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Surmounting Perceived Barriers for Missouri Female Superintendents:
A Phenomenological Study

by

Leslee Kristina Smith

August 31, 2022

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
School of Education

Surmounting Perceived Barriers for Missouri Female Superintendents:

A Phenomenological Study

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Leslee Kristina Smith

This Dissertation has been approved as partial fulfillment

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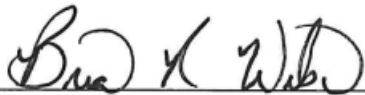
Lindenwood University, School of Education



Dr. Tanya Vest, Dissertation Chair

08/31/2022

Date



Dr. Brian Wilson, Committee Member

9-6-22

Date



Dr. Jared Terry, Committee Member

9/2/22

Date

Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree.

Full Legal Name: Leslee Kristina Smith

Signature:  Date: 9-6-22

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Abstract

Female superintendents throughout the United States disproportionately represent superintendents of public school districts (Cassidy et al., 2021; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). This research study utilized the theoretical frameworks of feminism and the structured organization of institutions (Acker, 1990). In addition, the qualitative study used the phenomenological design. An open-ended survey was utilized, as well as a follow-up interview with open-ended questions to solicit deeper, lived experiences of self-imposed barriers and the strategies lead female superintendents in a Midwest state employed to surmount those barriers. Forty-four female lead superintendents in a Midwest state shared stories of their journeys to a lead superintendent position. The study's findings provide a current context for how lead female superintendents experience self-imposed barriers. The top strategies lead female superintendents employed to address barriers were communicating with all stakeholders and asking for help, working hard to prove themselves, and gaining educational stakeholders' respect. In addition, lead female superintendents had a familial and spousal support system willing to sacrifice for the female superintendent's career. These findings of this study validate the current research that females experience self-imposed barriers to varying degrees throughout their careers. Further research is recommended to identify additional strategies females can take to surmount self-imposed barriers during their career journey, of females leading as a superintendent in differing school district sizes and females of color in the superintendency. Furthermore, additional research is needed to determine barriers specific to the number of years females have served in the superintendency and factors that may affect this implication.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Gender equality continues to be a precedent topic of conversation in corporate institutions and public education organizations throughout America (Longman et al., 2018; Sandberg, 2013). As this conversation grows in importance and frequency, many continue to ask why there is a marginalization between males and females in public education's superintendency role (Ramaswamy, 2020). Female superintendents throughout the United States disproportionately represent superintendents of public school districts, though females over-represent males teaching in the classroom (Cassidy et al., 2021; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). The U.S. Census Bureau concluded that the superintendency of public education institutions was the most male-dominated leadership position of any profession in the United States (Glass, 2019; Maranto et al., 2018). This study will address how aspiring female superintendents in a Midwest state could surmount self-imposed barriers to obtaining and upholding executive leadership positions in a male-dominated role.

Background of the Study

Females currently represent only 24% of superintendents of public education institutions nationwide (Ramaswamy, 2020, para.1). Studies show that even fewer females desire to enter the superintendent role since the COVID-19 pandemic (Sawchuk, 2022). Nearly 40% of the largest school districts across the nation had a leadership change since March 2022, with districts hiring men for the majority of these vacancies (McMurdock, 2022, para. 3; Sawchuk, 2022, para. 2; Zalaznick, 2022b, para. 5). Scholars, theorists, and others representing the feminist movement since the 1970s agreed that gender inequality has been prevalent through the decades, with social structures,

organizations, and cultures being intentionally fractured through gender division (Acker, 1990; Longman et al., 2018). As feminist theories and studies have evolved over the past 50 years, males dominating all leadership positions within organizations, especially the top executive-level positions in organizations, continue to remain (Risman & Davis, 2013). Since the high turnover in the superintendent position was created post-COVID-19 pandemic era, 70% of all districts have chosen men to fulfill this role (McMurdock, 2022, para. 6). Of all women superintendents who left their helm position as a superintendent since March 2020, 76% were replaced by men (McMurdock, 2022, para. 6; Zalaznick, 2022b, para. 5).

While analyzing the evolution of the fight for gender equality in all social structures, especially the workforce, more focus has been on the disparity of females in the top executive role for public education (Cassidy et al., 2021; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018; Vennes, 2022). About 76% of K–12 educators are women, while only 24% of superintendents are females (Ramaswamy, 2020, para. 4; Vennes, 2022, p. 2). Historically, the number of females representing superintendents has continued to rise nationally. Throughout the 1900s, female superintendents were few, representing superintendents nationwide at about 9%, compared to men representing 91% of those in this role (Garn & Brown, 2008, p. 50). However, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) showed that female superintendents represented nearly 24% of superintendents throughout the nation in 2010. That percentage remained almost the same at 25% in 2019 (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020, A Disturbing Trend section). Researchers in the field fear the increase of women in this leadership role has plateaued after growth throughout the years (Enfield & Gilmore,

2020; Ramaswamy, 2020). Most recent research validates the fear of female representation in the superintendency having a plateau effect, as there has been even less female representation since the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown of schools (McMurdock, 2022; Sawchuk, 2022). Dr. Julia Rafal-Baer, co-founder and partner of ILO Group, an education strategy, and policy firm, states, “Progress to close the gender gap in the leadership of our nation’s public schools was already slow, and now it’s gotten more severe” (McMurdock, 2022, para. 21).

While there is no question that disproportionality exists between males and females in the helm position of a school district, researchers have extensively sought the *why* behind this phenomenon (Cordova, 2019; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; McMurdock, 2022; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sawchuk, 2022; Vennes, 2022). Some theorists have argued that organizational structure and feminist barriers are the reason behind the continued disproportionality between genders of executive leaders of organizations (Acker, 1990; Longman et al., 2018), while other researchers have entirely different theories (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; McMurdock, 2022; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sawchuck, 2022; Silverman, 2004). Enfield and Gilmore (2020), as well as Vennes (2022), explored the *good ol’ boys’ club*, *queen bee syndrome*, and the lack of female mentors and networking in the field to groom more females to join the profession. In a different viewpoint of another possible cause for fewer women garnering a superintendent position, Silverman (2004) suggested that females declined to pursue the top role for public education institutions, due to raising children and relocating to another district. In addition, researchers Derrington and Sharratt (2009) repeated a study in Washington 14 years apart, concluding that the leading barriers for women searching for

a superintendent position in 1993 were the least likely in 2007. The study revealed that women initially reported gender-role stereotyping and sex discrimination as the barriers existing against them in the early 1990s (Darrington & Sharratt, 2009). However, women reported self-imposed barriers, including family obligations and unwillingness or inability to relocate to a new school district, due to family concerns or a spouse's career (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Vennes, 2022). More recent research suggests that in both public and private sector career fields, self-imposed barriers during the pandemic have fallen more heavily on females, while expectations that females continue to fulfill their responsibilities in their careers (Sawchuk, 2022). Derrington and Sharratt (2009) also found conclusions were not limited to aspiring female superintendents only in the state of Washington. Instead, the authors noted similar findings in Texas, Illinois, Indiana, California, and Iowa (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009).

Despite the many barriers reported to explain the disproportionality of females holding a superintendent position, research and the literature are relatively absent on what current females who carry a superintendent position in a public education institution have done to overcome these barriers (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020). The literature presented how to “resolve, balance, and negotiate,” as well as what Boards of Education can do throughout the hiring process of candidates, but little research had been done directly on females who have defied odds to reach the top executive position, despite the barriers they have encountered (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009, p. 10; Glass, 2019; Miles, 2019; Silverman, 2004). Rather than continue to examine why women are not filling vacated roles of superintendents throughout the nation or other studies that show the qualities women bring to the table,

research is needed to provide aspiring females the required tools from those experienced in the current occupation.

Theoretical Framework

Sociologists noted the apparent problem that men dominated leadership roles in political and economic organizations during the 1970s (Acker, 1990; Risman & Davis, 2013). Part of the problem when examining organizational structures in the 1970s and 1980s was that researchers had not acknowledged, questioned, or investigated the aspects of gender and democracy (Acker, 1990). Therefore, the variables of women and gender were excluded from empirical and theoretical research, which resulted in no data or information related to these variables early in the feminist movement (Acker, 1990). As a result, the theory of feminism elicits negative connotations, which can cause hesitation to mention the word (Sandberg, 2013). Sandberg (2013) shared regarding a professor:

Even though her students were interested enough in gender equality to take an entire class on the subject, very few "felt comfortable using the word 'feminism.'" And even "fewer identified themselves as feminists." As Professor Elam noted, it is as if "being called a feminist was to suspect that some foul epithet has been hurled your way." (p. 142)

The negative connotation with the theory of feminism continues to complicate the argument of gender disparity for females seeking to climb the leadership ladder in organizations (Acker, 1990; Sandberg, 2013).

The feminist movement was derived from the lack of female representation and freedom of choice for females (Acker, 1990; Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Risman & Davis, 2013). More specifically, however, is the concept of Acker's gendered institutions

theory (1990). Before Acker's (1990) work came to light, the genesis of gender inequality research was already underway (Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Risman & Davis, 2013). Initially, sex studies viewed masculinity and femininity as being measured as polar ends of a scale (Risman & Davis, 2013). An individual could only be masculine or feminine; there were no in-between identifiers (Risman & Davis, 2013). Realizing both males and females can and do possess qualities on both ends of the spectrum and some in between, research developed in the 1970s and 1980s created a measurement tool still used today (Risman & Davis, 2013). Bem (2013) defined masculinity and femininity as attributes with "masculine traits defined as 'efficacy/agency/leadership' while feminine [was defined as] 'nurturance and empathy'" (p. 737).

Acker (1990) explicitly described:

Moss Kanter shows that gender differences in organizational behavior are due to structure rather than to characteristics of women and men as individuals. She argues that the problems women have in large organizations are consequences of their structural placement, crowded in dead-end jobs at the bottom and exposed as tokens at the top[.] Gender enters the picture through organizational roles that "carry characteristic images of the kinds of people that should occupy them." (p. 143)

The theory of structured organization of institutions, therefore, concluded that without an intentional reorganization of qualifications for jobs, gender differences would likely continue to persist (Acker, 1990; Longman et al., 2018). Leading researcher, Schein, adds to more recent research on organizational culture, that states the culture is influenced by historic events, religion, and group decisions (as cited in Longman et al., 2018). Despite

Schein's organizational culture studies and research being more recent than Acker's 1990 studies, there continues to be a gap in the literature on this phenomenon. Longman et al. (2018) suggested that organizational structure and females' complex demands of domestic and professional responsibilities continue to inhibit more females from possessing and maintaining leadership roles.

Further, Epstein concluded from a meta-analysis study of gender differences in private and public sectors that gender differences are due to social expectations and social roles created for each gender (as cited in Risman & Davis, 2013). From Epstein's meta-analysis, conclusions were drawn that *deceptive distinctions* occurred in the social hierarchy "where the dynamics between superordinate and subordinate groups are based on power and numerical domination, and not the cultural characteristics of either group. Here, gender is defined more as deception than reality" (Risman & Davis, 2013, p. 739). As researchers continued to see the trend that males and females had social roles that were culturally assigned and expected of either gender, quantitative research revealed that females did more domestic labor than their male spouses, "even when they work outside of the home as many hours per week and earn equivalent salaries" (Risman & Davis, 2013, p. 740).

Research revealed that historically and presently, gender is a social institution that continues to justify unequal access and expectations for females at home and in the career field (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Sandberg, 2013). Acker (1990) and Risman and Davis (2013) argued that class, social structure, and power were constructed through gender structure and division. Risman and Davis (2013) quoted fellow researcher Lorber's belief that gender equality will happen when "all individuals

are guaranteed equal access to valued resources and society is de-gendered” (p. 747).

However, scholars noted trends in females leaving the workforce over the past two decades (Longman et al., 2017). Helgesen (2017) quoted this phenomenon as

...increasing recognition that the structure of work was designed to reflect the realities of an all-male workforce whose constituents had few, if any, domestic responsibilities beyond supporting their families” yet this leads to a “...mental mismatch between what the marketplace assumes people will value in their work and what women most deeply value. (p. 58)

While women are culturally expected to enter the workforce and advance in their career positions to provide for their families financially, women’s domestic responsibilities do not decline (Longman et al., 2017; Sandberg, 2013). Lastly, it should be noted that gender as a social institution could be observed in the differences in salary between male and female superintendents. Zalaznick (2022a) reported that female superintendents make 96% of what male superintendents earn (para. 2).

Statement of the Problem

There continues to be large disproportionality between the number of men and women who hold the superintendency position in public education school districts across the nation (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Henderson, 2017; Ramaswamy, 2020). Many suggestions have been made as to why men continue to dominate the superintendent position, including the good ol’ boys’ club, the queen bee syndrome, the lack of female mentors for other females, as well as school board and recruiter bias (Cassidy et al., 2021; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Henderson, 2017; Maranto et al., 2018; Ramaswamy, 2020). The imbalance in gender in the role of school district

superintendents is representative of the theoretical roots of feminism, structured organizations, and Epstein's deceptive distinctions (Acker, 1990; Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Risman & Davis, 2013; Sandberg, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

Nearly 15 to 20 years ago, females noted that stereotypes of gender roles stood as the number one barrier to obtaining a top administrative school position (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Throughout history, researchers have identified obstacles that females faced when seeking a superintendent role, and most notable is the shift in self-reported barriers (Glass, 2019; Henderson, 2017; Miles, 2019; Mortenson, 2019; Silverman, 2004). Newer studies indicated self-imposed challenges as the leading obstacles to women reaching the superintendent level (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Henderson, 2017; Sampson, 2018). Despite recent research, few have researched the action steps females take to overcome self-imposed barriers to achieving the height of their career goals (Glass, 2019). The focus of this study will be on the obstacles experienced by women superintendents that led them to encounter and personally identify ways to overcome those obstacles. The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges of females seeking superintendency roles in Midwest school districts and the reasonable action steps they can take to overcome these barriers.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What barriers have current lead female superintendents encountered in their career journey to a superintendency role?

2. How have current lead female superintendents surmounted self-imposed, self-reported barriers?

Significance of the Study

Female educators may benefit from this study, specifically those aspiring to be a superintendent, as they seek strategies to enhance the journey to obtain the top official position in public education institutions. In addition, this study could lead to ways female and male educator colleagues can support other females in their journey to become a superintendent. Finally, this study may validate current trends revealed in the literature of existing barriers for females who aspire to be a superintendent, including but not limited to: gender bias; family obligations; inability or unwillingness to move due to a spouse's career or family obligations; gender-role responsibilities; the "boys' club" culture; unavailability of family support; and lack of female support and mentors (Cassidy et al., 2021; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sampson, 2018).

Silverman (2004) quoted AASA's documented growth in females holding the top position in school districts from the early 1990s. However, the disproportionate rate continued to exist at an extreme level between males and females 14 years later (Silverman, 2004). Yet, research revealed many factors in favor of females leading school districts, including higher pressure for school districts to perform well on state standardized assessments, demands, and high expectations of the Every Student Succeeds Act, in addition to more females stepping into administrative roles at building levels (Cassidy et al., 2020; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018). With superintendents required to be masters as financial planners and spenders, leaders,

makers of change, and influencers of legislative actions, women can use their more female-gendered qualities of inclusiveness and relationship-driven approaches to be effective executive leaders of school districts (Cassidy et al., 2020; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018). After analyzing reported barriers for current female superintendents leading school districts in the Midwest state, the results of this study shed light on how female leaders have overcome those barriers to obtain and maintain a lead superintendent position successfully. With these insights, aspiring females may wish to adopt the same strategies to fulfill their career goal of becoming a superintendent. These insights could also benefit female educators beyond the Midwest state studied.

Definition of Key Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined:

Good Ol' Boys' Club

The good ol' boys' club is a theoretical club that excludes female candidates from promotional movement, questioning females as to their experience, background, and skills, while men with the same credentials and experience, or less, were not asked about these characteristics (Cassidy et al., 2021; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019).

Non-Adult Child(ren)

A non-adult child(ren) is a dependent child that one is responsible for raising and supporting financially and time-wise.

Self-Imposed Barriers

Self-imposed barriers are "the failure to attain the superintendency or the decision to avoid it because of family responsibilities" (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009, p. 9).

Superintendent

“The [public] school district’s CEO” (Ramaswamy, 2020, para. 5).

Queen Bee Syndrome

The queen bee syndrome is characterized by a lack of support or a direct barrier by females currently in power, limiting other females from growing in power (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Sandberg, 2013).

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

The scope of the study was bounded by the following delimitations:

Time Frame

Data were collected in the Spring 2022 semester. The survey was sent out on April 4, 2022, and left open for two weeks for data collection, closing on April 19, 2022.

Location of the Study

The physical location of the study was a Midwest state in the United States.

Sample

Participants in the sample must identify as female and currently hold a lead superintendent position in a Midwest state.

Criteria

Female superintendent participants were eligible if they currently served in a lead superintendent position in a Midwest state, with a female gender identifier.

The following limitations were identified in this study:

Sample Demographics

There were 140 female lead superintendents in the Midwest registered on the state association of school administrators.

Instrument

A qualitative survey was developed to elicit answers to the research questions. The survey questions were derived from suggestions obtained from the literature review regarding the reported barriers females face when seeking a superintendent position (Cordova, 2019; Glass, 2019; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Sampson, 2018).

In addition, there were open-ended questions to gain personal insight from participants about their current practices for overcoming self-imposed barriers. Descriptions of methods for overcoming self-imposed obstacles for females to obtain a superintendent role were used to formulate questions designed to elicit responses reflecting how well those practices were implemented in the participants' current roles as lead superintendents in the Midwest state.

The following assumptions were accepted:

1. The responses of the participants were offered honestly and willingly.
2. The sample was representative of the general population of educators who held teaching certificates from the Midwest state.

Summary

Gender equality for females, specifically in the role of superintendent of schools, has drastically improved since the early 1900s (Cassidy et al., 2021; Garn & Brown, 2008; Maranto et al., 2018). However, there still lies large disproportionality between males and females at the helm of leading school districts throughout the nation (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018; Ramaswamy, 2020; Silverman, 2004). There exists much research on the barriers females face in the top executive seat as a superintendent that shows nearly identical reasons across the country, including gender

bias, family obligations, inability or unwillingness to move, due to spouse's career or family obligations; gender-role obligations; good ol' boys' club, unavailability of family support, and lack of female support or mentors (Acker, 1990; Cassidy et al., 2021; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020).

This qualitative study was designed to identify and analyze the barriers encountered by lead female superintendents in a Midwest state and how they could surmount those barriers. The foundation of females in leadership positions can be found in Chapter Two, the literature review. The literature review includes the following: the historical significance of feminism, specifically regarding organizational structure; gendered stereotype barriers; and self-imposed barriers.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceived challenges women face when attempting to obtain a lead superintendent position in a Midwest state and how the participants have overcome these barriers. Understanding the evolution of feminism and organizational structures regarding social and gender structures will enhance the ability of women to navigate hierarchal positions in public education institutions. Qualitative data will be collected through a survey exploring female superintendents' perceived obstacles encountered on the journey to a lead superintendent position and strategies to overcome these barriers. Additionally, qualitative data will be collected by conducting follow-up interviews to understand further how participants overcame obstacles they believed to be self-imposed.

Chapter Two is a review of literature on the historical and current view of females in the top executive leadership role of superintendent in a public education institution. The evolution of the theoretical framework of feminism, the history of females in superintendent positions, and the currently identified barriers that exist for females attempting to advance in public school leadership roles are provided. Finally, the main barriers cited in the literature for females in their journey to a lead superintendent position are broken down to understand better how females surmounted perceived self-imposed obstacles.

Theoretical Framework

Various models, reasons, and theories have been examined throughout history, attempting to explain why fewer women are in the superintendency role (Acker, 1990; Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Cassidy et al., 2021; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield &

Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Klatt, 2014; Longman et al., 2018; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020; Risman & Davis, 2013; Sharp et al., 2004). Many of the original models centered around a psychological explanation of why more women were not at the top executive position in a school district and included: Estler's 1975 meritocracy model, Schmuck's 1980s individual perspective, Hanscot and Tyack's 1981 internal barriers, and Ortiz and Marshall's 1988 person-centered explanations approach (as cited in Sharp et al., 2004). Feminism theory has grossly evolved since the early 1970s and 1980s, focusing on individual female rights (Acker, 1990; Glass, 2019; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Longman et al., 2018; Maranto et al., 2018; Risman & Davis, 2013). At the inception of research on feminism throughout the 1970 and 1980 decades, early researchers did not question the organizational structures of employers (Acker, 1990). Therefore, little to no empirical or theoretical research was reported early on in the feminist movement (Acker, 1990). Acker (1990) further argued that in addition to the lack of research regarding females as leaders in the organizational workplaces, men dominated leadership roles in nearly all political and economic organizations during the 1970s. Schein's research on organizational culture defined cultures as assumptions, behaviors, and perceptions that guide decisions and behavior within an organization (Longman et al., 2018).

Feminism has an extensive range of understanding (Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Groenhout, 2002). Researchers have studied various characteristics of women in leadership, including biological differences, gendered personality differences, sex roles, sex differences in organizational participation, class and gender differences, and liberal feminism, to seek a better understanding of the complexity of women in leadership roles

throughout organizations, both private and public (Acker, 1990; Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Cassidy et al., 2021; Groenhout, 2002; Maranto et al., 2018; Risman & Davis, 2013). Acker and Van Houten (1974) researched the Hawthorne Effect, which supported the authors' claim that organizational structures were influenced by gender. The authors expanded:

Specifically, sex differences in organizational participation are related to differential recruitment of women into jobs requiring dependence and passivity, selective recruitment of particularly compliant women into these jobs, and control mechanisms used in organizations for women, which reinforce control mechanisms to which they are subjected in other areas of society. (Acker & Van Houten, 1974, p. 161)

Risman and Davis (2013) supported Acker and Van Houten's (1974) work by analyzing original sex studies used for employment and personality scales that measured two ends of a spectrum: masculinity and femininity. Risman and Davis (2013) concluded an individual could possess no shared measures. However, Risman and Davis (2013) also suggested that Bem's further studies during the 1970s and 1980s revealed this measurement tool used for employability and personality measures did not accurately define the actual personality traits of those taking the assessments. Instead, the authors claimed the gendered assessments were based upon "sex role socialization theory [which] maintains that children are accordingly rewarded for displaying the gender-appropriate behaviors that they are encouraged to perform" (Risman & Davis, 2013, p. 737).

Acker (1990) furthered the research of gendered social organization theory as he explored class and gender and reported, "Examining class and gender, I have argued that

class is constructed through gender and that class relations are always gendered” (Acker, 1990, p. 145). Risman and Davis (2013) stated that most quantitative research revealed that women do more domestic labor than their husbands, even when they matched or exceeded the number of hours their spouse worked outside of the home. Although there are significant variations in gender division, research showed that men are almost always at the highest levels of executive power (Acker, 1990; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). Therefore, researchers argued that gender is a social institution (Risman & Davis, 2013).

While many researchers argued social organizational theories, other researchers questioned if other theories explained why women continue to fall short in leadership positions in an organization (Cassidy et al., 2021; Cordova, 2019; Glass, 2019; Groenhout, 2002; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018; Mortensen, 2019). Groenhout (2002) argued that liberal political thought was based on Kant’s original work that everyone possesses their own rights and is therefore gender-neutral, indicating that women have the right to make decisions. Research further revealed that if women are denied possession of their rights, this is an infringement of their rights, which is morally unacceptable (Groenhout, 2002). However, Groenhout (2002) argued that depending upon the lens of liberalism or feminism that one looks through reveals whether one supports liberal feminism theory altogether or separately.

Liberalism is based upon fundamental rights for individuals, defined by rationality and autonomy, which Groenhout (2002) broke down into two separate categories, individual thesis and rights thesis. Groenhout (2002) differentiated between individual and rights thesis and explained, "Both rely on the notion that there is

something morally significant to human capacities for rational deliberation" (p. 54). Groenhout (2002) theorized that individual rights are based upon individuals being thought of as individuals first, not as a part of a larger group, while the rights thesis argues that people have rights that are "politically protected liberties and entitlements first and foremost" (p. 54). If women have their individual rights first and foremost, as Groenhout argued, the individual rights are influenced by the structural, organizational decisions that influence organizational policies of paid vacation and sick leave; maternity leave; higher wages; no access to paid family leave, or health insurance (Sandberg, 2013). Without equal rights access to support the domestic responsibilities women encounter, women cannot move up in the gendered organizational structure (Acker, 1990; Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Cassidy et al., 2021; Sandberg, 2013).

History of Females in the Superintendency Role

Superintendent positions first appeared in Buffalo, NY, and Louisville, KY (Rinehart, 2005). Historically through the 1900s, the percentage of female superintendents was minimal and stayed relatively the same, representing approximately 5% to 11% of all school districts' superintendents nationwide (Garn & Brown, 2008, p. 50). Female representation in superintendent positions grew from 1910 to 1930, from 9% to 11% of all superintendents being female (Garn & Brown, 2009, p. 50). Theorists suggested the triumph of women gaining the right to vote in the 1920s as a possible explanation for this growth (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 22). More recently, females holding superintendent positions have increased from 6.6% of school districts nationwide in 1992 to 13% in 2004, according to AASA (Silverman, 2004, p. 16). However, further statistical analysis from AASA surveys revealed the percentage of female superintendents

in 2010 was approximately 24% (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020, p. 14). In 2019 the rate of female superintendents was 25%, indicating a plateau effect, with little growth in the number of female leaders (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020, p. 14). AASA results also showed that the statistical representation of females leading school districts was not influenced by enrollment size or racial or ethnic diversity (Cassidy et al., 2021; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, statistics showed that the role of the superintendency of schools is the most male-dominated leadership position comparative to any other profession in the United States (Cassidy et al., 2021, p. 127; Garn & Brown, 2008, p. 51; Glass, 2019, para. 1; Sharp et al., 2004, p. 22). Furthermore, although 75% of all teachers throughout the United States were women, only 18% of women lead educational efforts in districts' lead positions (Garn & Brown, 2008, p. 51; Glass, 2019; para. 1; Silverman, 2004, p. 14). Because of the topic of males overwhelmingly dominating school superintendent positions nationwide, an article was published by *USA Today* seeking to explore the phenomena. A Hewlett Packard study showed that "...men will apply for a position if they meet 60% of the qualifications, while women will apply for a position when they meet 100% of the qualifications" (Ramaswamy, 2020, "Finding top talent" section).

Currently Identified Barriers

The literature revealed various obstacles females have encountered as they attempted to obtain a superintendent position during their career (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Klatt, 2014; Longman et al., 2018; Palladino et al., 2007; Ramaswamy, S., 2020; Sandberg, 2013; Sharp et al., 2004; Silverman, 2004). The most

commonly cited barriers throughout the literature are the good ol' boys' club; the queen bee syndrome; a lack of female mentors for females aspiring to be a superintendent; the lack of females with high school principal career pathway experience; gender bias; and self-imposed barriers (Cassidy et al., 2021; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Klatt, 2014; Longman et al., 2018; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Palladino et al., 2007; Ramaswamy, S., 2020; Sampson, 2018; Sandberg, 2013; Sharp et al., 2004; Silverman, 2004). A detailed review of each of these barriers is below.

Good Ol' Boys' Club

When attempting to explain the disproportionality between males and females representing the superintendent role, Enfield and Gilmore (2020) provided one possible example: the good ol' boys' club. The authors elaborated upon the term of the good ol' boys' club as female candidates for a superintendent position were questioned as to their experience, background, and skills, while men with the same credentials and experience, or less, were not asked about these characteristics (Cassidy et al., 2021; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Sawchuk, 2022). Further, men were almost always paid more than their female counterparts (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Sawchuk, 2022). Domenech, AASA executive director (as cited in Ramaswamy, 2020) said, "Both in education and in the business world, there's a boys club. The males that tend to be in the hiring position often make the decision in the factor of another male." Sharp et al. (2004) conducted a three-state study of female superintendents in Texas, Indiana, and Illinois, exploring female superintendents' perceptions of barriers that existed while seeking their career aspiration of becoming a superintendent. The

authors noted that the study's female participants stated that Board of Education members were primarily comprised of more male than female board members, believing men hire men superintendents (Sharp et al., 2004). In addition, 50.4% of the women superintendent participants indicated that exclusion from the good ol' boys' club was somewhat of a barrier in their journey to a superintendent position (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 29). Further, in a study completed on Minnesota female superintendents and their perceptions of barriers to the superintendency role, one of the participants exclaimed,

Retired, white male leaders (of a previous generation) are running the search firms that lead superintendent searches in Minnesota. They are absolutely a part of a 'good old boys' network and pretend to be about equity and change, but they are not. (Mortensen, 2019, p. 80)

Sawchuk (2022) indicated the same concern of having White men overwhelmingly representing members of the board of education. Sawchuk (2022) also suggested from various female aspiring superintendents, “Women’s personality traits are frequently discussed, rather than their knowledge, skills, and performance” (para. 31). Additionally, according to the last two 10-year AASA studies, most school boards are comprised of men, indicating that school boards mainly comprised of men are reluctant to hire women (Glass, 2019, Section: School boards are reluctant to hire women superintendents). This claim was supported by a study conducted in Illinois for aspiring K-12 administrators (Cassidy et al., 2019).

There was a larger presence of men in the superintendency position. Women perceived the barriers of the higher number of male candidates for superintendency positions, socialization in the old-buddy-system to support other

men, and greater levels of acceptance of males by male administrators. (Cassidy et al., 2019, p. 132)

Queen Bee Syndrome

Throughout the research, the queen bee syndrome was defined as a lack of support, or a direct barrier, of females currently in power, limiting other females from growing in power (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Sandberg, 2013). During the 1970s, this behavior was common enough among females that the term, queen bee syndrome, was used to describe women in power, especially in male-dominated fields, to keep other females below them as *worker bees* (Sandberg, 2013). Enfield and Gilmore (2020) echoed these declarations regarding the queen bee syndrome: women perceive other women as competition rather than embracing a mentorship opportunity.

When interviewing female superintendents in Illinois, Indiana, and Texas, female superintendents stated that the lack of influential sponsors was somewhat of a barrier to 53.9% of those interviewed (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 29). Sandberg (2013) noted the queen bee syndrome existed among females in the private and public sectors. Sandberg quoted Stanford professor Gruenfeld, who said, "We need to look out for one another, work together, and act more like a coalition. As individuals, we have relatively low levels of power. Working together, we are fifty percent of the population and therefore have real power" (p. 160). In addition, Schein (2010) contributed to defining an organization's culture with his work in the private business sector. Schein (2010) defined organizational culture as:

[a] pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well

enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 18)

In a study completed with Minnesota female superintendents and their perceptions of barriers to the superintendency role, 12% of participants stated lack of peer collegial support was definitely a problem, while 20% of participants claimed this was somewhat of a problem (Mortensen, 2019, p. 72). In a study focused on the power of career paths for women obtaining a superintendent position, one participant advised: “Female teachers need women in top leadership positions to inspire and mentor them to take up challenges of leading and to provide visible role models for female students developing leadership skills,” (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020, p. 1). The literature historically and currently suggests females need females to be supported for advancement, not to cause another barrier to leadership in public education (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Sandberg, 2013; Sharp et al., 2004).

Female Mentoring and Networking

The need for female mentors for other females is vital for the success and growth of other females joining the superintendency role (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; McMurdock, 2022; Palladino et al., 2007; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sandberg, 2013; Sawchuk, 2022; Sharp et al., 2004). In a three-state study of female superintendents, 55.2% of participants said that a lack of professional networking was somewhat of a barrier, while 12.1% said it was a serious matter (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 29). Researchers suggested ways to increase the number of females representing superintendents nationwide (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; McMurdock, 2022; Ramaswamy, 2020). One way to increase the number of females in the superintendent role is for colleagues to recommend the AASA Aspiring

Superintendents Academy for Female Leaders or the Chiefs for Change's Future Chief's Program (Cordova, 2019; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020). The women participants who participate in the Chiefs for Change's Future Chief's Program are twice as likely to apply for lead superintendent positions compared to those who did not enroll in the women-only programming (Cordova, 2019). Additionally, female superintendents should intentionally mentor other women to become superintendents, whether in-district, out-of-district, or using political capital (Sandberg, 2013). Female career mentorship is vital to the success of female representation in the most executive-level position in public schools (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; & Ramaswamy, 2020).

Gullo and Sperandio (2020) described a second-generation gender bias as "Hidden barriers to women's success such as a lack of role models, organizational structures and practices historically designed to fit men's lives, fewer available professional network opportunities, and cultural expectations" (p. 3). Further, female superintendents interviewed in the states of Indiana, Illinois, and Texas declared a lack of influential sponsors was found to be somewhat of a barrier to 53.9% of female superintendents (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 29). Glass (2019) analyzed AASA's most recent 10-year study, in which results implied that females have a less developed mentoring system than men. Male or female mentors can assist females in supporting mobility within their current district through promotions (Glass, 2019). In attempting to discover how rural female superintendents can withstand the superintendency role, researchers suggested women collaborate with other females to lessen the feeling of isolation when serving in this role (Palladino, 2007). Klatt (2014) conducted an in-depth study between one male and one female rural superintendent with similar life conditions. In Klatt's

(2014) study, the female superintendent in a rural school district reiterated that she felt if she could find other females in the profession to collaborate and network with, the isolated-feeling in the superintendency role would be diminished.

In an attempt to close the gender disparity gap, females must first be interested in the lead superintendent position, which data supports they are not (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). By women empowering other women to apply for the superintendency position, this strategy could be one attempt to attract more women to the executive leadership role for public education institutions (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020. Ramaswamy, 2020). Other studies showed that female career professionals are ambitious to sponsor other career aspiring women: "A recent survey found that 'high-potential women' working in business want to 'pay it forward,' and 73 percent have reached out to other women to help them develop their talents" (Sandberg, 2013, p. 164). Workplace expectations, specifically a lack of mentors, cannot continue to be one of the greatest perceived barriers for women (Cassidy et al., 2021). Lastly, with carefully selected mentors for aspiring female superintendents, female leaders can gain promotional status if attempting to advance in-district (Glass, 2019).

HS Principal Career Pathway

Throughout public education hierarchy trends, individuals who become superintendents typically are secondary-level principals, first: "According to a 2015 report by NYCOS [New York Council of School Superintendents], 81% of new superintendents came from either a middle/high school principalship or elsewhere in the district office," (Ramaswamy, 2020, para. 12). Glass (2019) discovered that of the 297 women superintendents in the AASA study, only 130 were former elementary teachers.

Over half of all participants in the study came from a secondary background (Glass, 2019, “Poorly Positioned” section). Based upon Acker’s (1990) argument that gender bias is incorporated into organizational structures, and knowing that the vast majority of new superintendents come from either a middle/high school principalship, it should be noted that men make up 67.3% of high school principals, and 60% of middle school principals (Ramaswamy, 2020, para. 10). In addition, Sharp et al. (2004) completed a tristate study that concluded that few women apply for the high school principal role. However, it is the most indicative position that leads to a lead superintendent position (Sharp et al., 2004).

Gender Bias

The term gender bias is commonly misunderstood to mean that only males have a bias against females (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Sandberg, 2013). While males have historically and currently been proven to be biased against women, gender bias could also exist from female to female (Sandberg, 2013). Sandberg (2013) elaborated upon this common misconception and unfortunate truth that females, themselves, are not only the victims of sexism but also can present this obstacle for other women. As a result, women are not only victims of sexism, but they can also be offenders (Sandberg, 2013).

Perceptions are changing for women regarding the obstacles that stand in their way to a superintendent position (Cassidy et al., 2021; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020). Women who participated in a 1993 study in the state of Washington indicated barriers for women attempting to reach the superintendent level were perceived as institutional, such as gender-role stereotyping and

sex discrimination (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Cassidy et al. (2021) researched gender differences in perceived barriers of aspiring superintendents and concluded that women reported higher levels of perceived barriers in their journey to the superintendency. These authors replicated their study 14 years later, and female superintendent participants noted gender-role stereotyping and sex discrimination as the least perceived barrier to the superintendent role (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Risman and Davis (2013) cited Lorber's 1994 argument that gender is a social institution, where gender has created and justified differences between men and women, therefore justifying the inequality that exists between the careers both groups hold. Not coincidentally are the dates that Lorber cited with their gender as a social institution argument and when women reported correlated obstacles during the same time period (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Risman & Davis, 2013). Gullo and Sperandio (2020) concluded, "Gender equality in education remains a significant social justice issue" (p. 1).

With men historically dominating economic and political leadership roles, gender bias is certain to be embedded in the organizational structures developed through social institutions (Acker, 1990; Cassidy et al., 20201). Kanter argued that the problems encountered by women in organizations are the structures of positions they are in, all dead-end jobs that cannot move up simply because women do not possess the look of the kinds of people that should occupy them (Acker, 1990; Cassidy et al., 2021; Maranto et al., 2018). This implication that women must possess a certain look to move up in the structural hierarchy of an organization implies gender bias and stereotyping, whether conscious or subconscious, that others possess when making a decision on promoting women (Acker, 1990; Acker & Van Houten, 1974). Men are more likely to be promoted,

and, more quickly, to lead principals than females (Maranto et al., 2018). In addition, males aspired to be promoted to the superintendency 1.3 times more than females (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020, p. 5).

There is a gender bias that continues to emerge between how females are perceived differently than males, even when they respond nearly the same way in handling a situation (Cassidy et al., 2021; Klatt, 2014; Risman & Davis, 2013; Sandberg, 2013). Klatt (2014) elaborated on suggestions in the literature that women who possess male qualities such as being too direct are considered "bitches;" even when they possess other effective skills and knowledge required in a superintendent role, such as financial matters and curriculum knowledge. However, women who had nurturing and collaborative qualities, often associated with female attributes, as well as a commanding disposition, were usually considered effective leaders (Cassidy et al., 2021; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Klatt, 2014).

Board of Education members reported they typically do not see females as being strong managers nor financial experts, therefore limiting women's abilities to move up in the hierarchical climb to a superintendent position, though there was no basis behind members' claims as to why they did not see females as not possessing these skills (Glass, 2019; Sharp et al., 2004). However, in a three-state study completed in Indiana, Texas, and Illinois, 95.7% of women stated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that women were seen as weaker in school finance and facilities (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 32). There was little to no basis behind why those individuals reported concerns or reservations about promoting women, implicating the very existence of gender bias and stereotyping in the workplace (Glass, 2019; Sharp et al., 2004).

In addition to the above-mentioned gender bias that exists for females advancing to the superintendency position in public education, salary variances also exist between male and female superintendents. Male superintendents earn higher salaries than female superintendents (Zalaznick, 2022a). Female superintendents are earning about 96% of what their male counterparts do in the same position (Zalaznick, 2022a, para. 2). Though wage discrepancies have drastically drawn closer to the same amount, there is still variance between male and female superintendent salary packages.

Board of Education Roles

Board of Education roles rely heavily upon the governing of school districts, but most importantly, the selection of the individual who is named superintendent of schools (Cassidy et al., 2021). Female superintendent Bhavna Sharma-Lewis in a workshop called, “What Happens When the School Board Falls Out of Love With You,” shared, “You have to be aligned with your board, otherwise you’re never going to be successful” (Zalaznick, 2022c, para. 2). Cassidy et al. (2021) proposed the Gatekeeping Theory, where school boards hire consultant firms, which hold the key to whom will be selected as the superintendent of schools. Mortensen (2019) conducted a study on Minnesota female superintendents and their perceptions of barriers to the superintendency role. In the 2019 study, one female participant reported:

Retired, white male leaders (of a previous generation) are running the search firms that lead superintendent searches in Minnesota. They are absolutely a part of a ‘good old boys’ network and pretend to be about equity and change, but they are not. (Mortensen, 2019, p. 80)

Moreover, when studying gender differences in perceived barriers of aspiring superintendents, Cassidy et al. (2021) noted in 75 searches where a female was one of the finalists, only 12% were hired (p. 129). Yet, when Board of Education members are primarily female, female superintendents are hired more often (Cassidy et al., 2021).

Authors studying the phenomenon of fewer females in the most executive seat of school districts have focused their research on what school boards are in search of when choosing the successful characteristics of superintendents (Glass, 2019; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Sampson, 2018). The research revealed that Board of Education members report that fiscal management and the understanding of budgets are the utmost vital components of a successful superintendent applicant (Glass, 2019; Maranto et al., 2018). In the most recent AASA 10-year study, 82% of female superintendents indicated school board members as not viewing them as strong managers, and 76% of females reported their governing Board of Education members did not view them as capable of handling district finances (Glass, 2019).

While few Board of Education governing bodies cite curriculum and instruction experience as a critical component for the ideal superintendent candidate, more recently, there has been a greater emphasis on national mandates for school performance (Maranto et al., 2018; Silverman, 2004). As a result, board of Education members may shift focus to the expertise of curriculum and instructional components that many female superintendent applicants possess (Glass, 2019; Maranto et al., 2018; Sharp et al., 2004; Silverman, 2004). Women are twice as likely as men to have previous experience as curriculum specialists (Maranto et al., 2018). However, with more females having expertise in the instructional and curriculum roles, many studies find that females have

less experience in secondary administration, which is the direct pipeline to a superintendent position (Glass, 2019; Maranto et al., 2018). Maranto et al. (2018) concluded in their gender study in the superintendency that leaders of high schools, who are most often males, are often chosen as better candidates for the superintendent position.

One of the most widely reported reasons that females are disproportionately sitting in the executive seat is due to school boards not hiring females, second only to females being discouraged from preparing for the superintendency (Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). Enfield and Gilmore (2020) suggested that one solution to combating the lack of females pursuing the superintendent role is to advise the governing bodies of the importance of female leadership by being intentional about who is presenting in front of Board of Education members, promoting within the district of service for females, and how school officials talk about leaders in front of Board members. Gullo and Sperandio (2020) explored the power of career paths for both males and females, leading to the superintendent position. In their research, Gullo and Sperandio (2020) suggested that females might consider an in-district pathway to being promoted to a superintendent position, as females have already created networking opportunities in the district for which they are working. In a Kansas study conducted on female superintendent perceptions of challenges in seeking the top executive role, every single participant reported being promoted within the district they served to the top position (Miles, 2019). Of most importance in understanding the disparity of females in the superintendent position is to raise awareness among school boards and government officials to recruit more females into leadership roles (Glass, 2019; Maranto et al., 2018).

Self-Imposed Barriers

Perhaps females remaining less interested in the lead superintendent position is correlated not only to the demands of the executive role but also to balancing their personal family responsibilities (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Silverman, 2004). In 2007, female school district executive leaders in the state of Washington reported self-imposed barriers as their greatest obstacle to advancing their careers, which included components such as family responsibilities, domestic responsibilities, and child-rearing as limiting females' abilities to advance in their careers (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Maranto et al. (2018) indicated one suggestion for explaining the disparity of women in the top administration seat compared to men was that some females enter the teaching profession due to the family-friendly work hours, leave policies, and cultural norms that allow them to take care of their children and families. The authors suggested, "Given the traditional gender roles, female elementary educators are suspected of remaining in teaching roles, while allowing their male spouses to pursue higher leadership positions" (Maranto et al., 2018, p. 14). Study findings from AASA's most recent 10-year study echoed that women choose to enter education as a career to be teachers and do not aspire to be an administrator (Glass, 2019). Therefore, some studies suggest that women are disinterested in the top superintendency position due to the lack of desire to juggle professional and personal responsibilities (Glass, 2019; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019).

In a Kansas study examining female superintendents' barriers to being the executive leader of school districts, nearly all women who were interviewed stated they waited to apply for a superintendent position until their children were older (Miles,

2019). In a study of Minnesota female superintendents and their challenges in seeking a superintendent job, 20% of participants reported family responsibilities as a barrier, while 40% of participants reported family responsibilities as somewhat of a barrier (Mortensen, 2019, p. 72). In comparison, the most recent AASA 10-year study analyzing why more women are not representing the superintendency seat showed that participants recognized the time commitment leading a district requires days and nights and therefore chose their family as the priority (Glass, 2019). Additionally, in a three-state study of female superintendents, 65.5% of women had no school-age children at the time they took the survey; yet, 69.6% of women said they did not feel like they could not apply for a job due to a lack of spousal support or because of children (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 30).

Cassidy et al. (2020) and Derrington and Sharratt (2009) suggested that women superintendents report that although career expectations continue to increase for women, there is no decrease in the domestic responsibilities at home and in raising children. The implications of having a better understanding of self-imposed barriers for women in the workforce are quoted by the New York State Council of School Superintendents, “Given the time and stress demands of the superintendency, much more work needs to be done to understand these differences and whether (or perhaps, how) traditional gender roles around family responsibility impact the path to the superintendency” (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020, p. 7). Enfield and Gilmore (2020) suggested the *motherhood paradox* in which females model making time for family and themselves and sharing how females can effectively conjure both professional and personal responsibilities.

In addition to domestic and child-rearing responsibilities remaining a barrier for women to pursue the superintendency, so too is the inability to relocate their families

(Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Miles, 2019; Silverman, 2004). Miles (2019) noted that participants reported their ability to be promoted was limited by their inability to relocate due to their husbands being unable or unwilling to relocate. Men and women superintendents in the AASA study stated that their mobility was limited due to their spouses with their own professional careers (Glass, 2019). Women advancing in the superintendency is mainly dependent upon how supportive their spouses are in their career advancement (Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Mortensen, 2019). In a tristate study completed by Sharp et al. (2004), 73.4% of women said that the stress of superintendency did not impact their marriage, while 26.6% said it had (p. 31). In a 2007 study of well-educated professional women who had left the paid workforce, 60% reported their husbands as the critical factor in their decision (Sandberg, 2013, p. 110). Female superintendents in the state of Minnesota stated that their success in being able to advance to a lead superintendent position was largely dependent upon “supportive husbands who were able to relocate to support the career of their spouses” (Mortensen, 2019, p. 74). In conclusion, spouses can be the determining factor in whether women pursue advancement in their careers (Cassidy et al., 2021; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Sandberg, 2013; Silverman, 2004).

Summary

The perceived challenges and barriers for females pursuing the superintendency are founded on the belief of feminism in which women deserve equal access to all rights (Acker, 1990; Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Groenhout, 2002; Risman & Davis, 2013). The history of females in the superintendency role and the barriers females have

encountered are multi-faceted (Cassidy et al., 2021; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sandberg, 2013; Sharp et al., 2004; Silverman, 2004). Currently identified barriers reported by females include the good ol' boys' club; the queen bee syndrome; female mentoring and networking; gender bias; Board of Education roles; and self-imposed barriers (Cassidy et al., 2021; Cordova, 2019; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Klatt, 2014; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sampson, 2018; Sandberg, 2013; Sharp et al., 2004; Silverman, 2004). Ongoing research to understand how females overcome these barriers to the superintendency position is required to diminish the disparity between males and females in the chief executive position for school districts (Cassidy et al., 2021; Cordova, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019).

In Chapter Three, the methodology for conducting this qualitative study of female reported barriers and strategies females have utilized to surmount barriers to the superintendency in a Midwest state is outlined. The chapter includes the problem and purpose of the study, research questions, research design, population and sample, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations. The steps taken to collect and analyze the qualitative data needed to conduct this study are outlined in each section.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this study, participants identified the barriers females have encountered in their journey to securing a lead superintendent position in a Midwest state. Further, female superintendents also explored their triumphs in surmounting these barriers to hold and maintain a lead superintendent position in a Midwest state public education institution. The results of the self-reported barriers, and the ways the female superintendents conquered them, were analyzed. Qualitative data were collected to answer the research questions posed in the study. Female superintendents completed a survey and participated in answering open-ended interview questions. The problem and purpose, research questions and hypotheses, research design, population and sample, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations are described in this chapter.

Problem and Purpose Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges of females seeking superintendency roles in a Midwest state's school districts and the reasonable action steps females were willing to take to overcome these barriers. Data were obtained through surveys and individual interviews with participants. Many researchers have identified barriers that females faced when seeking a superintendent role throughout history, and most notable is the shift in self-reported barriers (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Klatt 2014; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sharp et al., 2004). While gender bias still occurs as females are seeking superintendent positions, other obstacles also lie between them and the top executive seat for public schools, including the good ol' boys' club; the queen bee syndrome; a lack of female mentors in the field, and the inability to maintain heavy domestic roles and professional

responsibilities simultaneously (Cassidy et al., 2021; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Klatt, 2014; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sawchuk, 2022; Sharp et al., 2004). Despite the current research, few have researched the willingness of females to take the action steps to overcome self-imposed barriers to reach their career goals. The results of this study suggest solutions for females to overcome self-imposed obstacles to obtain the career goal of becoming a superintendent and having a better work-life balance. A fully exploratory qualitative study was conducted with lead female superintendents in a Midwest state. The study was focused on obstacles that lead women superintendents have encountered and personally-identified ways to overcome these various types of obstacles.

Research Questions

The following research questions and hypotheses guided the study:

1. What barriers have current lead female superintendents encountered in their career journey to a superintendency role?
2. How have current lead female superintendents surmounted self-imposed, self-reported barriers?

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was used for this study, considering the qualitative data derived from interviewing participants consisted of the shared phenomenon of surmounting barriers as a female seeking a lead superintendent position in a Midwest state. Female education professionals need other females' direct stories to help explain phenomena (Cassidy et al., 2021; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Klatt, 2014; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy,

2020). Females mentoring other females could benefit those involved and the field of education by producing more female leaders (Cordova, 2019; Glass, 2019; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Sampson, 2018). Interviews were conducted to gain insight and learn first-hand perspectives from female superintendents on surmounting barriers beyond the results collected from the initial survey.

Population and Sample

This study included female lead superintendents registered and listed with the Midwest state's Association of School Administrators. To qualify as a participant in this research, one was a registered current female lead superintendent in a Midwest school district listed in the Midwest state's Association of School Administrators' registry, with a female gender identifier. Potential participants were sent a description of the study and an invitation to participate.

Qualitative data were obtained through the administration of the survey. Participants revealed their length of time in public education, including prior positions, before obtaining the current superintendent role. In addition, this survey asked what obstacles the female participants had encountered when seeking a superintendent role and while serving in the lead role. Next, the survey asked what steps superintendents had taken to overcome the barriers considered self-imposed by the literature (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Finally, a question at the end of the survey requested participation in a follow-up interview. Follow-up interviews were conducted to obtain an in-depth understanding of female superintendents' self-imposed barriers and how they strategically overcame these barriers to perform their career roles.

The survey instrument was sent to all 140 female superintendents registered in the Midwest state's Association of School Administrators' registry, a census survey (Fraenkel et al., 2019). Data for all responses were used to report the survey findings. Every sample should be as large as can be reasonably handled; specifically, in qualitative studies, the sample usually includes 1 to 20 participants (Fraenkel et al., 2019). Using this recommendation, the sample size for the interviews in this study was four participants, due to the potentially limited availability of lead females in superintendent roles in the Midwest state. Convenience sampling was used based upon the convenience and availability of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although convenience sampling is less desirable, the time-constraint demands in the personal and professional lives of superintendent were taken into consideration, as this is a focus of the research questions of this study. The selection of participants in the follow-up interview was based upon a first-come, first-served basis.

Instrumentation

In an effort to gain insight into how female superintendents surmounted perceived barriers to a lead superintendent position, a phenomenological research design was chosen for this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An original survey instrument and original interview questions were used to obtain qualitative data.

Survey

An original survey was designed first to identify perceived barriers participants had encountered in their journey to obtain a top-level executive position in Midwest public education school districts. The questions posed throughout this survey were created from suggestions in the literature, which identified prior research results on

female superintendents' perceived barriers to the superintendent position (Cordova, 2019; Glass, 2019; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Sampson, 2018).

Validity. Procedures were followed to ensure the validity of the survey questions. Survey questions were developed from established theories and themes of barriers females encounter in their pursuit of a superintendent position, to ensure validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These theories and themes were derived from an extensive literature review of females in their pursuit of a lead superintendent position throughout their careers.

Reliability. Steps were taken to create a reliable qualitative instrument. The interview questions were open-ended to elicit maximum experience from each participant to ensure no leading questions were administered (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, a field test was administered to females in a subordinate administrative role to anticipate any questions or concerns regarding the survey questions, which were addressed before administering the survey.

Interview

Like the survey instrument, the questions for the interviews were written with concise language designed to explore specific themes of personal lived experiences that evolved during the interviews and to discover phenomena encountered by the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews were conducted to obtain an in-depth understanding of lead female superintendents' perceived barriers and strategies employed to overcome them.

Validity. Procedures were followed to ensure the validity of the interview questions. As with the survey instrument, interview questions were developed from

established theories and themes of female leadership in the educational field to ensure validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These theories and themes were derived from an extensive literature review on the topic of females in the organizational workforce, females in the lead position of a superintendent in educational institutions, as well as information obtained from the survey results.

Reflexivity was addressed as the researcher is a female administrator in the Midwest state who aspires to be a lead superintendent in a Midwest state's public education school district as a career goal. Reflexivity was addressed through transcription of the interview process (Shelton & Flint, 2019). In addition, pilot testing with a population like the proposed studied population was administered to ensure the validity of the study. Pilot testing of the interview questions ensured the questions were clear and provided insight to yield better results (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Reliability. Steps were taken to create a reliable qualitative instrument. The interview questions were pilot-tested with a closely related population to the study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Those participating in the pilot test then shared any information that may make the survey and interview protocol more effective (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

The process of data collection began with developing and pilot testing a survey to ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument (see Appendix A). For this study, an email was sent to Lindenwood University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to receive permission to conduct this research project.

Upon the IRB approval, an email was sent to the Midwest state's Association of School Administrators' registry, asking a representative to forward an email message to all registered female superintendents in the Midwest state. This message contained the purpose of the study, the invitation to complete the survey, and a link to the survey. Included on the first page of the survey was the Survey Research Information Sheet (see Appendix C). To ensure ethical methods were utilized, each participant was assured of confidentiality, transparency, security of the data, and anonymity (Gupta, 2017). Participants who continued with the survey indicated their consent through the Lindenwood IRB consent form, which was the initial survey page. The survey was available for two weeks. Survey data was then collected and entered on a spreadsheet for analysis. The survey results were then used to evaluate and update the interview questions for follow-up participants. An invitation to participate in an interview related to the participants' personal journey to a superintendent position was the final component of the survey.

After data from the open-ended survey was collected and used to refine the interview questions, interviews were conducted. To ensure the interview questions were valid, a pilot test with female administrators who are familiar with the demands of administration in the Midwest state but are not participants in the study was conducted. The field test was used to determine and ensure the interview questions measure the intended content (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The follow-up phase of the study took place after an email was sent to interested participants who have agreed to a follow-up interview. First, an email was sent to participants who have agreed to a follow-up interview with the Research Information Sheet (see Appendix D). In the email detailing

specific information regarding the follow-up interview, informed consent was received prior to the interviews (see Appendix D). Next, an email was sent to participants confirming the time and date of individual interviews. Upon the conclusion of the interviews, an analysis of the survey and the follow-up interview results was completed. The data set was then interpreted and organized into themes derived from the collected responses.

Data Analysis

First, a survey to determine self-reported barriers that participants have encountered to their role as a lead superintendent in a Midwest public school was administered. After analyzing the results of the survey, interview questions were finalized and used to ask more in-depth questions to participants who reported self-imposed barriers, as well as gender bias and stereotype.

Qualitative Analysis

After the survey was conducted and results were analyzed, the follow-up interviews took place. As the interview took place, the researcher recorded results, as well as took notes throughout. Common language-reported barriers, strategies to surmount the barriers, coding, and themes were utilized by analyzing the responses given during the interviews. The survey and interview findings were analyzed, synthesized, and reported as descriptions and themes.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the survey were voluntary. No pressure for participants to complete the informed consent, and thus the survey, was applied. Participants in the survey could volunteer to participate in the subsequent in-person interviews. To ensure

participation in the interviews was voluntary, the primary investigator reviewed the additional informed consent and obtained each interview participant's signature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The Safe Harbor method was used to protect confidentiality (Fraenkel et al., 2019). Data was stored on a password-protected device. Electronic records of data collection will be deleted after three years. Paper records were stored in a secured, locked location with controlled access. All paper records will be securely destroyed after three years.

Summary

In this chapter, the problem and purpose of the study were presented. Following the problem and purpose were the research questions, research design, population and sample, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations. The approach to collecting and analyzing qualitative data was also described.

Chapter Four begins with a review of the problem and purpose of the study. The instruments developed for the study and a brief overview of how the data were presented are included. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a detailed analysis of the qualitative data obtained through the original survey instrument, as well as the follow-up interviews. The themes that emerged through data analysis are presented, and a chapter summary concludes Chapter Four.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

Current studies examined why the public education superintendent position is the most disproportionate in terms of males outnumbering females (Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Ramaswamy, 2020). The literature revealed a multitude of reasons the large discrepancy exists between males and females leading public school districts, including the good ol' boys' club, the queen bee syndrome, the lack of female mentors for other females, as well as school board and recruiter bias (Cassidy et al., 2021; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018; Ramaswamy, 2020). The asymmetry of gender in the role of superintendents of school districts supports the theories of feminism, structured organizations, and Epstein's deceptive distinctions (Acker, 1990; Acker & Van Houten, 1974; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Risman & Davis, 2013; Sandberg, 2013).

Nearly 20 years ago, females reported gender stereotypes and gender bias roles as the number one obstacle to obtaining a superintendent position (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). However, emerging studies indicated that self-imposed challenges are the leading obstacles to women aspiring to obtain a superintendent position (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Sampson, 2018). While the type of barrier is more commonly reported as self-imposed barriers, little research has been completed to understand the action steps females have taken to overcome self-imposed barriers to achieve the career goal of a top-level administrative position in public education (Glass, 2019). The purpose of this study was to determine the obstacles experienced by women superintendents and identify ways those obstacles could be personally overcome.

The instrument employed in this study was an original qualitative survey. The survey questions were derived from suggestions from the literature review regarding the reported barriers females face when seeking a superintendent position (Cordova, 2019; Glass, 2019; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Sampson, 2018). The survey instrument consisted of 15 questions eliciting personal experiences and demographic information to understand better the familial contexts of the participants' potential self-imposed barriers. Ten of the questions were open-ended questions. The survey was designed to identify potential self-imposed barriers and ways females have surmounted those barriers through their personal experiences. The survey was sent to 141 lead female superintendents in a Midwest state. Data were gathered from the 44 lead female superintendents who responded to the survey.

The original interview questions were developed to elicit more personal, lived experiences to enrich the qualitative data during the study's second phase. The open-ended questions were designed to provoke deeper discussions about strategies employed by current lead female superintendents' lived experiences. An interview guide, which consisted of five interview questions, was developed to ensure all interview participants were asked the same questions in the same order. The sample consisted of four lead female superintendents' responses to questions asked during the interview phase of the study.

Data collected from the Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey were analyzed and presented using themes and trends. Data collected from the one-on-one interviews were analyzed to identify significant themes and trends. The themes and

trends derived from the survey and interview data were displayed through tables and analysis discussions.

Survey Data Analysis

The Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey garnered a statewide sample of 44 female superintendents with a return rate of 31.20%. The Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey included several demographic questions. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the categorical variables within the Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey.

Ethnic Group

As seen in Table 1, of the 44 female superintendents who completed the Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey, 100% of them identified as being of the White/Caucasian ethnicity. Of the 1,776 superintendent respondents (both male and female) in the AASA's 2021–2022 Superintendent Salary & Benefits Study (Thomas et al., 2022), 87% were White (Not Hispanic or Latino), 4% were Black or African American, and 3% Hispanic or Latino. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), the population of the United States is 76.3% White, 13.4% Black or African American, and 18.5% Hispanic or Latino.

Comparatively, the Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey respondents were predominately more White than the general population, including fewer Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino respondents than the national population reflects. However, the Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey respondents had a similar race/cultural identity composition to the overall national

superintendent population (including both men and women), as evidenced in the AASA's 2021–2022 Superintendent Salary & Benefits Study data (Thomas et al., 2022).

Marital Status

The majority of respondents (39, or 89%) identified as married. Additionally, three, or 7%, identified as divorced, two respondents, or 5%, identified as single, while only one participant, or 2%, of respondents, indicated they were widowed. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Senior Services, National Center for Health Statistics (2022), the nationwide marriage rate was 5.1 per 1,000 total population in 2020, while the divorce rate was 2.3 per 1,000 total population.

Caregiving Status and Number of Children

The majority of respondents (55%) indicated they were *not* a mother or guardian to a non-adult child(ren) while a superintendent. Of those who indicated they were mothers to a non-adult child(ren), 23% had two children, 16% of respondents stated they had one child, 7% had three children, and 2% had four children. Nearly half of the respondents had children while serving as a lead superintendent in a Midwest state.

Gender

As seen in Table 1, of the 44 female superintendents who completed the Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey, 100% of them identified as being female. Of the 1,776 superintendent respondents (both male and female) in the AASA's 2021–2022 Superintendent Salary & Benefits Study (Thomas et al., 2022), 75% of respondents were male, 24% of superintendents nationwide were female, while 0.5% preferred not to answer, and 0.90% omitted their response to gender.

Lead Superintendent Status

Table 1 shows that all 44 female superintendent respondents serve in a lead superintendent role in their district. These data ensure the representation of this study was provided by lead superintendents of districts, not those serving in an assistant or associate superintendent role.

Years Served as a Superintendent

The majority of respondents (18, or 41%) have served in a lead superintendent role between 1 and 5 years. Closely behind, however, is 32% of respondents who have served in a lead superintendent role for 6 to 10 years. Table 1 shows that 18% of respondents have served as a lead superintendent between 11 and 15 years, while 7% of respondents indicated they have served as a superintendent for 16 to 20 years. Only 2% of respondents have served as a lead superintendent for 30 years.

Comparatively, of the 1,776 superintendent respondents (both male and female) in the AASA's 2021–2022 Superintendent Salary & Benefits Study (Thomas et al., 2022), 37% of respondents stated they have served as a lead superintendent for 1 to 5 years, 30% of respondents stated they have served as a lead superintendent for 6 to 10 years, 14% of superintendents have served for 11 to 15 years, and 6% of superintendents have served for 16 to 20 years. Lastly, 0.7% of respondents on the AASA's 2021–2022 Superintendent Salary & Benefits Study (Thomas et al., 2022) stated they had served 31+ years as a superintendent.

Respondents of the Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey had a similar experience level as those respondents to the AASA's 2021–2022 Superintendent Salary & Benefits Study in every category of years of experience. For example, 41% of

respondents of the Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey had 1 to 5 years of experience, while 37% of respondents of the AASA's 2021–2022 Superintendent Salary & Benefits Study indicated the same years of experience. In addition, 32% of the Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey had 6 to 10 years of experience, compared to 30% from AASA's study. As the number of years of experience increased, both studies indicated fewer superintendents with as many years of experience. The trend reveals a declining number of superintendents with years of experience between the 11 to 15 years and drastically declines within the 16 to 20 years of experience in both studies.

School District Size

Most respondents identified as working in rural school districts (95%). Suburban and Urban school districts both represented 2% of female superintendents leading the district. Rural representation in this study is similar to the national average for school districts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), 57% of school districts across the nation are considered rural.

Table 1*Demographic Results: Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey*

Ethnic Group	White/Caucasian						
	44						
	100%						
Marital Status	Married	Divorced	Single	Widow			
	39	3	2	1			
	89%	7%	5%	2%			
Mother/Guardian to a Non-adult Child(ren)	Yes		No				
	20		24				
	45%		55%				
Number of respondent's children	0	1	2	3	4		
	23	7	10	3	1		
	52%	16%	23%	7%	2%		
Identify as a Female	Yes		No				
	44		0				
	100%		0%				
Lead Superintendent	Yes		No				
	44		0				
	100%		0%				
Years Served as a Superintendent	1–5 Years	6–10 Years	11–15 Years	16–20 Years	21–25 Years	26–30 Years	30+ Years
	18	14	8	3	0	0	1
	41%	32%	18%	7%	0%	0%	2%
School District Size	Rural	Suburban	Urban				
	42	1	1				
	95%	2%	2%				

Note. $N = 44$.

Survey Question One

Participants in the study were asked to list all positions (past and current) held within public education before becoming a lead superintendent. This open-ended

question was designed to elicit participants' various experiences that led them to the lead superintendency position. Participants' responses to the open-ended question were analyzed to identify significant themes. After analysis of the responses to survey question one, seven themes emerged.

Theme One. The vast majority of participants included having a teaching position as an experienced position on their journey to a superintendent position. Analysis of survey question one responses revealed that 95% of study participants held a teaching position in their career experience. Of the participants who had taught, six indicated they had previously taught special education classes in some capacity. Two participants noted they were speech-language pathologists. These assignments were not included as teaching positions in the data analysis for this study.

Theme Two. Some participants possessed experience as a coach in their passage to the lead superintendent role. Eleven percent of participants stated they had athletic coaching experience in their journey to the superintendent position. There were various sports included in the coaching experience, including volleyball, track, basketball, and Special Olympics. In addition, there were various levels of coaching experience, including junior varsity and varsity.

Theme Three. Participants had experience as a lead principal before becoming a superintendent. As seen in Table 2, 84% of participants stated they had been a lead principal before becoming a superintendent. Of the 37 participants with lead principal experience, 30% had experience at the elementary level. An equal number of participants had experience in a middle school or high school lead principal role, with 14% of participants responding having experience at the middle school and high school level

combined. An equal number of participants had lead principal experience in a building serving students grades 7 to 12 as those serving students in grades K to 8. Five percent of participants stated their lead principal experience was serving grades K to 8, while 5% of participants served as a lead principal for a building serving students in grades K to 8. Eight percent of participants stated they were a lead principal for students K to 12. Twenty-four percent of participants noted they had lead principal experience but did not indicate the grade levels they served in this capacity. Lastly, 14% of all participants in the study did not indicate they had any lead principal experience.

Table 2*Lead Principal Experience: Building Level Experience*

<u>Building Level</u>	<u>Number/Percentage</u>
Elementary	11 30%
Middle School	5 14%
High School	5 14%
Grades K–12	3 8%
Grades 7–12	2 5%
Grades K–8	2 5%
No Building Level Given	9 24%
None	6 14%

Note. $N = 44$.

Theme Four. Participants had experience as an assistant principal before becoming a superintendent. As seen in Table 3, 23% of participants stated they had experience as an assistant principal before becoming a superintendent. Of the 10 participants in the study who had assistant principal experience, 30% of participants had middle school assistant principal experience, and 10% had high school assistant principal experience. In the survey results, 60% of respondents did not indicate what grade levels

they served in the assistant principal role. Lastly, 34 participants did not indicate they had any assistant principal experience.

Table 3

Assistant Principal Experience: Building Level Experience

Building Level	Number/Percentage
Elementary	0 0%
Middle School	3 30%
High School	1 10%
Did Not Indicate Building Level	6 60%
None	34 77%

Note. $N = 44$.

Theme Five. Participants had experience as a director of special education services. Twenty percent of participants had served as a director of special education services before becoming superintendent. Of the participants who had served as a Director of Special Education Services, five had served as special education teachers. Two participants had served as Speech-Language Pathologists before stepping into this administrative role. Two participants indicated they had teaching experience but did not indicate if the experience was in special education or another content area.

Theme Six. Participants had experience as executive directors of education. Four participants, or 9%, indicated they had served as an executive director in their journey to the lead superintendent role. Of the four participants in the study who had executive

director experience, 50% had been executive directors of secondary services, and 25% had been executive directors of elementary services. Twenty-five percent of participants did not indicate their level of executive director experience.

Theme Seven. Some participants had experience as assistant superintendents. Four participants, or 9% of the survey population, indicated they had served as an assistant superintendent of schools before entering the lead superintendent position. Two participants who responded they had experience as an assistant superintendent also had experience as an associate superintendent. In addition, all four participants stated they had experience as a director in various capacities before becoming a superintendent, including director, director of special education services, executive director, and K to 8 curriculum director.

Survey Questions Two to Four

There were no themes derived from questions two to four, as these questions addressed the demographic questions of each participant. Participants were asked to verify if they were a lead superintendent of a Missouri Public School District, how many years they had served as a lead superintendent, and the size of the school district the participant currently served as a superintendent. The participant was to give their personal experience response to each question. All results were presented in Table 1.

Survey Question Five

Participants in the study were asked to list their positive considerations for contemplating a lead superintendent role. This open-ended question was designed to elicit participants' thought processes when deciding to apply for a superintendent position. Participants' responses to the open-ended question were analyzed to identify significant

themes. After analysis of the responses to survey question five, four themes emerged. All participants indicated more than one positive consideration before applying for a lead superintendent position.

Theme One. Participants' desire to have a district-wide impact was a positive consideration for contemplating a lead superintendent role. A large majority of participants indicated they desired to have a significant, more global impact on student success, finances, staff, and the district. Fifty-nine percent of participants discussed their aspiration of ensuring positive global change at a district level rather than a specific building level or department level they had previously led within the school district.

Theme Two. Participants yearned for growth and challenges within their careers. Thirty-six percent of participants indicated they were ready for a new challenge in their professional careers. Participants stated that leadership opportunities, the ability to lead, collaborate, and empower other administrators, and having a new challenge were positive considerations made in their decision to apply for a lead superintendent position. A participant stated, "I knew I needed to leave the classroom, but I wanted to stay within the school system." Many participants noted that they possessed great ideas for school improvement, and the challenge of leading the improvement was their positive deciding factor in seeking the lead superintendent position.

Theme Three. Participants aspired for a higher salary/increase in pay. Thirteen participants noted an increase in salary as a positive consideration when applying for a lead superintendent position. Thirty percent of participants found salary benefits, including the positive effect on their retirement fund, as beneficial factors when considering the lead superintendent position.

Theme Four. Participants had an inclination to create and maintain strong, positive relationships with all educational stakeholders. Ten participants indicated they strongly desired to continue great relationships with staff, students, families, the community, and the Board of Education. For example, a participant stated, “A positive I considered was the ability to touch more people in a positive way in a school district and community.” Another participant noted, “I already had an established working relationship with the Board of Education.” Twenty-three percent of participants indicated that building a culture of trust, learning, and positive relationships was a significant positive factor when considering the superintendency advancement.

Survey Question Six

Participants in the study were asked to list challenges they considered before applying for a lead superintendent role. This open-ended question was designed to elicit participants’ thought processes when deciding to apply for a superintendent position. Participants’ responses to the open-ended question were analyzed to identify significant themes. After analysis of the answers to survey question six, six themes emerged. All participants indicated more than one consequence they considered before applying for a lead superintendent position and all themes.

Theme One. Participants feared the time commitment required of a lead superintendent position. Forty-five percent of participants stated that a consequence they considered before applying for a superintendent position was the time commitment required of this position. Many participants noted they were accustomed to a ten-month contract versus the twelve-month contract required of a lead superintendent. In addition, participants stated the time away from their family and missing family obligations were

consequences they considered before applying for this position. Within the time commitment concern, most participants noted the challenge of managing being both a mother and a superintendent as a consequence they considered. One participant stated, “The biggest challenge was sacrificing time with my children and family.” In contrast, another participant stated the major consequence they considered before applying was “the effect the [superintendency] would have on my family life.” Sacrificing the time required of a superintendent was the most frequent consequence considered by participants before applying for a superintendent position.

Theme Two. Participants considered the lack of understanding of district-level finances before applying for a superintendent position. Fourteen participants, or 32%, considered their lack of knowledge and the complexity of school finance and budget as a critical consequence of stepping into the superintendent position. Two participants specifically noted “facilities and finances” as the two items are related. In addition, participants noted that school budgets are already underfunded, and they worried about learning the financial component of the job.

Theme Three. Participants were concerned about the additional stress and responsibilities of the superintendent position. Analysis of survey question six responses revealed that 23% of participants indicated the additional stress and responsibilities were consequences they considered before becoming a lead superintendent. Participants included their concern about being “the face” of the district and the extra scrutiny that comes with the lead superintendent position of a school district. One participant noted, “Moving from the relative obscurity and security of the Assistant Superintendent chair to

being the one with the proverbial target on my back and a less secure tenure, there was a greater risk and more public scrutiny in this position.”

Theme Four. Participants had concerns about the perceptions of a female in the lead superintendent position and the Good Ol’ Boys’ Club. Twenty percent of participants noted they were concerned about being a woman in a male-dominated position or the perceptions of being a woman in the superintendent role. In addition, 22% of the participants who noted their concern about being a female in a superintendent role stated that the Good Ol’ Boys’ Club was a concern. One participant said, “When applying, I knew with mostly male board members, it was going to be more difficult as a female to be hired.” Another participant said, “Being young and a female and being taken seriously,” was a consequence she weighed before applying. Lastly, a participant stated, “I was also aware of the ‘good old boys’ club’ and hoped that I had proven myself to be the best for this role.”

Theme Five. Participants weighed the consequences of community and Board of Education relations and the politics of a female in the lead superintendent role. Female participants were concerned about the consequences of community and Board of Education relationships. Eighteen percent of participants stated they considered community and Board of Education relations before applying for the top executive role of a public school. One participant said, “dealing with the board and community,” while another participant noted, “Working with difficult board members,” as consequences they considered before applying for a position. One participant noted, “Also, when applying, I knew with mostly male board members, it was going to be more difficult as a female to be hired.”

Theme Six. Lack of support/mentorship in the superintendent position. Six participants in the study stated they considered a possible consequence of applying for the helm position of a school district as a lack of support and no mentor in the superintendent seat. Many of these 14% of participants continually stated they considered whether or not they were ready for a lead superintendent position. In addition, participants stated they considered the consequence of how to garner further knowledge of the position they felt they did not know as consequences they considered before applying for the top executive role of a public school system in the Midwest state.

Survey Question Seven

Participants were asked to list the reasons that ultimately led them to apply for a superintendent position after considering the role's positives and challenges. This open-ended question was designed to elicit the participants' decision-making process that led them to apply for a superintendent position. Participants' responses to the open-ended question were analyzed to identify significant themes. After analysis of the responses to survey question seven, six themes emerged. All participants indicated more than one key component they considered before applying for a lead superintendent position.

Theme One. Participants applied for a lead superintendent position because it was the right time for the next step in their careers. An analysis of survey question seven indicated that 27% of participants decided to apply for a lead superintendent position because it was the right next step in their career. For example, one participant noted, "I was tired of handling student discipline at the middle school level." Another participant noted, "I felt I was ready, and it was a role I was willing to do."

Theme Two. Participants applied for a lead superintendent position due to support and encouragement from the Board of Education, community, staff, and students. A quarter of all participants indicated the encouragement and support they received from various educational stakeholders, including the community, staff, students, Board of Education members, and even the outgoing superintendent, which led them to apply for a lead superintendent position. Participants quoted a heavy emphasis on the community relationships they had and that the ability to serve the patrons of the community was important to them. A participant noted, “We had a different superintendent every couple of years. I felt our school needed consistency.” Another participant said she received encouragement from her colleagues and the current school board but also, “I had a fear of who I would answer to if I didn’t apply.” Of the 25% of participants who noted their decision to apply for a superintendent position, two participants reported they were encouraged to apply for the top executive position by the outgoing superintendent in the district they sought to serve.

Theme Three. Participants desired to have a more global impact by applying for a superintendent position. Twenty-three percent of participants in the study indicated the ultimate reason for applying for a superintendent position was the desire to have a greater, more global impact on students in education. One participant stated, “I knew that the greatest impact I could make was at the district level where I had significant input into the financial allocations to programs.” Other participants noted that they desired to challenge themselves and build a strong team of administrators and teachers who had the same philosophy of teaching children. In addition, participants emphasized the priority of

supporting teachers to educate and focus on children. Lastly, participants realized they were limited in their ability to make a true difference.

Theme Four. Participants suggested the need for a new challenge and being goal-oriented. Fourteen percent of participants stipulated that they decided to apply for a lead superintendent position after weighing the positives and consequences. These found they needed a new challenge and being goal-oriented. Participants stated they were ready for a new challenge and felt like they were up to the task. One participant said, “I applied for a chance to excel in my leadership abilities.” Another participant stated, “I like to learn and love a challenge.” Some participants who indicated needing a challenge said that they were willing to learn although they did not feel ready, not knowing all parts of the job.

Theme Five. Participants ultimately applied for a lead superintendent position due to the salary/financial incentive. Analysis of the question of why participants ultimately applied for a lead superintendent position, 11% of participants said they applied due to the salary and financial incentive of the position. Participants indicated that the pay increase also led to better retirement benefits in addition to the salary increase. Of the five participants who quoted a financial salary increase as their ultimate reason for applying, three of the five participants indicated other factors that helped them decide to apply.

Theme Six. Participants applied for a lead superintendent position to benefit their families. Four participants in the study stated that their family was their deciding factor in applying for a lead superintendent position. One participant said, “I wanted my family to grow up in a small rural community, and that ultimately led me to apply for a superintendent position.” Other participants noted they applied for a lead superintendent

position due to the proximity to their homes. Another participant reported being encouraged to apply to a district near their home. In all, 9% of participants utilized proximity and familial benefits as their deciding factors to apply for a lead superintendent position.

Survey Question Eight

Participants in the study were asked how they have overcome the challenges they perceived before applying for a superintendent position, now that they serve in a lead superintendent role. This open-ended question was designed to elicit participants' real-world experience of surmounting obstacles while practicing as a lead superintendent of a public school. Participants' responses to the open-ended question were analyzed to identify significant themes. After analysis of the responses to survey question eight, five themes emerged. First, all participants indicated more than one key strategy they utilized to surmount challenges while serving as a superintendent.

Theme One. Participants surmounted challenges by communicating with all stakeholders and asking for help. After analyzing strategies that female superintendents implemented to overcome their perceived barriers to the superintendency role, 34% of participants stated communicating with all stakeholders was key to surmounting barriers. Participants stated they communicated by being a great listener, getting information out to stakeholders, asking questions, and asking for advice. Good communication was the greatest contributor to being successful. Participants noted that over-communication was a key to their success. In addition, participants stated that not shying away from asking questions to other superintendents or administrators and calling the Department of

Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) was a vital component of surmounting challenges in the superintendent role.

Theme Two. Participants overcame perceived barriers by forming relationships and building a professional network of peers. Establishing and forming relationships with peers and building a professional network was an integral component that 27% of participants stated they developed in overcoming perceived barriers in the superintendent role. For example, a participant noted, “I reach out for assistance when I need it. I attend meetings with other superintendents for support, collaboration, and help.” Another participant stated, “I found great mentors, asked questions, and was willing to take risks.” Building strong networks of people you can trust from the profession is a strategy that 12 participants in the study found essential to conquer perceived challenges to the superintendent role.

Theme Three. Participants overcame perceived challenges to a lead superintendent role by working hard and proving themselves to gain respect from educational stakeholders. Participants in the study said they worked harder than anyone else to prove themselves against perceived gender biases as a lead superintendent. Twenty-five percent of the participants stated they worked hard to gain respect from other superintendents in the field. One participant said, “I worked to assist other superintendents so they could see my worth. I continue to lead with integrity.” Participants also stated that working with integrity and transparency has allowed stakeholders to trust them as they continually work together.

Theme Four. Participants are still attempting to take control of perceived challenges in the superintendency role. Participants expressed that they have not been

able to overcome perceived challenges to the superintendent role; instead, they are still attempting to overcome them. Fourteen percent of participants stated they are still trying to find strategies to overcome the barriers while leading in the superintendent role. For example, a participant of the study confided, “It is a difficult but rewarding position. I love my job, but the last two years have been very hard to get all of the t's crossed and i's dotted!! We are expected to do a lot more now than even four years ago!” Another participant with four years of experience as a lead superintendent admitted they were burnt out. Participants suggested setting boundaries to overcome obstacles as a lead superintendent, yet they were still attempting to implement those boundaries.

Theme Five. Participants stated having supportive spouses and families willing to sacrifice for the participant’s career was the factor in overcoming perceived barriers of the superintendent role. Eleven percent of the participants in the study stated their supportive spouses and families understood the sacrifices the participants had to make, which was how they overcame barriers and responsibilities in the superintendent role. One participant noted, “My family and I have found a way to balance the demands of the position.” While another participant stated, “My family has taken a back seat to my school districts, so I guess I have to say, I failed. However, my husband has been my biggest supporter and understands totally I am doing this for my students.” Participants acknowledged their spouses and families had to make sacrifices for them to fulfill their roles and responsibilities as a superintendent.

Survey Question Twelve

Participants in the study were asked if they had family support the participant relies upon to frequently help with child(ren) responsibilities up to or more than 1 to 2

times per week. This question was designed to determine if participants utilized familial support as a strategy to overcome self-imposed barriers in attempting to meet domestic and professional responsibilities simultaneously. Participants' responses to the question were analyzed to determine if this was a significant factor in overcoming self-imposed barriers to serving as a superintendent. After analysis of the answers to survey question 12, one theme emerged.

Theme One. After analyzing whether or not participants utilized their family as support to help them with child(ren) responsibilities frequently, 34% of participants indicated they utilized family to help them. Sixty-six percent of participants stated they did not. However, there was not an option for participants to choose "not applicable" if they did not have non-adult children at home. When reviewing the demographic statistics of the survey, 55% of participants did not have non-adult children at home, while 45% of participants did have non-adult children in the home. Therefore, 11% of participants with non-adult children did not frequently utilize family support at least 1 to 2 times a week to assist them with child(ren) responsibilities.

Interview Data Analysis

The Lead, Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Follow-Up Female Superintendent Interview utilized a sample of four female superintendents with a return rate of 11% of the 44 survey participants being interviewed. The Lead Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Follow-Up Interview consisted of five open-ended questions to inquire about a deeper understanding of lived experiences of individual participants. An analysis of the results was conducted, and themes for each question are included below.

Interview Question One

Participants were asked to elaborate upon the differences between the self-imposed barriers presented and the barriers categorized as gender stereotypes or gender bias barriers. Examples of both types of barriers were given to ensure the participant understood before responding.

Theme One. Participants stated the support of their spouses and families was the primary strategy that allowed them to surmount self-imposed barriers. Analysis of interview question one resulted in each participant discussing the support of their families and spouse of the superintendent position they took. Three of the participants said their spouse was willing to move and either seek other employment or commute to work for the participant to advance into a superintendent role. For example, one participant said,

My husband is in the airline industry, and we're close to St. Louis, and so we were able to make that change and knew that it could be anywhere in Missouri that's close enough to an airport, and we could both change because we could be more mobile because of him and because my son was going off to college.

In addition, another participant said,

When I got the job, and we moved down here, it was a struggle for him because we moved away from his friends and away from our farm, and he had to find a job, and he had trouble finding a job at the age he was, and so that was the big struggle. But yet, I had the job, and I think that was the hardest for us [relationship-wise that] I was making more money than him. That was a big adjustment for him because he was always the breadwinner.

One of the participants said she and her family had been in the community where she became a superintendent for over 20 years. Therefore, the participant and her family did not have to move or relocate as she advanced to the superintendent position in the district she had served for a significant time. Her children went to school in that same district. Three participants stated they waited until their children were grown and graduated from high school before stepping into the superintendent role. One of the participants said her youngest child was a junior in high school when she accepted an assistant superintendent role; however, her child was supportive of the move for their family.

Theme Two. Participants stated they did not encounter direct gender bias or gender stereotypes, though gender biases did exist. All four participants said they had not considered the differences in self-imposed barriers versus barriers considered gender bias or gender stereotypes. However, one participant noted she did not apply for a lead superintendent position in the district she was currently serving in because she felt the district's culture did not suit her. Another participant stated that she felt people think women are softer and unable to make firm decisions compared to men. Another participant said she was directly asked if she could handle the discipline and amount of supervision required at a building-level administration position [in reference to her administrative journey to a lead superintendent position].

The participant stated she was able to quote other women currently in the superintendent seat who do well and are firm in their decisions. The participant stated, "It gave me a chance to show some assertiveness to the men in the room." Lastly, a

participant discussed an encounter with a board member who expressed concern about the relationship the participant was having with another board member.

I've had one board member express to me a difficulty I was having with another board member was because I was a woman. That's never been overtly stated like that before, but he felt pretty sure that was it, and I kind of wonder because, you know, we don't have a close relationship as I have with some of my other board members. But as far as overt gender bias, I cannot say that I've been a victim of that.

Participants primarily discussed the self-imposed barriers they have encountered, more so than any gender bias or gender stereotypes.

Interview Question Two

Participants were asked the common actions they took to surmount challenges before and during applying for a superintendent position in a predominantly male role.

Theme One. Participants stated being well prepared with a confident approach as a common action they took to surmount challenges before and during applying for a superintendent position. All four participants stated being well prepared for their interviews and serving as a superintendent of schools has been vital to their success. All four participants stated they had to develop a strong cohort of peers they were comfortable calling to ask questions or for advice. A participant stated,

I had the school attorney on speed dial. And you know, there are lots of conversations with my business manager and finance people. Then I think about picking good consultants when it comes time for facilities, projects, and things like that. I think just trying to be a step ahead.

One participant stated you have to sell yourself with your beliefs and what you are doing correctly. A participant suggested that familiarizing yourself with the district, school calendar, and cadence of the community you serve and what happens month to month is vital to be well prepared.

Three of the four participants stated they began working with the board of education members before interviewing. One participant stated that proving herself to the board before she accepted the role of superintendent helped ensure all board of education members understood how she operated and that she got things done. All three participants stated they knew the make-up of the board of education, knowing that each district they applied to was comprised of all males. In addition, one participant said if a participant had a choice of when to be interviewed in the interview process, she always chose to go last. The participant stated, "I always try if I get a choice of when to interview, I always try to be last because you're fresh in their mind."

Theme Two. Participants stated not to become emotional when serving as a superintendent or applying to become a superintendent. One participant stated, "The one thing we can't do as females is getting emotional. Because you know, a man getting emotional is viewed differently than a woman getting emotional." Another participant stated that she had to have an emotional check as she was preparing for the interview process for a lead superintendent position. The participant said,

It was making sure that when I practiced answering questions, I tried to stay level with how I composed my answers and how I responded to questions. It was making sure that I didn't use too flowery language.

A participant elaborated that they were intentional in the font they used on their resume and letter of interest to the board of education. The participant stated, “Even the fonts I used on the resume or the letter or the documentation that I took with me, I tried to make it not as flowery.” Participants emphasized the need for being well prepared, whether for interview questions, how you respond to questions, or how you respond and act in situations while leading in the superintendent role.

Interview Question Three

Participants were asked to describe their perspective of the superintendent culture in Missouri public education.

Theme One. Participants considered the perspective of the superintendent culture in Missouri public education as the ‘Good Ol’ Boys’ Club.” Three of the four participants explicitly said the superintendent culture in Missouri public education had the ‘Good Ol’ Boys Club’ feel. The fourth participant stated the culture of superintendency in Missouri public education was starting to see a shift toward more females entering superintendent positions, as Board of Education members are hiring the best candidate for the post and not basing their selection on gender. One participant said,

You hear the stories about well, it’s the good ol’ boys’ club. Well, that’s because so many of them are old boys. But you have to be willing to make the first move. I think what I have experienced in Southwest Missouri anyway, and I hear from colleagues, is that it’s not this way across the state, but Southwest Missouri tends to be helpful.

Although participants admitted the superintendent culture in Missouri public education did have the ‘Good Ol’ Boys’ Club’ feel, male superintendents were willing to help

female superintendents and collaborate with all superintendents. They perceived a shift in observing more females entering the superintendent role in Missouri public schools.

Interview Question Four

Participants were asked what suggestions they had for women aspiring to be lead superintendents in the state of Missouri.

Theme One. Participants suggested that women aspiring to be a lead superintendent in the state of Missouri should create a network of colleagues they can trust, collaborate with, and ask questions. Two of the participants stated that just being you and being confident, with the willingness to learn and ask questions, is imperative for women who are aspiring to be a lead superintendent. Both of these participants stated you have to be willing to ask questions to males and females and find people who may know an answer, as well as organizations and resources that will benefit them by leading a district to success. Another participant stated that while building your network of people you can trust, women should also know how to pick the battles they engage in and learn how to handle others.

Interview Question Five

Participants were asked about their feelings about female-specific mentors and network groups for females aspiring to be superintendents.

Theme One. Participants supported female and male mentors and network groups for females aspiring to be superintendents. All four participants agreed that having other female mentors and colleagues in the superintendent role was beneficial for unique perspectives and challenges that arise. However, all four participants stated it was vital for their success to have male and female mentors. One participant said,

You know, sometimes I think the men are like, well, how can they get their special group? I think there's a bit of a double standard there. But we're still an underrepresented group, so it's okay. But I think that you've got to be willing to rub elbows with the guys too. And that goes back to that 'Good Ol' Boys' club' thing. You just have to insert yourself, and they are, for the most part, I find that they're very welcoming. I think that as women, we need to encourage and promote other women. I think we definitely need to find the best candidate. But it usually takes another woman telling some woman that you see something in them, and that female should not be afraid to do it.

Another participant said:

For me, that's an interesting one too, because I'm a part of those, and I do see the benefit. So, I do see the benefit because there are some challenges as a female and some of the conversations are different. Some of the challenges just by nature that we go through are different. However, I do also see that the more we keep ourselves as females separate, the more likely we aren't going to be accepted as we're all leaders doing the same role as superintendents are struggling in the same way. So, I also try very hard to make it a point to be a part of all of the other groups that are available, because I think that's important as well, that it's not just about that female group.

Overall, participants were supportive of female mentor and network groups, yet, they also supported inclusivity of collaboration with mentoring and networking for female superintendents with males and females.

Research Questions

In this section, the responses and themes that developed from the survey and interview results are considered with respect to each research question. Each research question is addressed individually, and participant responses are themed to consider and address each question.

The first interview question was asked to determine each participant's personal experience with barriers they have encountered when attempting to seek a lead superintendent position.

Research Question One

What barriers have current lead female superintendents encountered in their career journey to a superintendency role?

In response to research question one, current lead female superintendents have encountered the following barriers in their career journey to a superintendency role: self-imposed barriers, gender bias, and gender stereotypes. First, participants in the study stated they had encountered self-imposed barriers, which consisted of the increased time commitment that a superintendent position requires, a lack of confidence in understanding school finances, and the additional stress and responsibilities a superintendent position requires. Forty-five percent of female superintendents in the study stated the time commitment away from their family was a self-imposed barrier. At the same time, 32% of the participants said the lack of understanding of school finance was a barrier to applying for the lead superintendent position. Lastly, 23% of participants stated that a superintendent position's additional stress and responsibilities were a barrier for them to apply for this position.

Participants stated they also encountered gender bias and gender stereotypes that were imposed upon them in their journey to a superintendent position. Twenty percent of participants said the perception of a female in a male-dominated role created a barrier of hesitation in applying for a lead superintendent job. Twenty-two percent of participants stated the Good Ol' Boys' club was a barrier in applying for a lead superintendent job. In addition, some participants said the all-male composition of school boards created a barrier. In contrast, other participants said other males applying for the job created a barrier in seeking a superintendent position. Fourteen percent of participants said the lack of mentorship and lack of support had been a barrier in seeking out a superintendent position.

Research Question Two

How have current lead female superintendents surmounted self-imposed, self-reported barriers?

In response to research question two, the current lead female superintendents had surmounted self-imposed, self-reported barriers with a multitude of strategies. After analyzing participants' responses, the following themes emerged as strategies that current lead female superintendents have used to surmount self-imposed barriers: communicating with all stakeholders, forming relationships and building a professional network, working hard, proving themselves to gain respect from educational stakeholders, and having supportive spouses and families.

The most frequently reported strategy for female superintendents to surmount self-imposed barriers was effectively communicating with all stakeholders. Thirty-four percent of participants stated communicating with all stakeholders was key to

surmounting barriers. In addition, participants expressed that being willing to ask questions, seeking out the information you do not know, and asking for advice were key components to overcoming challenges in the superintendent role.

Next, participants stated they overcame perceived barriers by forming relationships and building a professional network of peers. Participants said finding trustworthy colleagues and peers and establishing great relationships with them was vital to overcoming barriers in the superintendent role. In addition to building professional networks, participants also stated that building relationships with board members, staff members, and especially stakeholders who are unsure about a female leading in the role of superintendent were immediate strategies to overcoming perceived barriers.

Participants overcame perceived challenges to a lead superintendent role by working hard and proving themselves to gain respect from educational stakeholders. Twenty-five percent of the participants in the study said they worked harder than anyone else to prove themselves against perceived gender biases as a lead superintendent. In addition to working harder than anyone else, participants also stated that working with integrity and transparency has allowed stakeholders to trust them as they work together. Participants stated having supportive spouses and families willing to sacrifice for the participant's career was a factor in overcoming perceived barriers of the superintendent role. Participants overwhelmingly credited their supportive spouses for overcoming challenges in the superintendent role. Eleven percent of participants said that their spouses and families sacrificed their family time for the participant to be successful in fulfilling their responsibilities in their superintendent role.

Summary

In this chapter, a review of the problem and purpose of the study was given. The instruments developed for the study were reviewed, and an overview of how the data were presented was included. The remainder of the chapter was devoted to a detailed analysis of the data obtained through the original survey instrument and the follow-up interviews. The themes that emerged through data analysis and how the data answered the research questions were also presented.

In Chapter Five, the findings and conclusions of this phenomenological study are presented. Implications of the research on lead female superintendents' perceptions of self-imposed, self-reported barriers are provided, in addition to strategies to surmount these perceived barriers. Recommendations for future research about how to encourage more female representation in the lead superintendent position concludes the final chapter.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications

The disparity of female representation in the superintendent position for public schools reflects an ongoing social issue in corporate institutions and public education organizations throughout America (Ramaswamy, 2020; Sandberg, 2013). Male superintendents predominately represent public education's top executive position, though females over-represent males teaching in the classroom (Cassidy et al., 2021; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020). Females currently represent only 24% of superintendents of public education institutions nationwide (Ramaswamy, 2020, para. 1). Representatives from the feminist movement since the 1970s have argued that gender inequality has been prevalent in social structures, organizations, and culture (Acker, 1990).

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was twofold. The first purpose was to collect data through a survey to derive qualitative data from female superintendents' direct experiences to help explain the phenomenological barriers they have encountered in their journey to a lead superintendent position. The second purpose was to collect follow-up interview data beyond the initial results collected from the survey to gain further insight and learn viewpoints from female superintendents on how they surmounted barriers firsthand (Cassidy et al., 2021; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Miles, 2019; Sawchuk, 2022).

A review of the findings from the analysis of data explored in Chapter Four is presented at the beginning of this chapter. Conclusions, shaped by the findings and supported by previous studies reviewed in Chapter Two, are suggested. Methods for improving female representation as lead superintendents throughout the nation are

offered in the Implications for Practice section, and recommendations for future research are provided. The chapter concludes with a final summary of the study.

Findings

A phenomenological research design was employed to consider the phenomenon of lead female superintendents in a Midwest state and how they surmounted barriers to obtaining the top executive position in a public education institution. Qualitative data were used to answer the two research questions that guided this study. Qualitative data were initially collected from participant responses to the Lead, Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey in the first phase of the study. Additional qualitative data were obtained through the Lead, Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Follow-Up Female Superintendent Interview for the second phase of the study. Data analysis revealed perceived barriers females have encountered in their career journey to obtain a lead, superintendent position, and identified strategies participants utilized to surmount self-imposed, self-reported barriers to the superintendent position.

Research Question One

What barriers have current lead female superintendents encountered in their career journey to a superintendency role? Analysis of participants' responses revealed lead female superintendents in a Midwest state had encountered various barriers in their quest to obtain their current positions. Female superintendents' reported barriers fell into six distinct groups: (a) time commitment required for a lead superintendent position, (b) lack of understanding of district-level finances, (c) concern about the additional stress and responsibilities of the superintendent position, (d) concern about the perceptions of a female in the lead superintendent role and the Good Ol' Boys' Club, (e) concern about

Board of Education and community relations and the politics of a female in the lead superintendent role, and (f) lack of support or mentorship in the superintendent position.

Participants' reported barriers in their career journey to obtain a lead superintendency role further revealed relative experience and were also matched with positive considerations to become a lead superintendent. Most participants revealed they held a teaching position before becoming a superintendent. While 95% of participants reported teaching experience in the classroom, 11% also reported coaching experience before becoming a superintendent. In addition, the preponderance of participant responses revealed participants had experience as a lead principal before becoming a superintendent. Participants also disclosed they had experience as an assistant principal and director of special education services before becoming a lead superintendent. A minority of participants noted they had experience as an executive director of education and an assistant superintendent of education before obtaining a lead superintendent position. Lastly, most participants stated they were the lead superintendent in a rural school district.

In addition to the vast experience that helped prepare participants to become lead superintendents, participants also divulged positive, helpful advantages in the participants' career journey. For example, participants noted having a desire to have a more global impact increased their willingness to apply for a lead superintendent position, in addition to yearning for growth and challenges within their public education careers. Participants also noted they aspired for a higher salary or increase in pay and were inclined to create and maintain strong, positive relationships with all educational stakeholders.

Research Question Two

How have current lead female superintendents surmounted self-imposed, self-reported barriers? Examination of qualitative interview data revealed that female superintendent participants indicated that they implemented more than one key strategy to surmount challenges faced while serving as a superintendent. Participants surmounted challenges by communicating with all educational stakeholders and asking for help when needed. In addition, participants noted they formed relationships and built a professional network of peers. Participants also revealed they could overcome perceived self-imposed, self-reported challenges by working hard and proving they could do the job to gain respect from stakeholders. Lastly, participants stated having supportive spouses and families, who were willing to sacrifice for their careers, allowed the participants to surmount challenges. It should also be noted that 14% of participants reported still attempting to find effective strategies to surmount self-imposed, self-reported barriers.

Conclusions

The research questions were developed to stimulate a deeper investigation of the barriers encountered by lead female superintendents when attempting to seek the top-most executive position in public education. Cordova (2019) proposed that structural change, stronger networks, supports, networking, and better preparation are required changes to increase female representation in the superintendency position. Investigating the lived experiences of female superintendents' perceived barriers encountered on their journey to seek a superintendent position provided understanding and direction for other female educational leaders who seek to lead public education institutions. Additionally, investigating the strategies females utilized to surmount perceived barriers in their

journey to a lead superintendent position provided clarity and direction to the shortcomings of the current research on how females can overcome barriers in their quest to lead in a superintendent position (Cassidy et al., 2021; Derrington & Sharrat, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sampson, 2018; Sharp et al., 2004).

Research Question One

What barriers have current lead, female superintendents encountered in their career journey to a superintendent role? Consistent with previous research (Cassidy et al., 2021; Cordova, 2019; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Klatt, 2014; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sampson, 2018; Sharp et al., 2004; Zalaznick, 2022c), participants' perceptions of the barriers they have encountered in their career journey to a superintendency role were similar to other studies' findings. Previous researchers (Cassidy et al., 2021; Cordova, 2019; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Klatt, 2014; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sampson, 2018; Sharp et al., 2004) acknowledged that barriers encountered by females as they attempt to seek a lead superintendent position included the gendered expectations of the superintendent role by the Good Ol' Boys' Club and Board of Education members, lack of experience of females in personnel, facilities and finance, lack of sponsors and networking, inability or unwillingness to sacrifice family time, and lack of females expressing interest in becoming a superintendent. However, previous researchers have not addressed how current lead female superintendents have implemented and utilized effective strategies that helped them overcome the perceived barriers.

Research has revealed that female superintendents previously cited gender bias or gender stereotypes as the top barrier they had encountered in the early 1990s; however, most recent studies indicated that self-imposed barriers are the most noted barriers women identify in their journey to seeking a superintendent role (Cassidy et al., 2021; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Klatt, 2014; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sampson, 2018; Sawchuk, 2022; Sharp et al., 2004; Silverman, 2004). Self-imposed barriers have included “[t]he failure to attain the superintendency or the decision to avoid it because of family responsibilities” (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009, para. 7). Of the barriers most quoted by participants in the study, four of those barriers are considered self-imposed. Those self-imposed barriers include the time commitment required of a lead superintendent position; lack of understanding of district-level finances; additional stress and responsibilities of the superintendent position; consequences of community and Board of Education relations; and the politics of a female in the lead superintendent role. It should be noted the barrier most cited by participants in the study was the time commitment a lead superintendent position would require of the participant.

Research Question Two

How have current lead female superintendents surmounted self-imposed, self-reported barriers? Female superintendents in the study revealed they overcame self-imposed, self-reported barriers by communicating with all stakeholders and asking for help; forming relationships and building a professional network of peers; working hard and proving themselves to gain respect from educational stakeholders; and having spouses and families willing to sacrifice and support them in their superintendent role and

duties. Participants responses were consistent with current research (Cassidy et al., 2021; Cordova, 2019; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Klatt, 2014; Maranto et al., 2018; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020; Sampson, 2018; Sandberg, 2013; Sharp et al., 2004; Silverman, 2004). All four participants in the follow-up interview stated they had not considered the differences in self-imposed barriers versus barriers considered gender bias or gender stereotypes. Participants in the follow-up interview primarily discussed the self-imposed barriers they encountered in their journey to a lead superintendent position, more so than any gender bias or gender stereotype. Forty-five percent of participants quoted the increase in time commitment factor as one of their top considerations for not applying for a lead superintendent position. Thirty-four percent of participants indicated they utilized family to help them with child(ren) responsibilities frequently (up to or more than 1 to 2 times per week). In the follow-up interview, three out of four participants noted that the support of their spouses and families was the primary strategy that allowed them to surmount self-imposed barriers. Relying on supportive spouses and families was consistent with how women who have served as CEOs of Fortune 500 companies had been successful in their careers (Sandberg, 2013). Zalaznick (2022b) also makes the suggestion that more female educators may be successful in a superintendent position, if they have a spouse or partner who shares the domestic responsibilities.

Participants also suggested that women aspiring to be a lead superintendent in the Midwest state should create a network of colleagues they can trust, collaborate with, and ask questions. All participants were explicit that although having female-specific mentors and female-specific network systems, females should not limit themselves to just

females. Though much of the current literature reveals that women need to mentor other females as vital components to success (Cordova, 2019; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Glass, 2019; McMurdock, 2022; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Ramaswamy, 2020), participants suggested that both male and female mentors and networks are required. All participants noted the importance of expanding one's collaborative network with other superintendents, despite their gender, as a vital component to success in a superintendent role.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for females aspiring to be lead superintendents in public education institutions. The first practice supports strategies females can implement to surmount perceived self-imposed barriers in their journey to securing a lead superintendent position. The second practice provides professional networking and professional development considerations so that male and female educator colleagues can support other females in their journey to becoming a superintendent.

Strategies Females can Implement to Surmount Perceived Self-Imposed Barriers

The findings of this study revealed that current lead female superintendents had encountered many self-imposed barriers in their journey to securing a top-executive position in a public school. Self-imposed, self-reported barriers that female superintendents encountered included experiencing the Good Ol' Boys' Club, Board of Education members' gendered expectations of the superintendent role, females having less experience in personnel, facilities, and finance, lack of sponsors and networking, inability or unwillingness to sacrifice family time, and females not expressing interest in

becoming a superintendent. Furthermore, female superintendents were unaware of the differences between biases, including gender bias or gender-stereotype, and self-imposed barriers. In addition, female superintendents were more focused on self-imposed barriers than gender bias or gender-stereotype barriers in the survey and the follow-up interview portion of the study. Finally, influenced by the lack of research that currently exists in the literature, phenomenological recommendations were given by current female superintendents in ways they have personally overcome self-imposed, self-reported barriers.

The first strategy to overcome self-imposed barriers is communicating with all stakeholders and asking for help (Cassidy et al., 2021; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Kang, 2022; Zalaznick, 2022c). Participants in the study revealed that they considered not applying for a superintendent position because they lacked knowledge of district finances. Although 32% of participants reported this consideration of not applying for a superintendent position, 34% of participants said that by communicating with all stakeholders, being a great listener, asking questions, and asking for advice, they were able to overcome this perceived barrier. It should also be noted that participants stated that asking other superintendents questions and calling their state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), contributed to their overall success as a superintendent.

The second strategy to overcome self-imposed barriers was to work hard to prove themselves and gain educational stakeholders' respect (Cassidy et al., 2021; Glass, 2019; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Gullo & Sperandio, 2020; Kang, 2022; Sampson, 2018). Females aspiring to become a superintendent need to work with other superintendents in

the field to assist them with questions, projects, or concerns for other educational colleagues to overcome perceived gender bias. In addition, the aspiring female superintendent should lead with integrity and transparency with all educational stakeholders to foster trust as the stakeholders and superintendent work together (Zalaznick, 2022c). Finally, the female superintendent should be well prepared and take a confident approach when applying for the superintendent position. The female superintendent should intentionally not become emotional when applying or serving as a superintendent.

The final strategy to surmount self-imposed barriers was to ensure they have a familial and spousal support system willing to sacrifice for the female superintendent's career (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Enfield & Gilmore, 2020; Klatt, 2014; Miles, 2019; Mortensen, 2019; Sandberg, 2013; Zalaznick, 2022b). The female superintendent candidate should establish the demands and responsibilities of the position at the forefront of taking the job both with her spouse and family, but also with the Board of Education (McMurdock, 2022). There should be an ongoing dialogue between the female superintendent and their spouse and family regarding the expectations of each person's role in their home and professional lives to establish a work-life balance. It should be explicitly clear between the female educator professional and her spouse and family, who is responsible for what responsibilities and what sacrifices are willing to be made in each of these responsibilities. Lastly, female superintendents should be explicitly clear when negotiating her contract with the Board of Education that supports stronger family leave policies, and outlines expectations and adequate leave for family-work life balance (McMurdock, 2022; Sawchuk, 2022).

Professional Networking and Professional Development Considerations

The findings of this study revealed female superintendents need professional networking and mentoring with male and female education colleagues. Fourteen percent of the participants in the study revealed they considered not applying for a lead superintendent position because they were unsure if they were ready for a lead administrative position. Participants also revealed they considered the consequence of how to garner further knowledge of the position before applying for a superintendent position. Therefore, professional networking and mentoring are recommended (Kang, 2022; McMurdock, 2022; Sawchuk, 2022; Zalaznick, 2022c).

Aspiring female superintendent candidates should form relationships and build a professional network of educational colleagues. Female superintendents should attend professional meetings with other superintendents for support, collaboration, and help. Female superintendents should immediately find a mentor, ask them questions, and be willing to take risks. In addition, asking questions of representatives at the state-level Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) should also be a strategy used to surmount perceived barriers. Another suggestion for building a solid professional mentorship and network is establishing a trusting work relationship with an education attorney to advise you on school legal matters.

Though there could be benefits to female-specific networking groups due to the unique perspectives and challenges that arise for females in the superintendency role, it is vitally important to establish a more extensive networking system with both male and female colleagues. Inclusivity of collaboration, networking, and mentorship should

include educational colleagues, legal representatives, educational organizations, and community stakeholders.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on barriers that current lead female superintendents have encountered. In addition, this study also focused on strategies that current lead female superintendents have implemented to surmount self-imposed, self-reported barriers. This study reinforced the current research suggestions of the self-imposed obstacles encountered by females aspiring to be lead superintendents; however, further research is needed to support females successfully navigating how to overcome these self-imposed barriers. Additionally, further research on recruitment strategies is needed, specifically for female educators aspiring to be a superintendent. Moreover, further research must be conducted to analyze females of different race. Research should identify generalizations and differences in the barriers experienced by females of color, and the strategies they employ to surmount the challenges. Furthermore, additional research is needed to determine barriers specific to the number of years served in the superintendency, and factors that may affect this implication. Lastly, research that includes participants from various school district sizes is warranted to ensure fidelity.

How to Surmount Perceived Self-imposed Barriers

Future studies should focus on how current lead female superintendents should surmount self-imposed barriers. While the sample size of this study was 44 participants in a Midwest state, additional studies must focus on strategies for how female educational leaders have overcome barriers. Females have various strategies to surmount the challenges they face every day, in the workplace and in their homes. Nearly all studies in

the literature reviewed focused solely on what barriers existed for females seeking the top executive leadership position in public education. Gresham and Sampson (2019) suggest this implication for research conclusion in their content analysis of 43 dissertation literature reviews, as well. Gresham and Sampson (2019) concluded that the 43 dissertation studies they analyzed, focused solely on the disparity of females in the superintendent position, with common themes among the 43 dissertation studies. However, the document analysis concluded that the shift in research most focus on how females are overcoming these barriers (Gresham & Sampson, 2019). More studies must investigate how to overcome barriers rather than focusing on the gender disparity in the leadership position.

Recruitment Strategies for Aspiring Female Superintendents

The findings of this study reveal additional recruitment strategies for aspiring female superintendents are needed. Whereas participants in the study stated they did not feel confident in their abilities in school district finances and facilities, proactive approaches were not suggested for the participants before accepting a lead superintendent position. Participants in the study revealed they built a strong network and sought mentors in the field, and asked questions and advice from educational colleagues and agencies. However, there were no programs cited by participants in the study that offered training beforehand to enhance the knowledge and confidence of the individual for superintendent responsibilities in finances. Ramaswamy (2020, para. 15) quoted, “Conoy pointed to a Hewlett Packard study that says men will apply for a position if they meet 60% of the qualifications, while women will apply for a position when they meet 100% of the qualifications.” Perhaps by empowering aspiring female superintendents with more

knowledge and confidence in the responsibilities of the superintendent position, more female applicants will seek to apply for vacant superintendent positions.

Female Superintendents of Different Race

Findings from this study reflected 100% of female participants were of the White race. The literature suggests that although women are grossly unrepresented in school leadership positions, women of color experience even more barriers to school leadership positions (Daniels, 2022). In a research study analyzing gender representation in the K-12 superintendency position in two Canadian provinces, the literature suggests equal female representation in the K-12 superintendency is prevalent in Canada and the United States, as well as countries around the world (Henderson, 2017).

Daniels (2022) proposes that women of color experience barriers of “encouragement to apply state certification requirements, discrimination and bias in educational leadership” (p. 2). Additionally, Black women only represent 13% of positions in principal positions nationwide, while there is no quoted statistic of Black females in superintendent positions nationwide (Daniels, 2022). Comparatively, as with the disparity in representation of White females in executive level positions both in the public and the private sector, Black females are represented in both sectors also (Spell-Hansson, 2022). Only women of color have held CEO positions in a Fortune 500 company prior to 2021 (Hansson, 2022). Additional research is needed to determine what unique barriers Black female leaders in executive leadership experiences, and the self-surmounting strategies Black female superintendents have utilized to overcome them.

In addition to Black females being gravely underrepresented in the school leadership positions, Asian females are underrepresented as well. In a study conducted

with 1,509 superintendents in the United States, 89.3% were of the White race (Kang, 2022, p. 2). Asian-Americans only represented 0.0046% of all superintendents of the 2020-2021 study (Kang, 2022, p. 2). Of this less than 1% of Asian-American representation of superintendents nationwide, there was no discernment of how many Asian female superintendents there were, if any. As with Black female superintendents, more research is required to identify barriers that Asian female educators experience when attempting to seek a superintendent position. In addition, more research is needed to identify ways in which Asian females have surmounted self-imposed barriers to lead school districts.

Number of Years a Female has Served in the Superintendency

This study found that the majority of female participants had served in a lead superintendent role for one to five years. In a recent AASA study, findings showed that nearly half of all superintendents, male and female, nationwide have five years or less experience as a superintendent (Zalaznick, 2022a, para. 8). In addition, the AASA survey concluded that all K-12 superintendents are getting younger, compared to study results 10 years prior (Zalanick, 2022a, para. 7). In regards to the current literature review that indicates most females wait until later in life to seek a superintendent position, more research is warranted to determine the implications the trend of younger executives entering the superintendent position, and how this will affect females' representation. In addition, implications of females entering later in life in order to wait for their children to be grown, could have an additional effect on the number of years females serve in the superintendent position.

Female Superintendents from Various School District Sizes

Findings from this study reflected 95% of participants serve as a superintendent in a rural school district. While two participants were from urban and suburban, respectively, there is a lack of representation of urban and suburban school districts represented in this study. The literature suggests that studies have varied in their findings about female representation in the superintendent position (Female superintendents by locale, 2013; Mortensen, 2019; Sharp et al., 2004). A report on the American Association of School Administrators stated that despite female representation climbing to 24% in 2013, district enrollment size was not an indicator (Female superintendents by locale, 2013, para. 1). In a three-state study completed by Sharp et al. (2004), conclusions were drawn that females head larger districts of 25,000 students or more, as well as rural school districts of 300 students or less (p. 26). However, men represented the superintendent position of districts of medium size with a student population between 3,000-24, 999, more in this tristate study (Sharp et al., 2004, p. 26). In a study completed in Minnesota's female superintendents' perceived barriers to the superintendency role, 65% of female participants revealed they worked in rural school districts with fewer than 2,999 students, while 35% were employed by suburban school districts (Mortensen, 2019, p. 71). With such varied suggestions throughout the literature, in addition to this study's findings, more conclusive research needs to be conducted to generalize perceived barriers and strategies to surmount barriers that female superintendents of all district sizes have experienced.

Summary

The background of the disparity of female representation in public education's superintendent position (Ramaswamy, 2020) was presented in Chapter One. Feminism, the theoretical framework that shaped this study, was a suitable lens through which to view the analysis of strategies females could utilize to surmount perceived self-imposed barriers because the theory is focused on gender inequality that has been prevalent through the decades (Acker, 1990). The focus of this study was to explore the barriers encountered by a Midwest state's lead female superintendents in their career journey to a superintendency role. In addition, the study focused on strategies the lead female superintendents have utilized to surmount self-imposed, self-reported barriers during their career journey in the Midwest state.

A review of the literature was presented in Chapter Two. A review of why more women were not entering the top executive position in a school district was reported. In addition, there was an extensive review of the grossly evolved feminism theory since the origin of the theory in the 1970s and 1980s, especially focused on feminism in organizational structures. Acker (1990) further specified feminism in the workplace as a gendered social organization theory. An additional theory was presented to understand why more females did not represent the superintendent position across the nation, including Kant's work of Liberalism (Groenhout, 2002). Liberalism argues that everyone possesses their rights and is therefore gender-neutral, indicating that women have the free will to make their own choices (Groenhout, 2002).

The methodology of the study was described in Chapter Three. Guided by research questions, a phenomenological approach was selected to examine current lead

female superintendents' reported barriers encountered in their career journey and strategies they implemented to surmount self-imposed, self-reported barriers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative instruments were designed for the study to answer the two research questions. Survey data from phase one of the study and interview data were used to seek a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences.

After collection, the data were analyzed and displayed in Chapter Four regarding the two research questions. First, qualitative data from the superintendents' responses to the Lead, Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Survey were analyzed and presented using themes. Then, qualitative data from the superintendents' responses to the Lead, Female Superintendent Perceived Barrier Follow-Up Female Superintendent Interview were analyzed and presented using themes.

Key findings and conclusions of the study were presented in Chapter Five. Female superintendents' self-reported barriers encountered in their career journey to a lead superintendent position and strategies the participants had implemented to surmount self-imposed, self-reported barriers were acknowledged in the findings of the two research questions. Based on the findings and the theoretical framework that shaped this study, implications for practice included strategies aspiring female superintendents can implement to surmount perceived self-imposed barriers, as well as professional networking and professional development considerations. Recommendations for future research included additional studies of how female superintendents have surmounted self-imposed barriers, as well as recruitment strategies for aspiring female superintendents.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

1. Please list all positions (past and current) held within public education before becoming a lead Superintendent.
2. Are you a Lead Superintendent of a Missouri Public School District?
 1. Yes
 2. No
3. How many years have you served as a lead Superintendent?
4. How would you describe the school district in which you currently serve as a Superintendent?
 1. Urban
 2. Suburban
 3. Rural
5. What were positives you considered before contemplating a lead Superintendent role?
6. What were challenges you considered before contemplating a lead Superintendent role?
7. After considering the positives and the challenges of becoming a lead Superintendent, what ultimately led you to apply for a Superintendent position?
8. Now that you serve as a lead Superintendent, how have you overcome the challenges you perceived before applying for a Superintendent position?
9. Are you a mother or guardian to a non-adult child(ren)?
10. How many children do you have? (This can include stepchildren and/or any dependent children that you care for).

11. Do you have family support that you rely upon and frequently helps you with child(ren) responsibilities (up to or more than 1-2 times per week)?
12. What is your marital status?
13. Do you identify as a female?
14. What is your ethnic group?
15. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview in order for the researcher to obtain an in-depth understanding of female Superintendents overcoming barriers in order to achieve their career goal of a Superintendent of Schools?

Appendix B

Preliminary Follow Up Female Superintendent Interview

1. The literature considers family dynamics, including spousal support, ability to relocate your family to accept a job, and the juggling of domestic and professional responsibilities as self-imposed barriers, while gender stereotypes and gender bias items are categorized as a separate barrier type. Please elaborate upon the difference in challenges that self-imposed barriers presented, versus those that would be considered more gender stereotypes and/or gender bias.
2. What were the common action items that you took in order to surmount the challenges before and during applying as a superintendent, in a predominantly male role?
3. Describe your perspective of the superintendent culture in Missouri public education.
4. What suggestions do you have for aspiring women seeking to lead as a superintendent in the state of Missouri?
5. How do you feel about female-specific mentor and/or network groups for females aspiring to be superintendents?

Appendix C

LINDENWOOD

Research Information Sheet

You are being asked to participate in a research study. We are doing this study to gain a better understanding of how female superintendents can overcome barriers that exist for females in seeking a lead superintendent position in a Midwest Public School District. During this study, you will be asked to complete a fifteen-item open-ended survey. It will take about 10–15 minutes to complete this study.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time.

There are no risks from participating in this project. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study.

We are collecting data that could identify you, such as your email address. Every effort will be made to keep your information secure and confidential. Only members of the research team will be able to see your data.

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. We do not intend to include information that could identify you in any publication or presentation. Any information we collect will be stored by the researcher in a secure location. The only people who will be able to see your data are: members of the research team, qualified staff of Lindenwood University, representatives of state or federal agencies.

Who can I contact with questions?

If you have concerns or complaints about this project, please use the following contact information:

Kristina Smith, [REDACTED]

Dr. Tanya Vest, tvest@lindenwood.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or concerns about the project and wish to talk to someone outside the research team, you can contact Michael Leary (Director - Institutional Review Board) at 636-949-4730 or mleary@lindenwood.edu.

Appendix D

Survey Research Information Sheet

LINDENWOOD

Survey Research Consent Form

Surmounting Perceived Barriers for Missouri Female Superintendents

You are asked to participate in a survey being conducted by Kristina Smith under the guidance of Dr. Tanya Vest at Lindenwood University. We are doing this study to gain a better understanding of how female superintendents can overcome barriers that exist for females in seeking a lead superintendent position in a Midwest Public School District. It will take about 10 minutes to complete this survey.

Answering this survey is voluntary. We will be asking about 140 other people to answer these questions.

At the end of the survey, you will be asked if you are interested in participating in an additional interview by phone. We will contact you to schedule an interview at your convenience. In this interview, there will be five open-ended questions to investigate what personal experiences you have used to surmount barriers in your journey to the superintendent position. The interview is expected to last no longer than ten minutes.

What are the risks of this study?

We do not anticipate any risks related to your participation other than those encountered in daily life. You do not need to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or you can stop taking the survey at any time.

We will be collecting data that could identify you, but each survey response will receive a code so that we will not know who answered each survey. The code connecting you and your data will be destroyed as soon as possible. We do not intend to include any information that could identify you in any publication or presentation.

Will anyone know my identity?

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. We do not intend to include information that could identify you in any publication or presentation. Any information we collect will be stored by the researcher in a secure location. The only people who will

be able to see your data are: members of the research team, qualified staff of Lindenwood University, representatives of state or federal agencies.

What are the benefits of this study?

You will receive no direct benefits for completing this survey. We hope what we learn may benefit other people in the future.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study, you may contact the Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board Director, Michael Leary, at (636) 949-4730 or mleary@lindenwood.edu. You can contact the researcher, Kristina Smith directly at [REDACTED]. You may also contact Dr. Tanya Vest, tvest@lindenwood.edu.

By clicking the link below, I confirm that I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be required to do, and the risks involved. I understand that I can discontinue participation at any time by closing the survey browser. My consent also indicates that I am at least 18 years of age.

You can withdraw from this study at any time by simply closing the browser window. Please feel free to print a copy of this consent form.

Vita

Leslee Kristina Smith received her Bachelor of Science in Criminology in 2011 from Missouri State University. Kristina began teaching special education at the Seymour School District in 2012, as she worked on completing her provisional licensure for teaching special education through the University of Missouri, St. Louis. Kristina completed her special education teaching certification coursework in 2014. While teaching special education at Hollister R-V School District, Kristina earned her Master of Arts in School Administration from Lindenwood University in 2016. Since 2017, Kristina has been the Director of Special Education Services at Hollister R-V School District.