worked properly throughout the interview and recorded any observations made during the interview. Additionally, I prepared notes during each interview in case the digital recorder malfunctioned.

While I used a consistent set of fairly structured questions for the interviews, the interviews resulted in largely semi-structured or unstructured conversations as the discussions were shaped by the participants’ responses. I selected the interview technique for the collection of my data to fulfill four purposes: (1) to obtain current constructions of individuals, (2) to hear reconstructions of past experiences, (3) to hear future projections, and (4) to verify information from other sources (Grogan, 1996). To this end, I approached each in-depth interview from the point of view of a researcher who is unsure about exactly what needs to be known in order to answer the research questions. In all cases, I used the first few minutes to exchange pleasantries and personal stories and to establish rapport before the interviews ensued. Throughout the interviews, I encouraged each participant to lead me in the discussion by relying on each participant’s sense of where she would like to go with the interview, according to her individual set of professional and personal experiences. I encouraged the participants to provide as many details and anecdotes as possible to enrich the data. The four research questions and follow-up questions permitted the participants to clarify their responses and allowed them to elaborate on
their initial responses. After they had received the typewritten transcripts, several women responded with comments indicating that they wanted additional assurance that their responses would remain confidential and that no information would be shared that could expose their identities. Thus, one might reasonably conclude that these women respectfully guard their professional relationships with others. While their confidential comments and shared stories pertaining to their career pathways helped to paint an accurate portrait of these women, they still valued their anonymity in this study.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data analysis in qualitative research often refers to the procedures of sorting, summarizing, analyzing, and interpreting the observations that are made on subjects in a research study, and they can range from simple to complex classifications (Sowell & Casey, 1982). Schreiber & Asner-Self (2011) reference the work of Creswell (1998) to indicate that once the interviews are transcribed, the researcher begins with the identification of statements that relate to the phenomenon of interest by separating relevant and irrelevant data. Lichtman (2010) concurs that the goal of qualitative analysis is to take a large amount of data and interact with it in such a manner that the researcher can make sense of the data that has been gathered through a process known as *The Three Cs: Coding, Categorizing, and Identifying Concepts*. Data analysis is best conducted concurrently with data collection to allow the researcher to refine categories, to discover patterns, and to determine the themes that emerged from the data that represented answers to the research questions (Grace & Ajjawi, 2010). True data analysis requires reflexivity on the part of researchers to acknowledge their preconceived ideas and prejudices, long commitment with the data, and constant comparison of the data to derive emerging themes that richly describe the phenomenon (Grace & Ajjawi, 2010). Creswell (2003) recommends that researchers approach data analysis and representation using several steps. As the researcher, my
first step consisted of data managing during which I organized and prepared the data for analysis. The second step included reading during which I read through the text, made margin notes, and formed initial codes. In the next step, I began to develop a detailed analysis using a coding process to organize the material into chunks or segments of text before labeling the categories that emerged. Following this step, I used a coding process to classify the data and to generate a description of the setting or participants as well as categories or themes for analysis. During this process, I developed significant statements, and grouped the statements into meaningful units. Next, I interpreted the data and advanced how the description and themes were represented in the qualitative narrative. Finally, I represented and visualized the data in a large spreadsheet depicted in Appendix C. This document was invaluable in that it allowed me to better interpret the meaning of the data and to present narration of the essence of the experience.

**Modes of Analysis**

There are two important considerations in the analysis of qualitative data. First, analysis occurs concurrently with and subsequent to data collection; and second, there are a variety of ways in which the analysis can be conducted and the frameworks within which the data can be organized (Rist, 1982). To state that data analysis occurs concurrently with data collection is only to acknowledge that research is not simply the methodical collection of predefined data from predefined sets of respondents. Rather, while the researcher is in the field, there is a constant tension between collection and analysis, or a constant assessment of what is known versus what is to be learned. This continual process of making judgments on-site as to strategies of collection, focus for study, and line of inquiry hinders the replicability of this qualitative study. Further, this constant interaction of data collection and analysis prevents the researcher from absolutely stating the sequence for either.
Rist (1982) depicts no fewer than seven analytic frameworks available for the organization and presentation of qualitative data. They are: (1) Role analysis, (2) Network analysis, (3) Natural history, (4) Thematic analysis, (5) Resource allocation, (6) Ritual and symbolism, and (7) Critical incidents. Clearly, the best analytic framework available for the organization and presentation of the qualitative data in this study was a combination role analysis, used in the analysis of the individual interviews, and a thematic analysis used across individuals.

**Credibility and Transferability Considerations**

In qualitative research, credibility is defined as the extent to which the data, data analysis, and conclusions are believable and trustworthy; the extent to which the themes and the patterns that emerge from the data are plausible, accurate, consistent, and meaningful; and the amount of confidence the researcher places in the statements, meanings, themes, and general description of the results and conclusions (McMillan, 2008). As I gathered data from different participants, at different times, and in different places, I looked for patterns across the interviews and in the written documents I prepared. With respect to credibility, self-report is a major concern, especially with social bias that occurs when a participant provides a response that would be valued by the researcher or society but is not a true reflection of that person’s beliefs or behaviors (Schreiber & Asner-Self, 2011).

Transferability in qualitative research is also an issue because it is difficult to achieve since the intent of this form of inquiry is not to transfer findings to individuals, sites, or places outside the scope of the study (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative researchers often use the technique of *member checks*, also known as informant feedback or respondent validation, to help improve the accuracy, credibility, and transferability of a study (Creswell, 2007). In member checks, the
interpretation or report is given to members in order to check the authenticity of the work. The comments of the members serve as a check on the viability of the interpretation (Creswell, 2007). The participants either affirm that the transcripts reflect their views, feelings, and experiences, or that they do not reflect the experiences. If the participants affirm the accuracy and completeness, then the study is said to have credibility. The overall goal of the process of member checks is to provide findings that are authentic, original, credible, and reliable (Creswell, 2007).

After I had completed the interview with each participant, I began the process of member checks by transcribing the interview and sending it to each member for her examination. By sharing all of the findings with the participants, it allowed them to critically analyze the findings and to comment on them. A few of the participants requested that some of the information in the transcript be eliminated to protect their anonymity or to maintain confidentiality. After making the revisions, the transcript was returned to the participant for additional examination and approval. Upon completion of the study, I sent a copy of the entire document to each participant for a final review. Several of the participants responded with their affirmation of the findings, conclusions, and implications in the study. One respondent reported, “I believe your study shows exactly what women are facing in the world of leadership as well as [in] the world in general. Although we have come a long way, I believe that we still have a long way to go” (Emailed response, June 19, 2014).

Limitations of the Study

At times, qualitative research has been criticized for the limited quality of work undertaken and for the limited effectiveness of its application (Cherry, 2010). McMillan (2008) concurs that there is little or no emphasis on replications in qualitative studies. This type of qualitative research often focuses on the subjects in the study that have certain characteristics,
such as age, ability, or gender. Results in this study are limited to other individuals who have the same or very similar characteristics. The researcher must ensure that the participants in the study are carefully chosen as individuals who have similar experiences, to forge a common understanding (Creswell, 2007). In this study, all the participants have served or were currently serving as superintendents of school districts in one state. Limitations also can be related to situational characteristics that included the specifics of the setting and context in which the study was conducted. This study mirrored the same dilemma in that the interviewees represented only a few school districts in one state. Limitations may be related to the nature of the methodology that was used. In this study that examined unique individuals and relationships, causal conclusions are left to the discretion of the reader.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this particular study was to investigate the career pathways of women toward the superintendency in several public school districts in Pennsylvania and to examine the perceived barriers and supports that may have influenced their attainment of this position of educational leadership. I selected to interview fifteen women who were currently serving as superintendents or who had previously served as superintendents in public school districts in Pennsylvania.

Using a qualitative approach in this study was essential because it embodied several important characteristics that aligned with this research. For example, I collected data during the months of November 2013, December 2013, and January 2014 by speaking directly with the superintendents in their natural settings; that is, most often in an office or district service center. On four occasions, I met with the participant in a restaurant or other public setting such as a library. As the researcher for this study, I obtained the data from the superintendents by spending time directly interacting and conversing with them. I made sense of all the data I recorded by organizing my audio recordings and visual notes into categories of themes. Using an inductive analysis approach, I organized the responses I garnered from the interviews with the superintendents to build a strong foundation from the patterns and themes that emerged and collaborated with the superintendents to give them an opportunity to peruse the themes and to shape the direction of the process. In a few instances, the women requested that I edit portions of the transcript to protect their identities and to exclude personal information. As a qualitative researcher, I asked questions of the participants to discover what they were experiencing, how
they interpreted their experiences, and how they themselves structured the social world in which they live. With each interview, I attempted to set aside my own preconceived definitions, ideas, and experiences regarding how the superintendents would respond and attempted to understand their answers from their perspective by focusing on the meanings expressed by the individual participants. When I perceived that their responses were unclear, I asked them to clarify their thoughts. Following an analysis of the data, I allowed the research design to emerge retrospectively. As a qualitative researcher, I assumed a critical theory perspective which allowed me to focus my concerns toward empowering women aspiring to the superintendency and to transcend the constraints placed on them. I considered my own moral, ethical, political, and emotional position about my research questions and balanced my own position with my professional practice. In this study, I gained a more comprehensive understanding of the career pathways of former and current female superintendents, the supports these female superintendents reported in attaining this position, and the barriers these women reported and the strategies they used to overcome the barriers in their career pathways to their top leadership positions through the contours of the qualitative methodology of portraiture.

The Methodology of Portraiture

In the methodology of portraiture, there were five essential features on which I focused: context, voice, relationships, emerging themes, and aesthetic whole; and I discussed these traits with each of the women.

**Context.** Addressing context, portraiture includes five types: (1) internal context, or the physical setting; (2) personal context, or the researcher’s stance and perspective; (3) historical context, or journey, culture, and ideology; (4) aesthetic context, or symbols, and metaphors; and (5) shaping context, or visible and subtle changes. In this study, the internal context represented
the physical, school or district office setting; the personal context signified my own, individual attitude and perspective; the historical context reflected the institutional culture and history and the origins and evolution of each participant’s organization and the values that shaped its structure and purpose; the aesthetic context depicted the metaphors I chose to use to symbolize the larger phenomena that emerged as significant in the narrative; and the shaping context represented the vibrant and subtle transformations in the setting and/or changes in the participants themselves.

**Voice.** In portraiture, my voice as the researcher was evident in the assumptions, preoccupations, and framework I provided to the inquiry as it was encompassed in the orientations of epistemology, ideology, and method. My voice reflected my position and perspective, as it revealed my observations and reflections, as I progressed from thin to thick description through my interpretive voice to seek meaning. Inevitably, my history, experiences, family background, cultural origins, intellectual interests, theoretical frames, and ideological fixations informed and shaped my voice. Finally, this feature denoted the presence of my voice distinguishing the participants’ voices in dialogue with them. In this study, each of the modalities of voice reflected a varied level of presence and visibility for me as the researcher/portraitist. In each modality, the chosen stance was purposeful, conscious, and attentive; yet, I attempted to guard against producing a self-portrait by overwhelming the voices or actions of the participants.

As a group, the women in this study characterized themselves as tough but also warm, inviting, and genuine. They candidly offered character traits depicting themselves as strong-willed and assertive but flexible and forgiving, too. They represented a dichotomy between being outspoken but willing to listen, and they were fiercely proud of their accomplishments.
Their advocacy for the children and families they serve emerged through their collective voice. They spoke passionately about loving and valuing children, and they confidently guided their organizations as instructional, educational, visionary leaders. During the interviews, a sense of humor emerged through their verbal and nonverbal gestures. One woman voiced her thoughts about her career pathway with a belief that, “Your life is a series of chances, and it is how you act on those chances that set the path for the next thing in your life” (Personal interview, January 17, 2014). Another participant distinguished the superintendency with the following sentiment: “It’s a job; it’s what I do, not who I am” (Personal interview, January 28, 2014).

**Relationship.** Prior to embarking on this study, I had been acquainted with six of the participants. I did not know the remaining nine participants before the interviews. However, in listening and responding to each participant, I strived to develop an understanding of her perspective by empathically putting myself in each participant’s place and witnessing her point of view, her ideas, her emotions, her fears, and her pain. I strived to be clear and honest about my expectations; to be open and responsive to each participant’s needs and desires; and to ensure that each participant knew my intents, needs, and wants for this study. In the end, I forged relationships with some of the women and deepened the relationships I previously had established with others. At the close of one interview, the participant offered, “I felt that we did build a relationship” (Personal interview, December 2, 2013).

**Emergent themes.** As the portraitist, I listened for repetitive refrains that formed a collective expression of commonly held views. I listened for resonant metaphors in the form of poetic and symbolic expressions that revealed the manner in which the participants illuminated and experienced their realities. I listened for themes expressed through institutional and cultural
rituals. I used triangulation to weave together the threads of converging data sources. Finally, I constructed themes and revealed patterns among contrasting and dissonant perspectives.

As a researcher/portraitist, I entered the setting with a perspective, a framework, and a guiding set of questions resulting from my previous experience, my reviews of the literature, and my conceptual and disciplinary knowledge. Before embarking on the collection of data, however, I engaged in an early self-reflective, self-critical exercise that increased my consciousness about the lens I brought to the research. During the process, I implemented the five components throughout the three stages of the portraiture methodology: from preparation for the site visit through the data collection to the final writing of the portrait perspectives. After each visit, in the ongoing analysis of data, I recognized the probability that emerging themes would be implemented in a new way. In the final writing of each portrait, I respected the idea that emerging themes and the interrelationships among them would be used to illuminate the structure of both the site and the portrait which represented the parts of the interpretation and their necessity to a view of the aesthetic whole. The following themes emerged from the interviews with the participants.

**Intentions.** At one point in the interviews, all of the women who participated in the study emphasized that they never had any intention of ever becoming a superintendent. One interviewee shared, “And I have to be completely honest with you. I never in a million years wanted to be a superintendent, ever” (Personal interview, November 21, 2014). More often than not, they aspired to the position because they wanted to provide leadership and stability to the district.

**Convictions and work ethic.** Simply stated, these women live by their convictions. Undoubtedly, they are hard-working individuals, and all of the women remarked about working
long hours in the role and about being available 24/7 to the communities they served. In similar statements, many of the women believed that they must work longer hours and harder than male counterparts to get the same recognition.

**Mentors and networking.** All of the women in the study spoke about the importance of mentors who guided them in their journey to the superintendency. In many instances, their mentors intervened on their behalf at key junctures in their journey. There was somebody serving as a mentor through every step of the journey who saw something in each woman that was worthy of leading. They spoke positively about giving back to the profession by serving as a mentor to other men and women. During the interviews with these female superintendents, most of the women supported the importance of developing and maintaining connections within established professional networks.

**Politics.** Clearly, politics are deeply involved in education, and vice versa, as evidenced by the women’s remarks about how the educational decision system functions and in their remarks about school boards and the search and selection process. One respondent proclaimed that “the politics of the job are what I found most distasteful, and it was enough for me to find distasteful that it’s just a role that I don’t want to do again” (Personal interview, November 18, 2013).

**Personal wellness.** The participants recognized the need to maintain a proper balance between their personal and professional lives as they ascended to the superintendency. Some of the women candidly offered examples of how their health, marriages, and families were negatively impacted along the way in their quest to the top leadership position.

**Preparation.** Most of the women echoed that all of the training never totally prepares one for this job. Instead, they value theoretical study coupled with practical experience.
**The right fit.** Several women stressed the importance of finding the right fit and to being open to geographically expanding the search for a position to find that ‘just right’ fit. Regarding her right fit, one participant added, “I wish I would have branched out and broadened my geographical horizons sooner” (Personal interview, December 2, 2013).

**Timing.** With a few exceptions, the women advised others not to enter the role too soon. Reflecting on her recent ascension to the superintendency, one participant urged others to “allow it to be sort of your capstone experience, and plan for it to be your last ten years at most. I look at these thirty-year-old superintendents and think, ‘Are you out of your mind?’” (Personal interview, January 14, 2014). Furthermore, they encouraged aspiring individuals to consider the concept of longevity in the position, especially in light of the new guideline for superintendent contracts that imposes a limit of three years.

**Professional courage.** One woman coined the phrase “professional courage” to guide her practice in always asking if a decision is in the best interests of students. She offered, “You have to have that professional courage to do the right thing for kids, even though you might take some backlash for that. And the backlash that you get eventually comes out in the wash. If you are doing things to benefit yourself, the backlash isn’t going away. People eventually see right through you, and they should” (Personal interview, January 24, 2014). Overwhelmingly, all of the women concurred that their number one priority is educating students.

**Weather-related decisions.** Of all the decisions these women face each day, they agreed that weather-related responsibilities are some of the most challenging they face. All of these women agreed that one of the worst responsibilities of their position is to decide how to react in the event of inclement weather, because their decisions always seem to draw ire from some individuals or groups. One participant explained, “Now, I didn’t call off school and everybody
else called off school. In those days, I thought you don’t have to follow the herd just because the herd goes out. Well, I remember the local newspaper wrote a scathing article . . . about that idiot (me), without saying those words” (Personal interview, November 10, 2013).

**Accountability.** Decidedly, one of the strongest themes addressed the idea of accountability. All of the women spoke about the intense pressures associated with the culture of accountability in education, and they referenced the impact on educator effectiveness. There is an expectation that the superintendent must be knowledgeable about all aspects of the organization, be prepared to work in a collaborative spirit, and be willing and able to lead the way with initiatives that bring everyone together to boost student achievement and learning.

**Aesthetic whole.** In this study, I attempted to develop the aesthetic whole by attending to the four dimensions of conception, structure, form, and coherence. I sought to identify the overarching vision by drawing emergent themes through the flow of perspectives and perceptions from the participants. Just as conception expressed the overarching vision of the aesthetic whole, the structure represented the themes that provided a frame, stability, and organization for the narrative. As I built the structure, I was responsive to the emergence of the larger pattern. For me, as the researcher/portraitist, form was the texture of intellect, emotion, and aesthetics that supported, illuminated, and animated the structural elements. From the stories, examples, illustrations, illusions, and ironies offered by the participants, I attempted to give life and movement to the story, to provide complexity and nuance to the text, and to offer the reader opportunities to identify with the participants. Finally, I strived to develop coherence by representing an orderly, logical, and aesthetically consistent relationship of all the parts of the story.
In creating the aesthetic whole that considered the elements of conception, structure, form, and coherence, I endeavored to capture insight and emotion and to develop a narrative that informed, inspired, and reciprocated the gift of the final portrait. What emerged is a picture of fifteen women who were much more similar than they were diverse. Truly, the women brought a very different perspective to the superintendency. These women are collaborators, and they like things to be fair and equitable for all. As an aesthetic whole, these women believe that the nature of a superintendent’s work cannot be taught in a classroom; rather, they acknowledge that they must pull from their experiences and rely on their personalities to be successful. They vehemently support the need to make sound, reasonable decisions because they know they are in a position to make a difference and because they can accomplish the work at least as well as, if not better than, someone else. Through their entire careers, they have been about what’s best for students. Collectively, these individuals are a classy group of women!

**Career Pathways**

The first research question presented in Chapter 1 provides the structure for a rich discussion of the findings.

1. **What are the important experiences in the career pathways of former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania, and why are they essential?**

The career pathways of the women in this study were influenced by a multitude of factors that included, but were not limited to, demographic characteristics such as age, family concerns and mobility, gender, sexism, mentors, networks; educational preparedness; and job cluster or path. As depicted in Table 2, the women’s career pathways to the superintendency were varied. Approximately six of the women who participated in the study began their careers as elementary teachers. One participant began as a K-12 music teacher, one began as a math and science
teacher at the middle school level, one began as a reading specialist at the elementary level, one
began as a science teacher at the high school level, and one began as a K-12 teacher in an
alternative education setting. In a nontraditional pattern, four of the women began their careers
in the private sector in business-related positions. As they continued through the positions in
their careers, ten of the women entered the top position in a district through the roles of director
of curriculum and/or assistant superintendent. Three women acquired the superintendency
directly from the role of high school principal. Only one woman entered the superintendency
directly from the role of elementary principal. In a nontraditional approach, one woman
ascended to the superintendency through the role of business manager. The path to the
superintendency for most of these women followed the research in that it progressed through one
of two major channels and was indicative of the size of the district: (1) from the principalship
directly to the superintendency (in smaller districts), or (2) from the principalship to central
office administration to the superintendency (in larger districts). A candidate’s level of
experience and length of time spent in each administrative position were important. In
opposition to the research, secondary administrative experience seemed to be viewed as equally
lucrative as elementary administrative experience.
## Table 2

### Career Pathways of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pathway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-12 Music – High School Principal – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Teacher – Elementary Principal – Director of Curriculum/Assistant Superintendent – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Teacher – Elementary Principal/Director of Curriculum – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Math/Science Teacher – High School Assistant Principal – High School Principal – Elementary Principal – Assistant Superintendent – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Specialist – Elementary Principal – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Teacher – Elementary Counselor – Middle School Assistant Principal – Elementary Principal/Director of Curriculum/Special Education/Title I – IU Educational Consultant – Assistant Superintendent – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Learning Support Teacher – Elementary Principal/Supervisor of Special Education – IU Teacher – Assistant Superintendent - Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountant in the Private Sector – Business Manager – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Teacher – K-12 Assistant Principal – High School Principal – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Teacher/Gifted Education – Middle School Mathematics Teacher – Middle School Principal – High School Principal – Assistant Superintendent – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary Teacher – Reading Specialist – Reading Supervisor – Elementary Principal – Assistant Superintendent – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor in the Private Sector – Middle School Guidance Counselor – High School Guidance Counselor – High School Principal – Acting Superintendent – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Teacher – Elementary Principal/Title I Coordinator – Assistant Superintendent – Superintendent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-12 Alternative Education Teacher – Elementary/IST Teacher – Elementary Assistant Principal – Director of Elementary Curriculum – Assistant Superintendent - Superintendent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Influential Factors

Typically, the most commonly held positions by females were district-level positions including director, coordinator, or supervisor or building-level positions such as elementary school teacher and elementary school principal. In this study, higher percentages of females were found at the elementary principal level than at the secondary level. Similar to the findings by Glass (2000), approximately 33% of all the female superintendents in the study possessed secondary administrative background.

Table 3 depicts the number of years these female superintendents spent in each of their roles. Inconsistent with the literature, these women did not report that prior experience as a high school principal was more highly valued than was elementary principalship experience. Prior to the superintendency, nine of the women served as an assistant to the superintendent or as an assistant superintendent. Collectively, this group of women spent 439.5 years working in the public and/or private sector, with an average of 29.3 years building their careers.

Beyond recruitment, only a few of the women concurred with the research that suggests that the search and selection process often reinforces more male career pathways to the superintendency such as consultants’ surveys depicting previous positions, size and type of school or district, and number of years in each position. Similarly, these same women agreed that these practices continued to focus on the centrality of previous positions and deflected attention from leadership skills acquired through diversity of administrative roles.
Table 3

Participant Years in Positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years in the Private Sector</th>
<th>Years as a Teacher</th>
<th>Years as an Assistant Principal</th>
<th>Years as an Assistant Principal</th>
<th>Years as a Principal</th>
<th>Years as a Director of Curriculum/ Special Education/ Federal Programs</th>
<th>Years as a Business Manager</th>
<th>Years as an Assistant Super.</th>
<th>Years as a Super.</th>
<th>Total Years in Public Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Participant Years</td>
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<td></td>
<td>439.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average Participant Years</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the interviews, we also discussed the size of the district each of the women represented. Table 4 depicts the K-12 enrollments of the districts for which the women were leaders. The enrollments ranged in size from 820 to 5,300 students, with a median enrollment of 1,130 students.
Table 4
K-12 District Enrollments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of District</th>
<th>800-899</th>
<th>900-999</th>
<th>1,000-1,999</th>
<th>2,000-2,499</th>
<th>2,500-2,999</th>
<th>3,000-5,000+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Participants</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In practice, each of these women played many roles and traveled many winding roads in her journey to the top leadership position in one or more school districts. Thus, there is no one-size-fits-all career pathway to follow. Generally, the career paths of these superintendents were varied, and they began in a classroom or an office. Rarely were they planned; instead, they developed over time and allowed the participants an opportunity to develop necessary personal and professional skills and abilities. Along their pathways, the women were nurtured by one or more mentors and were often supported by a network of colleagues focused on leadership. For each of these women, her career pathway provided a vehicle for a fulfilling professional life.

Career Barriers

Building on the momentum from the first question, the second research question presented in Chapter 1 also provides the structure for a rich discussion of the findings regarding perceived barriers to ascension to the superintendency.

2. **What do former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania perceive as the barriers they faced in their ascension to the superintendency, and what are the strategies they employed to overcome these barriers?**

All but three of these practicing or retired female public school superintendents acknowledged that barriers existed when they were accessing and entering this top leadership position. They also confirmed that the role of superintendent is multifaceted and that challenges
abound everywhere. Yet, these female school superintendents confirmed that being a woman increased the difficulty of successfully overcoming barriers and meeting these challenges. Most of the women reported that they had to work longer and harder to get the same recognition as their male counterparts. Several barriers hindered these women’s entrance into the superintendency including discriminatory practices used in hiring and promoting women, bias in the search process, male-dominated professional networks, and the conflict between personal and professional responsibilities; and these barriers can be divided into two broad categories of internal and external barriers.

**Internal/Intrapersonal Barriers**

This study identified a number of internal or intrapersonal barriers that the women faced in aspiring to the superintendency that contributes to the problem of underrepresentation. Internal or intrapersonal barriers typically included issues of motivation, self-efficacy, role conflict, and gender-specific attitudes. The internal or intrapersonal barrier of role conflict related to making a choice between the roles of wife-mother and career woman that can create great anxiety given the tremendous time that each takes was not identified in this study. Gender-specific barriers identified in the study included lack of aggressiveness; waiting to be selected, discovered, persuaded, or asked to accept the position; reluctance to take risks; and lack of self-confidence.

In this study, an internal or intrapersonal barrier for one participant included her personal and/or family situation in which her spouse did not support her ambitions. She remarked, “I think the key to the family piece is your partner and how he views your role and how important he views that role” (Personal interview, January 17, 2014). For another participant, internal or intrapersonal barriers included ascending to the superintendency at a very young age and being a
female in a rural school district. She remarked, “I think in a rural area, you are still climbing that ladder that, unfortunately, hits up against the ‘glass ceiling’ because you are a woman” (Personal interview, November 21, 2013). Another participant reported, “I still feel in many situations based on past experience, as females we experience the ‘glass ceiling’ in this profession. Overall, it is still a male-dominated profession” (Personal interview, December 2, 2013). Another internal barrier for a few of the women constituted uncertainty about leaving a current position. Finally, the expectation for ‘situational toughness’ in the position was a worry for at least one woman who admitted, “I wear my heart on my sleeve” (Personal interview, January 24, 2014).

**External Barriers**

Many of the women in the study reported the existence of external barriers that were organizational in nature. In addition to the structure of traditional bureaucratic organizations, several other factors including age, cultural stereotyping, gender bias, the search and selection process, and other women emerged as additional external barriers obstructing women from this educational leadership position.

**Age.** As depicted in Table 5, the current ages of the women who participated in this study ranged from 40 to 66 years of age. Disregarding the two outliers, the majority of the women in the study ranged in age from 46-60.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Ranges</th>
<th>35-40</th>
<th>41-45</th>
<th>46-50</th>
<th>51-55</th>
<th>56-60</th>
<th>61+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Participants</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

**Ages of Participants**
For only a few women, these statistics support the notion that the age norms associated with the steps in women’s careers conflict with their roles. These women reported that they decided to delay their career moves in order to minimize the conflicts associated with balancing work and family responsibilities. With the exception of two participants, the women identified that when they entered the superintendency, they were embarking on the end of their careers. These women did not maintain a perspective on age that was particularly disadvantageous to them; that is, although they were older when they applied for their first superintendency, they did not report that overt or subtle age discrimination significantly affected them. Only two of the women ascended to the superintendency before 40 years of age, and the average age for these women entering their first superintendency was 45-50 years of age.

**Cultural stereotyping.** Cultural stereotyping exists when a fixed impression, which may have little basis in fact, is nevertheless perpetuated by persons unwilling to look more deeply into the matter. This means that individuals have opinions about others before they have ever met them. Most of the women in this study did not report that they had directly experienced cultural stereotyping. That is, they did not perceive that others stereotyped them as leaders who lacked the skills necessary to ascend to the position due to their gender. Similarly, they failed to affirm that the traditional public perceptions of femininity and of women as effective leaders were problematic for them. They did perceive, however, that they had to have more credentials, be better prepared, and be more knowledgeable than their male counterparts, if they wanted to be seen as educational leaders. At least one of the participants reasoned that in the conflict between the social construction of the role of public school superintendent and the social construction of femininity, society views the role of superintendent to be assumed by a more traditional, masculine individual who embodies corresponding leadership traits such as assertiveness and
hierarchical, controlling behaviors. Referencing a situation involving one of her professional colleagues, one interviewee offered that “because she was a woman, I can guarantee you that she was already set up for failure as a woman walking into the superintendency” (Personal interview, January 17, 2014). Furthermore, one female leader stated that when women leaders adopt a male behavior such as assertiveness, it is not valued. Quoting an excerpt from a book she had read during her graduate coursework, another participant remarked that “a strong woman equals ‘bitch’; a strong man equals success” (Personal interview, November 21, 2013). Several of the women commented about the existence of a societal view that indicates that female competencies are more closely aligned with the areas of teaching, learning, and curriculum; while more masculine competencies are more closely aligned with the areas of fiscal management, personnel, and other non-instructional issues. However, only one of the women mentioned an idea that her experiences in the classroom, as well as her formal and informal training, age, and other gender issues, created the impression that she lacked the proper leadership style exhibited by the familiar, accepted masculine persona. Most of the women agreed that the male stereotype of leadership emphasizes attributes such as competitiveness, focus, control, and ambition; while the female stereotype emphasizes attributes such as cooperation, acceptance, ethics, and perception of whole. Yet, most of these women maintained that they had been afforded equal opportunities to secure equitable roles and responsibilities in their careers.

**Gender bias.** Several of the women identified gender bias as a barrier, but the remaining women reported that gender bias was not a factor or a barrier for them and that being a female never stopped them from attaining the superintendency. One participant suggested that “you have to just show that you have the same skills, knowledge, [and] background; make the same
decisions; and present yourself as a man can” (Personal interview, November 18, 2013).

Another participant remarked, “It is said that this is a man’s world, and men have dominated the administrative world in education for so long. [Yet,] with the rise in women’s participation in administration at the superintendent’s level has come a moving of the bar with respect to accountability and results” (Email interview response, November 20, 2013). Another woman added that some of the toughest, strongest, and most powerful leaders in her community were women. The women who stated that gender bias was a barrier for them also remarked that they believed that a double standard still exists today. As one respondent noted, the search consultants actually shared with her that the district did not want to hire a woman for the superintendency. Still, some examples are more subtle than others, and one woman remarked that men often monopolize conversations in meetings, especially where good ol’ boys networks thrive. A few women offered that there may not be gender barriers to getting the job, but there are definite challenges to proving yourself in the job. One woman lamented that “being treated like a histrionic woman is fairly common. When a man interviews for a superintendency, some of the perception is taken just on a handshake and a slap on the back” (Personal interview, November 21, 2013). Most of the women shared their beliefs that men have dominated the world of administration for a long time. The veteran female participants discussed the existence of a lot of prejudice in the early years, and one participant proudly exclaimed that trends have improved, and “It’s because people like me paved the way” for other women to follow (Personal interview, November 10, 2013).

**Search and selection process.** Many of the women who participated in this study reported that they perceived the practices of the local school boards, or the protocols of the professional search firms they hired, or the procedures used by the local intermediate units to be
barriers to the superintendency. The women spoke at length about changing school board
dynamics, hiring practices involving internal versus external candidates, and mismatched
expectations that represented barriers to their ascension to the superintendency. A few of the
women reported that they believed that the negative perceptions of school board members
toward women as managers was a barrier in the hiring process. They further identified these
entities as the gatekeepers to the superintendency in that they played a significant role in whether
or not they even were considered by a school board because they controlled the selection process
through predetermined criteria. One woman remarked that she was repeatedly denied access to
several superintendencies by similar selection processes that were conducted by the same
individual with whom she did not share a professional relationship. The conflict became so
pronounced that she finally decided to respond to inquiring districts, “If [he] runs the search, I
can guarantee you that I will not be applying [because] I can’t keep going through that with him”
(Personal interview, December 2, 2013). One participant shared that she perceived that she was
not selected as the successful candidate because some “community members commented
publicly that I was a ‘silver spoon princess’” (Personal interview, November 12, 2013). She
further explained that she obtained one interview for the position of superintendent, only to be
denied because she perceived that the school district was simply not ready to hire a female
superintendent. Ultimately, she was hired as the superintendent of another district by a school
board comprised totally of white males.

Another pattern that emerged was nearly every woman remarked about the importance of
paying close attention to the intangibles described as the “chemistry” with the interviewers and
the “fit” with the district and community. Only one of the participants mentioned another
intangible regarding perceived socioeconomic status and class, while a few of the women
remarked about intangibles that included the ability to communicate with savvy stakeholders, business owners, students, faculty, staff, and the media. In their interviews, several women reinforced the need to examine how informal systems of connections can influence access to the superintendency, by exploring the ways that common consultant practices shape the perspectives of school board members; by analyzing the power and influence of individuals such as executive directors of intermediate units involved in the process; and by inspecting the issues of dissensus, confidentiality, and communications during the search and selection process. Generally, these women did not experience any perceived gender bias in the selection process such as expressions of negative preconceived expectations and prejudicial questions in screening or interviewing situations. However, the women overwhelmingly concurred that interim superintendents play a significant role in both directly and indirectly shaping superintendent search and selection processes; and they reported that no females served as interims during their selection process.

They wholeheartedly agreed that when consultant searches yield no one whom the board finds acceptable, interim superintendents sometimes make contacts of their own and recruit additional candidates for the board to consider and hire, or they serve the board by reading through the applications and selecting the strongest candidates for consideration. One woman spoke openly about the influence of an interim superintendent in her selection process. At first, she did not perceive that he favored her status as a viable candidate. However, after his presence in her interview, she reported that he developed an understanding of her skills and changed his mind to endorse her. She remarked that “[He] tried to stay out of it, as an interim superintendent would, and let the board decide. I have to tell you, by the end of the interview process, he was way on my side. He said, “You’re the perfect person for this job” (Personal interview, January 14, 2014).
Other women. Several women honestly responded that more often than not, women were the obstacles to their successful ascension to the superintendency, not the men, through their mean, caddy, jealous behaviors. One participant remarked that “females are worse than the males [because] they resent you” (Personal interview, November 10, 2013). In our conversation, another woman remarked that “it was women who were my obstacles, not men. It was women. So, it’s the women who are the caddy ones. But we have more women in education as teachers, so it makes sense” (Personal interview, January 24, 2014). Even after acquiring the position, one woman reflected that “because as a woman superintendent, you are challenged much more by female principals than you are by males” (Personal interview, November 21, 2013).

Career Supports

After discussing career pathways and barriers to ascension to the superintendency, the third research question presented in Chapter 1 also provides the structure for a rich discussion of the findings regarding supports for these women.

3. What supports do these former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania report in attaining this position, and why are they important?

All of these practicing or retired female public school superintendents eagerly acknowledged that supports existed when they were accessing and entering this top leadership position. The supports for these women can be categorized according to the following areas: role models and mentors; marriage and family; personal motivation; professional and personal preparedness; and professional organizations, affiliations, and networks.

Role models and mentors. While the research suggests that an additional barrier for women who aspire to the superintendency may be the lack of female role models and mentors, the findings in this study differed. Nearly all of the participants reported having both male and
female mentors who encouraged them along their journeys. These women reported that mentoring served as a powerful influence on their success. Furthermore, they remarked that having one or more mentors was essential, because each individual brought his or her own strengths and informative experiences to the relationship. One participant noted, “My journey included supports from former administrators, teachers, and professors [who] saw something in me that was worthy of leading. I have often found myself in a position of leadership from a young person on. If there was a job to do, I did it. My colleagues also recognized my leadership skill set and supported me” (Emailed response, November 19, 2013). Another participant spoke genuinely about her first mentor. “My influential role models, first and foremost, would have been [a gentleman I knew]. Again, my relationship with him was like ‘Tuesdays with Morrie.’ Every Saturday we had lunch, and he continued to encourage me and support me to go through with my degree. He was a smart man, a wise man, and he knew the importance of education and being able to feel some success on a career path. So, I would say he was my first, at least professional, mentor” (Personal interview, January 28, 2014). Another participant remarked, “My mentor taught me that you have to know when to wear your lace gloves and when to take them off and put on the iron gloves” (Personal interview, January 28, 2014). Distinguishing between male and female mentorship, one interviewee remarked, “Because truly when I really reflect back on the role models and the mentoring, I have to tell you that I got more support from my male colleagues then I ever did women. Women are brutal to each other. They are just brutal [by being] cutthroat, backstabbing, [and by] withholding information” (Personal interview, January 14, 2014).

Although most of the women in the study began their administrative careers later in life, they revealed that it was not difficult to find a mentor. In fact, they reported that their own
sponsors were rooted in previously developed relationships with individuals who had served as
mentors and included parents, family members, colleagues, esteemed superintendents in other
school districts, or successful retired superintendents who possessed solid expertise, valuable
experience, and keen insight. One interviewee offered, “. . . if you look at my mother, every
week my mother and I walked to the library holding hands to get new books. I think she instilled
[in me] that love for learning” (Personal interview, January 28, 2014). These women also
reported that while family members had a vested interest in their success and frequently served
as sponsors, their mentors outside of the family had an interest primarily because they
recognized their potential and demonstrated a willingness to work with them to provide insight,
advocacy, and support to their welfare and success.

All of these women spoke candidly and passionately about the key role their mentors
played in their quest for the superintendency. They described amazing relationships with
individuals who shared similar values and goals and who possessed the skills and knowledge
they needed to achieve their goals. In many but not all cases, the nature of the mentoring
relationship was hierarchical; that is, the mentor was in the position of power based on his or her
knowledge, access, or position. In other situations, the mentor was a subordinate or a
professional colleague in the same position. One participant noted, “I would say in my role as a
district leader . . ., I would say my biggest influence would be our guidance counselor who works
here. When I came to work here, she was someone who I guess I kind of buddied up with. She’s
been that support behind me through a lot of my career” (Personal interview, November 21,
2013).

For each of the women, the process of mentoring helped her learn the skills needed to be
successful and developed her ability to become a more reflective administrator and instructional
leader. Overwhelmingly, the women reported that mentoring was probably one of the most important aspects of socialization and was particularly relevant in helping them move into higher levels of school leadership. Although a low number of female superintendents continues to persist, the women in this study did not report that there was a lack of female role models for them. Certainly, aspiring women need role models like themselves who will encourage and support them through their ascension to the superintendency, but these women garnered strength in the relationships they forged with both their male and female mentors. In three instances, the women reported engaging in a mentoring relationship with the same individual. One woman commented, “I see [her] really as an epitome of sustained leadership, definitely respected” (Personal interview, November 18, 2013). In her comments, another woman remarked, “I liked the way she conducted herself. She shook hands with everyone, she was very warm and friendly, she introduced herself. And I remember the first time I met her thinking, gee, I really like that, [and] I think I’m going to start doing that the way she does that” (Telephone interview, November 25, 2013). Still another participant referenced her respect for this mentor who “led such a charge for making sure that you are championing public education, but she did it through PASA and AASA. [After] watching that and listening to her, I did the same thing” (Personal interview, January 17, 2014).

In this study, four of the women listed other female superintendents who patiently and graciously encouraged them, and three of the women listed the same female superintendent. Four of the women listed a charismatic male superintendent who served as their mentor, and two of the women listed the same male superintendent. Two of the women listed a network of superintendents in the county and/or state, and one woman listed business managers as her mentors. Some of the women listed principals and/or co-workers as their mentors. Three of the
women listed great male and female mentors in elementary school, high school, and college. A few listed their board presidents, board members, or secretary. One listed a male supervisor from the private sector. Almost all of the women cited family members as mentors, and they included their spouses, in-laws, parents, grandparents, and aunts in that group. Reflecting on her supports, one participant acknowledged, “I can’t tell you how many good, strong women I have had supporting me all of my life” (Personal interview, December 12, 2013).

Marriage and family. During the interviews, the topics of marriage and family arose. While no clear patterns emerged, most of the women cited these areas as supports. Only one woman was single, eight were married, three were divorced, and three were remarried. Of the fifteen participants, six had no children, two had one child, five had two children, and two had three or four children. Despite these statistics, most of the women spoke passionately about embracing all of the children in their districts as their own. One woman even shared a story about how she and her husband served as unofficial foster parents for some children in her district who needed a nurturing, caring, structured environment. A few of the women who participated in the study cited some examples of continued conflict that they, as married women, experienced between home and career responsibilities and flexibility in moving to new locations. One interviewee reported, “In terms of pursuing my doctorate, I delayed pursuing my doctorate until [my daughter] entered high school. While she was in high school, I was taking classes. That influenced that. I didn’t really become a principal until she was out of elementary school. So, my family did impact when I chose to make moves” (Personal interview, January 14, 2014). At least three women cited that they were not as mobile as their male peers because of family situations that included their spouses’ jobs. Yet, more than half of the women (eight) reported that mobility was not a problem and they clarified that their spouse’s jobs and their excellent support
systems were factors that afforded them opportunities for mobility. The remaining seven women listed mobility as a barrier, and they cited being place bound due to family responsibilities as caregivers for their children or parents as a factor, and they shared stories about traveling up to two hours in one direction to their jobs to avoid moving their families. One participant shared, “At that point in time, it became financial because I was commuting four hours a day for three years . . . to do that job” (Personal interview, November 12, 2013).

As with most traditional families in the country, some of these women had assumed the primary responsibility for the rearing of their child(ren); but they did not appear to believe that employers perceived any conflicts between their child-rearing responsibilities and their job responsibilities. There was absolutely no evidence to suggest that any parenting issues were ever addressed with these women during their interviewing process. Characteristic of today’s working women, several of the participants reported that they had experienced clearly identified self-imposed tensions and ill feelings that resulted from the conflicts that arose between the roles of caregiver and career woman and concerns about their failure in the roles of wife and mother due to the difficulty in maintaining relationships and managing chores. During one interview, the participant reminisced about the past and offered, “I think [my husband] felt solely responsible for our children. The one thing I will never forget, and this goes back to the female thing, my son was in kindergarten and my son was very socially backward. It was their Christmas play, and I had a board meeting that night. I kept telling him I’m going to try to be there because I thought if I get out early enough, I will go down. I lived about 15 minutes from there, because I didn’t live in this district. I said, ‘I’ll try my very best to be there.’ And of course, I wasn’t. He just stood there in front of everybody and just balled his eyes out. My husband videotaped it, and he was so upset that I wasn’t there. And that just kills me every time I
think about that” (Personal interview, November 18, 2013). Moreover, at least three of the women reported that these tensions and ill feelings resulted in their divorce. They maintained that they believed the ability to advance in their careers was negatively impacted by the conflict between their professional and personal responsibilities. Furthermore, the conflict in their role responsibilities also affected their aspirations to the superintendency, especially when relocation was expected. When addressing this factor, several of the women remarked about the extensive influence of marriage and family responsibilities on their careers and the powerful effect of the support of their spouse and children on their level of success in the superintendency.

**Personal motivation.** Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors seemed to drive goal-oriented actions in these female superintendents. One of the strongest intrinsic motivational factors inherent in these women was their quest to always make decisions based on the best interests of students. They embodied the notion that motivation to perform on the job was about learning. All of these women who pursued and attained the position of superintendent maintained positive beliefs about their ability to accomplish the work and relied upon perceived beliefs of strong self-efficacy to achieve their career aspirations. Each woman’s aspirations depicted a three-dimensional concept comprised of her career commitments, or what she hoped to accomplish during her career in education; positional goals, or the types of positions in which she was interested in pursuing and the goals she hoped to realize while she served in those positions; and leadership orientations, or the leadership styles she envisioned she must practice to reach her goals. Consistently, the number one reason that these women were interested in the superintendent’s position is because they believed they could improve the teaching and learning experience for students. Struggling with the decision to accept the position, one candidate relied heavily on her faith as she made the decision to apply for the position. She remarked, “Finally,
at that point, I said Lord, I’m going to apply. If I’m supposed to be superintendent, you’ll take away the roadblocks” (Personal interview, November 7, 2013). Although the women agreed that the position is complex and challenging, the prospect of making a difference for students, staff, parents, and the community was still a noble and attractive incentive for these women.

**Professional preparedness.** During the interviews, the participants discussed their professional preparedness. They described their *formal preparedness*, defined by the advanced educational administration/leadership training received through collegiate and/or university coursework and programs; *experiential preparedness*, characterized by their career experiences, professional relationships, mentoring, etc.; and *personal preparedness*, defined by their personal attitude toward the pursuit and acquisition of the role of the superintendency.

**Formal preparedness.** Approximately six of the women in this study had completed her doctorate, representing 40.0% of the group. The women remarked about preparation programs that varied in terms of the type of institution; the curriculum; the evaluation and selection criteria; the amount of required coursework; the type of system used to deliver the curriculum (online, face-to-face, a hybrid of the two, a cohort or individual program), the cost of the program, and the credentials of the faculty who deliver the program. Collectively, these women attended established colleges and universities with excellent programs across the state and beyond that included: Bloomsburg University, Bucknell University, California University of Pennsylvania, Cedar Crest College, Duquesne University, Edinboro University, Elmira College, Gannon University, Immaculata University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Lebanon Valley College, Lehigh University, Mansfield University, Marywood University, Saint Bonaventure, Shippensburg University, The Pennsylvania State University, Thiel College, University of Delaware, University of Pittsburgh, Widener University, and Wilkes University. All of the
women attended colleges and/or universities that were located within relatively close proximity (10-120 miles) to their homes.

Understandably, the women who had completed academic preparation programs outside of the field of education experienced skepticism about the efficacy of their programs. A few of the participants in this study commented on the quality of their educational preparatory program. Consistent with the research, a few of the women in this study reported that they had experienced a general indifference toward instructional leadership, a distinction between theory and practice, and inattention to research based in practice. They did not indicate that their programs were individualized for them with unique strengths and assurances of frequent encounters with diverse perspectives, nor did they indicate that their programs had been designed to depict what worked for school leaders. Moreover, they did not mention that their preparatory programs included well-designed syllabi with intellectually challenging issues and materials and current, practical curricula that were aligned with state and national standards. A few of the women remarked that their programs helped them develop an historical perspective that enabled them to view current events as a part of a continuing saga and to develop a clear understanding of racial and gender history to deal with current issues. While there is no national curriculum for superintendent preparation, some of these women offered that their superintendent preparation programs included courses in school finance, personnel administration, organizational theory, school law, and school-community relations, as well as internships.

Overall, the participants agreed that university preparation programs should provide authentic learning opportunities for individuals aspiring to the superintendency to enable them to acquire the requisite professional knowledge and skills to be effective leaders. Most of the participants extended their thinking by suggesting that the skills and knowledge for which a
superintendent is responsible can’t be taught in a classroom. One participant remarked, “Oh, no, it has to be both [theory and practice]. It really does. You asked what the toughest part is, and maybe the toughest part is you know what the theory is and you know what you’re supposed to be doing, but [you have to consider] what you have to do to get there” (Personal interview, December 12, 2013).

**Experiential preparedness.** The participants in this study represented great complexity of experiential preparedness that included variations in career paths leading to the superintendency. As a group, their experiences contributed to the journey toward the superintendency and prepared them for the responsibilities associated with the role. Several women commented that their experiences allowed them to mature, to learn, and to grow into capable, competent, passionate educational leaders.

**Personal preparedness.** During the interviews, the women discussed the importance of personal preparedness in terms of determining the best fit by anticipating the best time for seeking the position and considering family responsibilities and mobility factors. One participant mentioned that prior to an interview, she researched the district of interest by gathering information from multiple sources; becoming familiar with the district’s demographics, finances, strategic plan, and student achievement data; preparing a list of questions to ask the school board or interview team; preparing for initial interviews with basic knowledge of the district’s plan, goals, individual schools, enrollments, and size of the community; drawing upon prior experiences to illustrate examples; determining the highest priorities of the district and the immediate expectations of the successful candidate; talking openly and candidly about their leadership values and educational beliefs; understanding the school board’s intent to seek a best fit as much as they were; listening to their “gut” feelings;
forming opinions about working with current school board members but recognizing that those faces may change; and by letting the district know immediately if they were not interested in the position.

**Professional organizations, associations, and networks.** All of the women in this study belonged to multiple professional organizations and associations because of the opportunities they provided for training, professional development, and networking. Among these women, one organization stood out as popular—PASA or the Pennsylvania Association for School Administrators, which is the state affiliate of the national organization, AASA or the American Association for School Administrators. Another popular association for ten of these women was ASCD or the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Other organizations to which these women belonged included: PASCD, PSBA, PDK, NASSP/PAESSP, PASBO, ISTE, Rotary Club and the Chamber of Commerce. Five of the women listed their strong affiliation with PARSS, the Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools, because the organization exists to promote equal opportunity for quality education for all students in every school and community in the state. With one exception, the women agreed that these organizations were extremely beneficial. As they were aspiring to the superintendency and after ascending to the position, most of the women sought opportunities that included state, national, and international conferences; state, national, and international organizations; and civic connections that combined personal growth and professional affiliations.

All of the women discussed the importance of networking with other professionals and of establishing contacts in their ascension to the superintendency. Not one of the women even mentioned the existence of a “good-ol’-girls” network in the superintendency; however, many of the women recognized the existence and influence of a “good-ol’-boys” network. During the
interviews with these female superintendents, most of the women supported the importance of developing and maintaining connections with contacts within the framework of an established network. Most of the women reported that they had established contacts and developed networks for multiple purposes and in multiple modalities including face-to-face, electronic (email, blogs, wikis, Google Docs, Skype, etc.), small groups for specific topics or emotional support, and extended networks for specific skills or visioning.

**Evolution of the Position**

In the past twenty-five years, the role of the superintendent has evolved into one of the most comprehensive positions of leadership in existence. Overwhelmingly, these women concurred that the role has become more demanding and increasingly complex. The participants warned that individuals who aspire to this top position be cognizant of the evolution of the superintendency to include the following roles conceptualizations that transcend the social, educational, and professional needs that affect practice: superintendent as teacher-scholar, business manager, states[woman]/political leader, applied social scientist, and effective communicator. The participants recommended that individuals aspiring to the superintendency be prepared to work effectively with multiple stakeholders; to be responsive to political forces; to run an efficient, effective, complex organization comprised of students, staff, and administrators; and to be committed to improving student achievement and learning from the standpoint of a position that is removed from the direct teaching and learning process. In her interview, one woman remarked that she had no regrets about her career; nonetheless, if she had it to do over, she believes she might have stayed in the classroom or in a principal's role because she is so far removed from the students.
During the interviews, one woman mentioned that she truly believed that public education is under attack as the business world is pushing to establish schools for profit. Yet, she remarked that a free public education is still one of best characteristics of America. Several women mentioned that the good ol' boys system won’t work anymore. Today, superintendents must design teams of faculty, staff, and administrators who can work together. As the last line of defense, one participant remarked, “I’m the fence, and I take the arrows first” (Personal Interview, November 7, 2013). Many of the women remarked that the position of superintendency has evolved from one of a business manager, fiscal agent, and human resource-driven manager to more of an instructional leader. There is a whole cultural change in which expectations have shifted. The position is one that has evolved from a job where the superintendent sits behind a desk and is never seen to one that is much more hands on. No longer is the superintendent in place to run a building or a business; rather, she is there to lead it so she must have leadership qualities and be able to collaborate. Ultimately, there is a need to balance both.

In the interviews with these fifteen educational leaders, the following beliefs connected all of their stories: (1) embracing servant leadership and finding satisfaction in serving others; (2) focusing clearly on making decisions that are in the best interests of students; and (3) demonstrating a strong sense of confidence and self-efficacy. The stories these women shared represented a universality of experience about their perspectives on knowing the community, knowing the school board, knowing the organization and its people, and knowing the students. These women serve as the chief advocate for every student’s best interest; treasure the past to inspire the future; and strive to become the kind of leader that others admire.
Accountability was one of the strongest themes in the interviews. All of the women agreed that accountability is a huge trend, especially with the new Educator Effectiveness System (ESS) on the horizon. Over the years, the position has evolved from having little accountability to an accountability of extremes. Today, women are more focused on the true issues of education; and the participants believed that women work harder to get accountability results. The women also advised other aspiring individuals to understand the financial details of a budget because funding has changed considerably. Many of the participants advised others to familiarize themselves with the legal side of education and to use a solicitor whenever necessary. Moreover, they agreed that the need for personnel management is huge.

Embedded in the interviews was another strong recurring theme regarding longevity in the position. That is, the women recommended that aspiring individuals should plan to spend no more than ten years in a superintendency and to treat it as a capstone experience to their careers in educational leadership. Today’s superintendent is no longer just the CEO. She is expected to serve in a multitude of roles, and it is a tough job that can drain the energy from even the most vibrant woman.

At least two women reported that they believed there has been a rise in women's participation in administration at the superintendent level. Several women argued that they believe women have more of a voice and are being seen more, as evidenced by the visibility of the new female president of the PASA Board of Governors, but they also report that it is still a male-dominated profession and women still experience the 'glass ceiling.' There is no more mental image of “grumpy, old, gray-haired men” in charge (Personal interview, November 21, 2013). One woman suggested that this is a young person's game, and the individual better be on board for the next 5, 10, or 15 years. All of the women agreed that the superintendency is a
position that can cause very high stress levels similarly found in positions in business and industry. Yet, one participant expressed that “a superintendent is the CEO of a company without pay that is commensurate to other leaders because the public pays that individual’s salary” (Personal interview, November 21, 2013).

One woman suggested that the superintendency has become a position where there is a need to accomplish a lot in a little amount of time. It has become more urgent, and that sense of urgency sometimes creates distrust. To counteract the urgency, there is a need to prioritize and to determine the big issues that need to be addressed and to determine the other things one can let go for now. The task is especially tough when there are a lot of external influences such as state mandates and an impatient board and community. To exacerbate matters, a few of the women lamented that they believed educators and superintendents are no longer held in high regard. A declining economy often causes the community to be disgruntled when the board is faced with raising taxes. The women also mentioned more government control of education at the state and national levels. Politics have impacted the job in a more pronounced manner, and the women mentioned several issues such as: cyber charter issues, special education issues, issues with teachers’ unions and associations, insurance issues and the Affordable Care Act, and PSERS retirement issues that are looming on the horizon.

As the faces of school boards change, these women warned aspiring individuals to be mindful of the need to constantly strike a balance between school board involvement and micromanagement. Furthermore, they referenced the new guidelines for superintendent contracts with terms that are limited to 3 years. They are concerned that without continuity in leadership, education is affected. While all of the women agreed that communication is essential, they reflected that people often interpret comments from their perspective or lens, and they warned
others about using social media such as Facebook, etc. where comments can be taken out of context.

Organizationally, one participant convinced her school board that the district needed to abandon their 1950s pyramid top-down model and move to a new organizational chart that is cyclical and that places the child at the center. She explained that “those things which directly touch children are the teachers, the learning, and the instruction” (Personal interview, November 21, 2013). In this model, the first-degree systems are what support the teachers and they include the principals, the director of curriculum and instruction, the director of special education, and the director of educational technology; whereas, the second-degree systems include the supervisor of buildings and grounds, the director of transportation, the business manager, the director of technology infrastructure and network, food services, human resources, and finance. Finally, surrounding around all of that is the board of education.

Ultimately, all of the women agreed that an individual really has to want to do the job because it is hard work, it takes away from the individual’s personal life, and it represents a tremendous sacrifice for the individual and her family. These women urged aspiring individuals to recognize that today’s superintendents must be visible, transformational, instructional leaders, capable of building collaborative models for decision making and skilled in communication, public relations, organization and financial management, use of technology, strategic planning, problem solving, and consensus building. In their experience, these women remarked that districts are looking for candidates who are dynamic; confident; visionary; proactive; articulate and skilled in interpersonal relationships; assertive; highly motivated; collaborative; effective at problem solving; knowledgeable about instruction, long-range planning, budgeting, and finance; and able to move districts and schools to the next level of student achievement.”
Best Advice

Finally, after discussing career pathways, barriers to ascension, and supports while on the journey in the first three questions, the fourth research question presented in Chapter 1 also provides the structure for a rich discussion of the findings regarding advice for others aspiring to this role.

4. From the perspective of these women, what are the “best advice” pieces of wisdom they can offer other female candidates seeking the superintendency?

In this study, the participants offered varied impressions regarding the superintendency, and all of the women were eager to share their pieces of advice or “pearls of wisdom” with others aspiring to this role. One participant offered that, “When you bless others, you are blessed” (Personal interview, November 7, 2013). Others joined her and added comments regarding the importance of relying on your values, ethics, and morals as a firm foundation for your decisions and the need to push yourself to grow, to learn, and to better yourself in a pattern of lifelong learning. Another participant echoed a similar message to “embrace the position, and always make decisions that are ethical. Make decisions that are in the best interests of the student based on data that you can present and data that you can live with. At the end of the day, know that you did your best and you have made every decision based on the law and your personal, ethical code so that you can answer that you always did it for the right reasons. You can defend that decision” (Personal interview, November 21, 2013).

Several women warned those aspiring to this role against taking things to heart, but they also acknowledged that it is hard not to take that approach and to look at things from a logical perspective and to follow a gut instinct. One participant advised others to guard against being too influenced by what other people want for you. Another participant reasoned, “If you don’t
like contention, don’t be a superintendent. If being in conflict with groups of people makes you uneasy, don’t be a superintendent. If you’re not prepared to work, and work, and work, don’t be a superintendent” (Personal interview, November 18, 2013).

The women reflected on the importance of maintaining a sense of humor through it all. Wisdom prevailed as one participant remarked on the need to pick your battles and to acknowledge when you are wrong. Another participant advised others to “admit when you are wrong, [to] say you are sorry with feeling, [and to] try to do better the next time” (Emailed response, November 20, 2013). Effective leaders know when to walk away and know when to fight for what is right. Be the voice that always calms the storm and the person who listens because most people just want to be heard. During one interview, the participant candidly remarked, “I believe that the first time you lose your temper or you have bad manners or you say something inappropriate, that’s what people will always remember. I want them to remember grace and dignity and confidence. I don’t want them to think of me in any other way. I want them to be proud of their superintendent. When all else is crazy, the one constant that has to stay sane is that seat. You have to be the one who is able to be the eye of the hurricane and keep it calm in the middle of the storm going on around you. When you don’t, it upsets the balance of the whole organization” (Personal interview, January 28, 2014). The women also conceded that you can’t possibly be everything, know everything, and do everything for everyone. In the words of one woman, “I’ve learned that you can’t be perfect at everything. You can’t be the perfect wife, the perfect mother, the perfect professional person, the perfect daughter” (Personal interview, November 12, 2013). One participant added that “personal motivation continues to come from seeing successes” (Personal interview, January 17, 2014).
Some of the women shared their belief that a school leader should live in the community which she serves and should show her support by being visible and by attending activities and events whenever possible. Some of the participants expressed the need to communicate with others in the organization and with the community in a timely manner. Most of the women presented themselves as educational leaders who envisioned professional development as an opportunity to teach staff.

From their experiences, they recommended not limiting the geographical area when in search of a job. One participant advised others to “refrain from having a knee-jerk reaction if the hiring process does not go your way” (Personal interview, December 2, 2013). One woman urged others to “Just be yourself. If you’re female, you’re female. If that brings passion and caring and nurturing, that’s what it is. Just be who you are, not something that you’re not because that shines through” (Personal interview on November 18, 2013.) Still another interviewee added, “A career woman has to work like a dog, look like a lady, and act like a man” (Personal interview on November 18, 2013). When asked to characterize her leadership style, one participant offered, “I have found that if people are not intimidated, and people are not afraid to come to you with the answers, they’re more creative. There are times when people come down here just as excited as can be and say, ‘Can we try it?’ I say, ‘Let’s do it. Let’s try it. If it’s the right thing for kids, we’re going to do it.’ And I get it. Different people have different ways, but this works for me. So far, knock on wood, we’re doing all right. Some days, you just hear the laughter in this hall” (Personal interview, January 24, 2014). Exuding her humility, the same woman offered, “There isn’t a day, there is not a day that I feel worthy of this position, not a day” (Personal interview, January 24, 2014). Another woman presented that once you leave the classroom, there is no going back, so look before you leap. She eluded to the idea that “You
have to know that when you leave, you have to know that you’re not going back in because they’re never going to pay you to go back in” (Personal interview, November 21, 2013).

Regarding expectations, the women urged others to know that they are in charge and responsible for everything. Truly, the buck stops and the blame starts at the superintendent’s desk.

Personally, at least half of the candidates remarked about the need to have a supportive spouse. One participant shared how she turns off her computer on Friday afternoon and in the evenings, and knows that it will be there when she returns. Another participant added that “You have to remember to go home and be someone's wife, mother, daughter, and sister. The hat of the superintendent is a hat you wear to make a living, but the other hats are the hats you wear to make a life” (Personal interview, November 21, 2013). One participant warned that others in similar positions should never read the paper, related blogs, or their own headlines because they will spend their lives being angry at what people write. Most of the women advised that you can never make all of the people happy all of the time. One participant advised others to “be careful who you trust and do what's best for the majority of the students you serve, and the rest will fall into place” (Personal interview, January 14, 2014).

One recurring theme was that not one of these women ever had any intention of becoming a superintendent. Several women reported that their predecessors had been so ineffective; consequently, they were motivated to assume the position and provide stability for the district. They acknowledged that their diverse experiences contributed to the journey toward the superintendency; prepared them for assuming the responsibilities; allowed them to mature to handle the daily issues; and permitted them to learn and grow as researchers, mentors, and guides for teachers and families to trust. Yet, when the time came for each of them to decide to accept the position, they advised others to go into it with their eyes open, to make sure it is really where
they want to be, and to examine truly where they are and why they want to get here. They recommended that aspiring individuals ask themselves if they are doing it for the right reasons. One participant encouraged others to remember that “You are supporting people from every walk of life in basically everything, and it’s a huge weight on your shoulders to know that you are responsible for so much. So, make sure you have the resolve to be able to do that. But if you are truly there, and you truly want to make a difference in the lives of kids in the community, then don’t let anybody say that you can’t. Continue to work hard. Continue to show that you have integrity and the passion to do it, and you’ll get there” (Personal interview, January 24, 2014).

Through a myriad of other comments offered by the participants, one theme became apparent. The child is at the center of what they do. One participant supported this theme with the introduction of a new organizational structure to think about education in terms of systems thinking. She proposed, “If we want kids to focus, think, and learn, we’ve got to get teachers to focus, think, and learn” (Personal interview, November 21, 2013). For all of the women, every decision they make has to be focused on the child. Moreover, student achievement is their number one priority. One woman shared that every night that she says “thank you,” and every morning she says, “Please let me do what is good, right, and appropriate for kids and make those decisions” (Personal interview, December 12, 2013).

Another theme suggested a need for aspiring individuals to align themselves with other superintendents and individuals who are strong mentors and positive role models, especially because the superintendency is a lonely place. The women advised others to find exemplary mentors, grab them, hold on, watch them, and model them. The women also remarked about the power of networking to go different places and of establishing contacts with other professionals.
Still another theme emerged in the interviews. Nearly all of the women stated that the position is about finding a fit. “The process is about being the right candidate, with the right other mix of candidates, with the right mix of board members, on the right night” (Personal interview, November 12, 2013). It doesn't always come down to qualifications and skill set. They added that it is important for those aspiring to the superintendency to know what they like to do as much as it is what they do not like to do. One woman offered that “I also know that the women I am going to work with, the women that are looking or aspiring to be superintendents, already have that in their genes” (December 12, 2013).

The women’s advice suggested a theme in which they urged others to maintain their professionalism at all times. They warned others never to lose their temper and to never let down their guard. To preserve their sanity and really enjoy the journey, they emphasized the need to refrain from internalizing everything, to maintain a sense of humor, to not take oneself too seriously, and to develop tough skin or risk not surviving. Finally, one woman summarized the collective ‘pearls of wisdom’ of the group with her comment, “I’d like to say we've come a long way baby!” (Telephone interview, November 25, 2013).
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Introduction

The purpose of this particular study was to investigate the career pathways of women toward the superintendency in several public school districts in Pennsylvania and to examine the perceived barriers and supports that may have influenced their attainment of this position of educational leadership. This study sought to expand upon and strengthen previous research depicting a critical trend in the field of educational leadership related to inequitable representation of women in the superintendent’s position. Information provided in this study sought to provide insight to women who aspire to the superintendency in Pennsylvania by helping them understand what is needed to obtain the top administrative position in education and to inform them of the perceived barriers toward advancing to the superintendency. The study also attempted to provide information that graduate programs in educational leadership and mentoring programs for professional organizations can use to help identify the skills needed for women to succeed in the superintendency. The study aimed to not only assist women aspiring to the ranks of these top leadership positions but also to benefit individuals hiring school leaders.

To understand why and how some women reach the superintendency, it was critical to hear their voices and to appreciate the stories from the viewpoints of the women themselves. Concurrent with the work of Brown and Irby (2005) and Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), this study recognized the correlation between learning more about women in leadership roles, about how they obtain their positions, and about how they have become successful and increasing the number of women in the field.
Conclusions

The Methodology of Portraiture

Using the findings and tables presented in Chapter 4, several conclusions can be drawn from this study. The use of portraiture was an appropriate methodology in that it allowed me to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the participants in order to capture the essence of each individual and of the collective group. Using this methodology, I focused on five essential features: context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

Context. In portraiture, context includes internal context, personal context, historical context, aesthetic context, and shaping context. The internal context refers to the physical setting in which each interview took place. With the exception of two, I conducted all of the interviews in the participant’s office, in a restaurant, or in a college library. One participant requested a phone interview, and the other participant sent her responses to the research questions in an email. While there were no apparent differences in the quality of the interviews related to the context, the interviews held in restaurants reflected minor interruptions in the flow of the conversation as a waitress periodically checked on our table. Personal context represents my stance as the researcher, and it includes my views on the superintendency from an outsider’s perspective which lacks any congruent experience in the role. The historical context reflects the institutional culture, history, origins, and evolution of each participant’s organization and the values that shape its purpose. As a group, these women exuded pride in their districts and in the work they had accomplished in their tenure. The interviews that I held in each participant’s office provided me with a better understanding of the historical context through speaking with district staff, viewing pictures on the walls and in the office area, and visiting classrooms.
Clearly, the women who had spent the majority of their careers with the same district embodied a rich cultural history with the organization that emerged during their interviews. The aesthetic context reflected the symbols and metaphors inherent in the observations and reflections. These images serve as overarching themes and rich undercurrents that resound through their portraits. The shaping context represented the visible and subtle changes that transformed the interview as the participants became more comfortable with the questions and with me as the interviewer.

**Voice.** In portraiture, my voice as the researcher was evident in the assumptions, preoccupations, and framework I provided to the inquiry as it was encompassed in the orientations of epistemology, ideology, and method. My voice reflected my position and perspective, as it revealed my observations and reflections, as I progressed from thin to thick description through my interpretive voice to seek meaning. Inevitably, my history, experiences, family background, cultural origins, intellectual interests, theoretical frames, and ideological fixations informed and shaped my voice. Finally, this feature denoted the presence of my voice distinguishing the participants’ voices in dialogue with them. In this study, each of the modalities of voice reflected a varied level of presence and visibility for me as the researcher/portraitist. In each modality, the chosen stance was purposeful, conscious, and attentive; yet, I attempted to guard against producing a self-portrait by overwhelming the voices or actions of the participants.

**Relationship.** In listening and responding to each participant, I strived to develop an understanding of her perspective by empathically putting myself in each participant’s place and witnessing her perspective, her ideas, her emotions, her fears, and her pain. I strived to be clear and honest about my expectations; to be open and responsive to each participant’s needs and desires; and to ensure that each participant knew my intents, needs, and wants for this study.
Overall, I sensed that relationships were either forged or strengthened during our brief time together. During several of the interviews, the women wanted reassurance that any personal information they shared would not be included in the research and they seemed to rely on the fact that I would not betray their trust.

**Emergent themes.** The following themes emerged from the interviews with the participants.

1. At one point in the interviews, all of the women who participated in the study emphasized that they never had any intentions of ever becoming a superintendent. Oftentimes, they aspired to the position because they wanted to provide leadership and stability to the district when they perceived those elements did not exist. Reflecting on their comments, one might conclude that aspirations of leadership in this role initially are hidden from individuals and emerge over time as they experience situations in the positions that preempt their ascension.

2. Decidedly, one of the strongest themes attended to the idea of accountability. All of the women spoke about the intense pressures associated with the culture of accountability in education, and they referenced the impact on educator effectiveness. There is an expectation that the superintendent must be knowledgeable about all aspects of the organization, be prepared to work in a collaborative spirit, and be willing and able to lead the way with initiatives that bring everyone together to boost student achievement and learning. From these comments, one might conclude that accountability will continue to be a major focus in this position. Therefore, it stands to reason that aspiring individuals should understand that the responsibility for increased student achievement begins and ends with them.
3. Truly, these women live by their convictions and are hard-working individuals. In fact, all of the women remarked about working long hours in the role and about being available 24/7 to the communities they currently serve or had served. One might conclude that women aspiring to the superintendency should expect to work long hours in the position and to encounter responsibilities in the role that usually warrant the need for them to return to the district on the weekends to be visible for a multitude of events such as concerts, athletic events, or extracurricular happenings.

4. One of the most profound themes all of the women in the study echoed was the importance of mentors in their lives who guided them in their journey to the superintendency. Through their positive testimonials, one could conclude that the presence of one or more male or female mentors in the lives of those aspiring to this position of educational leadership is crucial to her successful ascension. A few of the women commented that friends or professional colleagues had contacted them to determine their interest in an open position with which they were familiar. Thus, the participants’ comments suggest the importance of developing and maintaining connections and of establishing contacts within existing professional networks to increase an individual’s likelihood of attaining the superintendency.

5. All of these women agreed that politics and education are interchangeably influential. Thus, it behooves aspiring women to recognize how politics impact the manner in which an educational decision system functions and in the process in which school boards conduct their search and selection process for viable candidates for the position.
6. The participants recognized the need to maintain a proper balance between their personal and professional lives as they ascended to the superintendency. Reflecting on their candid comments, others can discern that it is important to guard against tipping the delicate balance between work and family responsibilities too far in the wrong direction at the expense of one’s personal well-being.

7. Most of the women resounded that all of their training alone never totally prepared them for their ascension to the position. Instead, they valued theoretical study coupled with practical experience. Thus, one could conclude that aspiring individuals need an effective combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experience before ascending to the superintendency.

8. These women stressed the importance of finding the right fit and to being open to geographically expanding the search for a position. Thus, one could conclude that persistence and patience are two key ingredients to the successful acquisition of the top position in leadership. If unsuccessful, aspiring individuals would be wise to heed the advice of these women and to consider searching for vacant superintendencies outside of their initial geographic boundaries.

9. With only two exceptions, the remaining women advised others not to enter the role too soon and to allow it to be the capstone experience of a fulfilling career. Furthermore, all of the women recommended that aspiring individuals consider the concept of longevity in the position, especially in light of the new guidelines for superintendent contracts that limit the agreement to three years. Thus, others should expect to enter the role of the superintendency later in their careers and to consider their own longevity in the position.
10. Of all the decisions these women face each day, they agreed that weather-related responsibilities are some of the most challenging they face. All of these women concurred that one of the worst responsibilities of their position is to decide how to react in the event of inclement weather, because their decisions always seem to draw ire from some individuals or groups. One might conclude that these types of decisions will continue to be problematic, considering that these areas of the state typically are known for inclement weather. Thus, it may behoove aspiring women to think about how they will handle these situations by following the lead of neighboring districts and/or consulting area representatives from boroughs, municipalities, businesses, and industries who are charged with the same responsibilities. Ultimately, these women had the same opinion that their primary concern is the safety of the children en route to and from school.

11. One woman coined the phrase “professional courage” which guides her practice in always asking if a decision is in the best interests of students. Overwhelmingly, the women concurred that their number one priority is educating students and making decisions that benefit them. Aspiring individuals may conclude that having professional courage is a prerequisite skill not only to the triumphant ascension to the position but also to a successful career in the position.

**Aesthetic whole.** In creating the aesthetic whole that considered the elements of conception, structure, form, and coherence, I captured a portrait of fifteen women who were much more similar than they were diverse and who brought a very different perspective to the superintendency. These women collaborate with others, and they like things to be fair and equitable for all. As an aesthetic whole, these women believe that the nature of a
superintendent’s work cannot be taught in a classroom; rather, they acknowledge that they must pull from their experiences and rely on their personalities to be successful. As instructional leaders, these women vehemently support the need to make sound, reasonable decisions for those they serve. They understand that they are in a position to make a difference, and they perceive they can accomplish the work at least as well as, if not better than, someone else. Through their entire careers, they have been about what is best for students. Collectively, these individuals comprised a classy group of women who are strong, hard-working, savvy, intelligent, and passionate about their role in the educational system. Following their example, women might recognize the intensity of the commitment to the responsibilities of the position and to examine their own skills and aspirations to determine if there is similar alignment.

**Analytic Framework**

For this study, the best analytic framework available for the organization and presentation of the qualitative data was a combination role analysis, used in the analysis of the individual interviews, and a thematic analysis used across individuals. This framework permitted a comprehensive analysis of the role of each interviewee and of the collective role exemplified in the portraiture of these women as a group. Moreover, the framework permitted an effective means of addressing the first of four research questions in this study.

1. **What are the important experiences in the career pathways of former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania, and why are they essential?**

   Concurrent with existing research, the career pathways of these women varied and were influenced by a multitude of factors such as the individual’s age, family concerns and mobility, gender bias, mentors, contacts and networks; educational preparedness; job cluster or path; and other women. Some of these factors represented barriers for one woman but supports for another
woman. In practice, each of these women played many roles and traveled many meandering roads in her journey to the top leadership position in one or more school districts. Thus, one might conclude that there is no one-size-fits-all career pathway to follow. In this study, the career paths of the female superintendents were varied and complex, began in either business and industry or in the classroom, were rarely planned but developed over time and with opportunities that allowed the women to develop necessary personal and professional skills and abilities, were nurtured by one or more male and/or female mentors, were often supported by a network of colleagues focusing on leadership, and provided a vehicle for a fulfilling professional life.

The framework in this study also permitted an effective means of addressing the second of four research questions in this study.

2. **What do former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania perceive as the barriers they faced in their ascension to the superintendency, and what are the strategies they employed to overcome these barriers?**

All but three of these practicing or retired female public school superintendents acknowledged that barriers existed when they were accessing and entering this top leadership position. For the purposes of this study, the barriers were divided between internal and external barriers.

**Internal/Intrapersonal Barriers**

While research suggests that internal or intrapersonal barriers typically include issues of emotions, motivation, self-efficacy, role conflict, and gender-specific attitudes; the women did not report motivation as a barrier. Only two women remarked about their own self-efficacy. A few women indicated that an internal barrier was evident in their uncertainty about leaving their current position to assume the superintendency, primarily because they enjoyed the role and
suspected that the responsibilities of the position would alienate them even further from the students. Another woman reported that her internal or intrapersonal barriers reflect her practice of second-guessing herself and her hesitancy to demonstrate ‘situational toughness.’ Generally, role conflict was not an internal barrier, especially for the women who were not married and for those who had no children. Considering these remarks, one might conclude that the women did not perceive internal factors to be significant barriers to their ascension to the superintendency. Moreover, one woman commented that she has learned from her failures and that they have made her stronger.

**External Barriers**

The external barriers for these women included age, family concerns and mobility, cultural stereotyping, gender bias, search and selection process, job cluster or path, and other women. In this study, the women included age as an influential factor. Only a few of the women supported the notion that the age norms associated with the steps in women’s careers conflicted with their roles, and they tended to enter into their career moves later to avoid overload and the conflict associated with balancing work and family responsibilities. With the exception of two participants, the women identified that when they entered the superintendency, they were embarking on the end of their careers. Although they were older when they applied for their first superintendency, a somewhat contradictory conclusion was evidenced in that they did not report that overt or subtle age discrimination significantly affected them. Only two of the women ascended to the superintendency before 40 years of age, and the average age for these women entering their first superintendency was 45-50 years of age. Thus, one might conclude that aspiring women could expect to enter the superintendency later in their careers.
A few of the married women who participated in the study cited some examples of continued conflict that they experienced between home and career responsibilities and flexibility in moving to new locations. At least three women cited that they were not as mobile as their male peers because of family situations that included their spouses’ jobs. Seven women listed mobility as a barrier, and they cited being place bound due to family responsibilities as caregivers for their children or parents as a factor. Consistent with the research, several of the participants reported that they had experienced clearly identified self-imposed tensions and ill feelings that resulted from the conflicts that arose between the roles of caregiver and career woman, and at least three of the women reported that these tensions and ill feelings resulted in their divorce. Furthermore, the conflict in their role responsibilities also affected their aspirations to the superintendency, especially when relocation was expected. From these comments, one might conclude that for some women, the ability to advance in their careers may be negatively impacted by the conflict between their professional and personal responsibilities.

Very few of the women referenced cultural stereotyping per se as a factor, but five of the women reported that gender bias plagued their careers at some juncture. As mentioned heretofore, although the teaching profession is comprised of approximately three times more women than men, women in the superintendency remain dramatically underrepresented. Despite all of this legislation to ensure equity and prohibit gender-based discrimination, one might conclude that women continue to face barriers in the workplace.

Beyond recruitment, only a few of the women concurred with the research that suggests that the search and selection process often reinforces more male career pathways to the superintendency. These same women agreed that these practices continue to focus on the centrality of previous positions and deflect attention from leadership skills acquired through
diversity of administrative roles. As Tallerico (2000) indicated, interims influence the process by (a) sharing opinions with the board on which consultant to select to run the search and on how it should be conducted; (b) offering assessments of what the district needs; (c) investigating candidates’ backgrounds and references; (d) generating lists of questions to ask of candidates during interviews; (e) serving as sounding boards during the evaluation process; (f) facilitating the board’s development; and (g) being a reference point of comparison. Several of the women in the study remarked about the influence of an interim superintendent in their experiences. Accordingly, others aspiring to this position may benefit from understanding the dynamics surrounding the search and selection process.

While higher percentages of females were found at the elementary principal level than at the secondary level in this study, these women did not report that prior experience as a high school principal was more highly valued than was elementary principalship experience. Thus, one might conclude that varied pathways could be conduits to successful ascension to the superintendency.

While the research does not reference other females as an external barrier, four of these women included other women as external barriers in their organizations. Thus, one might discern the importance of forging sound relationships with other women in the ascension process.

The framework in this study also permitted an effective means of garnering conclusions using the third research question in this study.

3. **What supports do these former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania report in attaining this position, and why are they important?**
All of these practicing or retired female public school superintendents eagerly acknowledged that supports existed when they were accessing and entering this top leadership position. The supports for these women can be categorized according to the following areas: role models and mentors; marriage and family; personal motivation; professional and personal preparedness; and professional organizations, affiliations, and contacts and networks.

Every woman who participated in this study emphasized the importance of one or more male and/or female role models and mentors who influenced and shaped their careers along the way. From the consistency of their responses, one might recommend to others aspiring to the superintendency to look for strong role models and mentors who will nurture them and provide spiritual guidance for them while they travel their path to the top.

In the interviews, the women who are married and/or have families mentioned these individuals as supports, and the women who were raised in large, closely-knit families denoted their relationships with their spouses, parents, in-laws, siblings, aunts, and others as instrumental to their success. Only a few of the women who participated in the study cited some examples of continued conflict that they, as married women, experienced between home and career responsibilities and flexibility. Thus, one might conclude that support from a spouse, children, and/or extended family members can be beneficial during key junctures in one’s pathway.

Results from this study suggest that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors were inherent characteristics in these female superintendents. All of these women maintained positive beliefs about their ability to accomplish the work and relied upon perceived beliefs of strong self-efficacy to achieve their career aspirations embodied in their commitments, goals, and leadership styles. The women concurred that the position is complex and challenging, but they
also embraced the prospect of making a positive difference in the lives of the students, staff, parents, and the communities they serve.

When considering the superintendency, aspiring candidates could follow the direction of these women as they discussed professional preparedness through the lens of their formal preparation attained through advanced educational administration/leadership training received through collegiate and/or university coursework and programs; experiential preparedness characterized by their career experiences; professional relationships and mentoring; and personal preparedness defined by their personal attitude toward the pursuit and acquisition of the role of the superintendency.

The women who participated in this study were often supported by a network of colleagues focusing on leadership, for guidance on the journey to the top. As they were aspiring to the superintendency and after ascending to the position, most of the women sought opportunities that included state, national, and international conferences; state, national, and international organizations; and civic connections that combined personal growth and professional affiliations. Moreover, all of the women discussed the importance of establishing contacts and networking with other professionals in their ascension to the superintendency. During the interviews with these female superintendents, most of the women supported the importance of developing and maintaining connections within an established network. Thus, others may conclude that professional organizations, associations, contacts, and networks are extremely beneficial in attaining this role.

The framework in this study also permitted an effective means of garnering conclusions using the fourth research question in this study.
4. From the perspective of these women, what are the “best advice” pieces of wisdom they can offer other female candidates seeking the superintendency?

In this study, several conclusions can be drawn from the participants’ varied impressions regarding the superintendency. Foremost, one repetitive refrain signified the importance of relying on one’s values, ethics, and morals as a firm foundation for decision-making that is in the best interests of the student; to examine situations from a logical perspective and to follow one’s gut instinct; and to guard against being influenced by others.

From their comments, one can conclude that conflict in achieving the position is inevitable, and those aspiring to this role would be wise to consider their own comfort level with conflict between and among individuals. To combat the conflict and associated challenges with attaining the position, the women reflected on the importance of demonstrating humility, maintaining a sense of humor, choosing battles wisely, acknowledging one’s shortcomings, apologizing with feeling, and vowing to improve. Personal qualities such as facing challenges with calmness and a sense of humor, giving and gaining courage, listening well, and being ethical are paramount to the success of any female superintendent (Johnston, et al., 2002). Even at their ultimate best, several of the women conceded that one can't possibly be everything, know everything, and do everything for everyone. Further, most of the women advised that it is impossible to make all of the people happy all of the time. From these comments, others may take comfort in heeding their advice to do what is best for the majority of the students and remain assured that the rest will fall into place.

One commonality emerged in the women’s comments about remembering that the hat of the superintendent is a hat one wears to make a living, but the other hats are the hats one wears to make a life. Ultimately, one can conclude that it is important to strike a balance between
personal and professional responsibilities and to find ways to cope with the pressures and the stress of the ascension process.

According to similar comments, not one of these women ever had any intention of becoming a superintendent. When the time came for them to decide to accept the position, they advised others to go into the position with open eyes, to make sure the position is really one to which they aspire, and to examine their reasons for ascending to this leadership role. One might conclude that it is necessary to reflect on the reasons for ascending to the role and for assuming the accompanying responsibilities. These women presented themselves as educational leaders who envisioned professional development as an opportunity to teach staff. Concurrent with research by Johnston, et al. (2002), these women strongly urge other women to first know themselves to better know how their interpersonal interactions might affect the organization and to determine what it takes to keep the organization focused on meeting the purpose of quality teaching and learning.

Overwhelmingly, the women suggest a need for aspiring individuals to align themselves with other superintendents and individuals who are strong mentors and positive role models, because the superintendency is a lonely place. One can conclude that aspiring women should seek exemplary mentors, grab them and hold on, watch them, model them, and harness the power of networking to support their ascension.

From these women’s experiences in searching for a position, one can conclude that it may be necessary to expand the geographical area of a search to find a perfect fit. That is, the process might not always result in a candidate with the best qualifications and skill set. Rather, one might conclude that successful acquisition is about being the right candidate, with the right mix of other candidates, with the right mix of board members, at the right time.
The final conclusion considers that over the years, changes in education, expectations, and accountability have warranted that superintendents know everything about teaching and learning. They need to be able to walk into classrooms and recognize quality instruction, talk about it with teachers, and lead the way for initiatives that bring everyone together!

**Implications**

Through more than 25 hours spent in personal interviews with the 15 participants and in more than 450 pages of transcribed notes from the interviews, several implications can be drawn in the portrait of the women as a group. Most of the women remarked that their professional study alone never totally prepared them for the job. Instead, they valued theoretical study coupled with practical experience. Thus, one could imply that one of the most important courses in any graduate preparation program could be the superintendent’s internship, especially if the course of study requires an individual to shadow a practicing superintendent to experience firsthand the responsibilities of the role and to garner opportunities to apply her theoretical knowledge.

Through a plethora of comments, the collective group implied that it is important for aspiring individuals to try to determine the search and selection criteria depicting what a hiring school board wants—a change agent or an individual to pick up and carry on, to build relationships and establish trust, and to share her passion for leadership. They recommended that aspiring candidates draw upon their prior experiences in an interview and to be prepared by reviewing possible questions. They warned others that it is difficult to please all board members and to beware of mismatched expectations between a candidate and the school board. They encouraged an aspiring candidate to determine where she stands on an issue and to communicate
that stance to the board clearly and effectively. Once selected, the women implored others to be forceful and assertive when negotiating the impending contract for the position.

With only two exceptions, the remaining women advised others not to enter the role too soon and to allow it be the capstone experience of a fulfilling career. They agree that it takes age, experience, and wisdom to do the job right. They warn that if one begins her career too soon at a younger age, she most likely will not have the maturity she needs to be successful. Thus, one might imply that aspiring individuals need time to experience all of the responsibilities associated with the positions leading up to the superintendency before assuming the role. Further, one may imply that older candidates represent more maturity and greater wisdom gained through experience. These women regard themselves as individuals with a lot of expertise, not as experts. They believe the varied experiences represented in their career pathways are important because they have helped them better understand the uniqueness and challenges of each role. Moreover, they believe their positions were significant because they added to their credibility, helped them become more well-rounded, and prepared them well for the skills they needed to successfully acquire the superintendency.

Through their collective demeanor, one might imply that these women are confident in their abilities to do the job, have a sense of self-efficacy as professional women, and love what they do! These women place a high premium on integrity and honesty in their roles as servant leaders. They are assertive, hard-working team players who are willing to pitch in and do any job in the district. They are connected to the students in their districts and are focused on teaching and learning. In addition to being familiar with associated responsibilities that are more managerial in nature such as developing an understanding about finance, law, and personnel; they spoke passionately about their lead role in attending to accountability; overseeing
curriculum, instruction, and assessment; establishing a district mission and vision, creating professional learning communities; and delineating between approaches that are content focused versus learning focused. When it comes down to working and being passionate about students and school, these women take their role seriously.

Limitations of the Study

At times, qualitative research has been criticized for the limited quality of work undertaken and for the limited effectiveness of its application (Cherry, 2010). McMillan (2008) concurs that there is little or no emphasis on replications in qualitative studies. This type of qualitative research often focuses on the subjects in the study that have certain characteristics, such as age, ability, or gender. Results in this study are limited to other individuals who have the same or very similar characteristics. The researcher must ensure that the participants in the study are carefully chosen as individuals who have similar experiences, to forge a common understanding (Creswell, 2007). In this study, all the participants have served or were currently serving as superintendents of school districts in one state. Limitations also can be related to situational characteristics that included the specifics of the setting and context in which the study was conducted. This study mirrored the same dilemma in that the interviewees represented only fifteen school districts in one state. Limitations may be related to the nature of the methodology that was used. In this study that examined unique individuals and relationships, causal conclusions are left to the discretion of the reader. Several additional potential limitations of the study are identified:

1. Although the purpose of this particular study was to investigate the career pathways of women toward the superintendency and to examine the perceived barriers and supports that influenced their attainment of this position of educational leadership, the study is limited to former and practicing female superintendents in public school districts in
Pennsylvania. Consequently, it is difficult to transfer the results of the study across different states in other parts of the country.

2. Generally, the participants embodied homogeneous characteristics that may limit the study.

3. The methodology of portraiture also may constitute a limitation in the study, since most of the interviews with the participants were conducted in a single setting occurring between one and one-half and three hours. Furthermore, the settings for some of the interviews were unrelated to the workplaces of the participants. In those circumstances, it was more difficult to ‘paint’ a completely accurate portrait of the interviewees without supporting evidence from the office and/or school setting. In the art and science of true portraiture, the researcher seeks to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people she is studying, documenting their voices and their visions and illuminating their authority, knowledge, and wisdom (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). The limitation of this methodology reflects the inability to offer completely authentic and compelling narratives due to anonymity and confidentiality issues. Thus, the study represents more generic characteristics in the portraits of the participants to protect their identities and to guard their privacy.

4. Finally, interpretation of participant voices should be cautiously examined since they were prepared and reported through the researcher’s lens and voice.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The questions posed by this study provide an avenue for additional research. Because this study involved interviews with women representing districts that were predominantly small
and rural, future research might focus on women who lead large suburban or urban districts with K-12 enrollments of greater than 3,000 students.

To assist women in their ascension to the superintendency, future research should explore ways in which search consultants and school board members can expand the process by examining their underlying assumptions, values, and beliefs about equity; by creating structures for members of historically underrepresented groups to acquire additional leadership skills; by targeting recruitment of females; and by modifying common selection procedures.

Many of these women were hired from within their own educational systems or they returned to their home districts where they had attended elementary school, high school, and/or college. Future research may address the number of female superintendents who actually get hired from outside of their own systems.

Findings support that the women in this study worked hard to build their reputations as educational leaders. Future research might focus on a woman’s reputation as a factor for hiring in the superintendency. Specifically, the research might address the need for women to build a reputation to be hired in small, rural districts.

Once a woman successfully ascends to the superintendency, future research may provide insight into the performance of female school superintendents once they reach their top positions. Further data collection could help researchers and policymakers begin to address which characteristics are associated with an individual’s effectiveness after she ascends to the superintendency. Additionally, in an effort to understand and reshape educational leadership, further research should investigate the length of tenure for specific career positions of women in educational administration, and specific reasons why boards of school directors select certain candidates over others.
Future research should continue to focus on improving women’s access to the school superintendency by working toward eliminating biases about the face of leadership, questioning inequitable professional practices, shaping community belief systems, and creating opportunities that nurture the aspirations and achievements of female applicants. When women continue to exhibit the qualifications and leadership skills that are necessary to successfully perform the work required in the superintendency in this era of accountability, they will be embraced as women who have dared to dream differently and who are capable of crawling through the window of a dream and successfully leading districts in the future.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A
Invitation Letter to Participants

[Current Date]

Dear [Name of Superintendent]:

I am currently enrolled as a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at The Pennsylvania State University. As part of this program, I will be conducting a research study to investigate the career pathways of women toward the superintendency in several public school districts in Pennsylvania and to examine the perceived barriers and supports that may have influenced their attainment of this position. I will be working with several distinguished female educational leaders in this study, and I would like to invite you to participate. For many years, I have been interested in the career pathways of women toward the superintendency, and I would be very excited to learn more about your experiences in your successful ascension to your position. For your consideration, I have listed the following research questions:

1. What are the significant experiences in the career pathways of former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania, and why are they so important?
2. What do former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania perceive as the barriers they faced in their ascension to the superintendency, and what are the strategies they employed to overcome these barriers?
3. What supports do these former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania report in attaining this position?
4. From the perspective of these women, what are the “best advice” pieces of wisdom they can offer other female candidates seeking the superintendency?

Few studies have attempted to depict or comprehend the experiences of female superintendents from the viewpoints of the women themselves, and I believe it is critical to hear their voices and appreciate the stories from their perspective. If you decide to participate in this study, I will ask you to meet with me for an interview during which you will have an opportunity to reflect on your experiences and to share your “pearls of wisdom” with other women who may be aspiring to this position. Throughout the study, I intend to follow the enclosed guidelines and information for researchers, research participants and Institutional Review Board (IRB) members for conducting human participant research.

If you have any reservations about participating in the study, please feel free to decline or to contact me with any questions, concerns, or comments by accessing my contact information that is listed below.

Home Phone: (570) 322-7995 Work Phone: (570) 326-6508, Extension 1002
Cell Phone: (570) 220-8695 E-Mail Address: sgriggs@loyalsocklancers.org

If you have further concerns about this research, please feel free to contact my university doctoral advisor, Dr. Nona Prestine, who will be supervising this research at her contact information that is listed below.

Work Phone: (814) 863-3762 E-Mail Address: nap11@psu.edu

Please contact me at your earliest convenience if you are interested in participating in this study. I look forward to hearing from you, and I thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sherry E. Griggs
APPENDIX B

Superintendent Interview Questions

Name ___________________________ Date Interviewed ___________________

School District ________________________________________________________

Interview Questions for Superintendents:

1. What are the details of your background, your academic preparation, and your experiences in your career pathway to the superintendency; and why are they important?

2. What were the barriers you faced in your ascension to the superintendency, and what were the strategies you employed to overcome these barriers?

3. What supports, influential role models, mentoring, and/or networking did you experience in attaining this position; and why were these so important?

4. What “best advice” pieces of wisdom can you offer other female candidates seeking the superintendency?
### Research Question 1: What are the significant experiences in the career pathways of former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania, and why are they important?

### Educational Preparation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Associate's Degree</th>
<th>Bachelor's Degree</th>
<th>Master's Degree</th>
<th>Reading Specialist</th>
<th>Supervisor of C &amp; I</th>
<th>Principal's Cert.</th>
<th>Letter of Eligibility</th>
<th>Doctorate</th>
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</thead>
</table>

### Career Pathway

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years as Teacher</th>
<th>Years as Assistant Principal</th>
<th>Years as Principal</th>
<th>Years at IU</th>
<th>Years as Director of Curriculum</th>
<th>Years as Assistant Superintendent</th>
<th>Years as Superintendent</th>
<th>Years as Business Manager</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Research Question 2: What do former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania perceive as the barriers they faced in their ascension to the superintendency, and what are the strategies they employed to overcome these barriers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal Barriers</th>
<th>External Barriers</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Research Question 3: What supports do these former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania report in attaining this position, and why are they important?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Models/Mentors</th>
<th>Personal Motivation</th>
<th>Professional Preparedness</th>
<th>Membership in Organizations and/or Associations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Research Question 4: From the perspective of these women, what are the “best advice” pieces of wisdom they can offer other female candidates seeking the superintendency?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pearls of Wisdom</th>
<th>Aspirations</th>
<th>How has the position evolved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### 5 Essential Features of Portraiture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
<th>Aesthetic Whole</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### APPENDIX C

Data Analysis Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Location of Interview</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Miscellaneous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Last Name</th>
<th>First Name</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Location of Interview</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Miscellaneous</th>
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</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent Themes</th>
<th>Aesthetic Whole</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

- **Research Question 1:** What are the significant experiences in the career pathways of former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania, and why are they important?

- **Research Question 2:** What do former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania perceive as the barriers they faced in their ascension to the superintendency, and what are the strategies they employed to overcome these barriers?

- **Research Question 3:** What supports do these former and practicing female superintendents in Pennsylvania report in attaining this position, and why are they important?

- **Research Question 4:** From the perspective of these women, what are the “best advice” pieces of wisdom they can offer other female candidates seeking the superintendency?
APPENDIX D

Pennsylvania School Boards Association
(PSBA)

Regions of the State
VITA

Sherry Elizabeth Griggs

Sherry Elizabeth Griggs has been an educator and administrator for the past 30 years in the state of Pennsylvania. With a bachelor’s degree in business education from Bloomsburg University, Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, she served as a business teacher at the high school level in two public school districts. After earning her master’s degree in educational administration from The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania and her secondary principal’s certification from Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, she served as an assistant principal at the junior high school level, an assistant principal at the high school level, a principal at the middle school level, and an interim principal at the elementary school level. After earning a supervisor’s certificate in curriculum and instruction and the superintendent’s letter of eligibility from Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, she became a supervisor of curriculum and instruction and currently serves in that capacity. She completed her doctorate in educational leadership from The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania. Her research interests include data-informed decision making, women’s roles in educational leadership, literacy across all content areas, and professional learning communities. She and her husband have been married 29 years. They currently reside in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and they are the proud parents of two grown sons.