WOMEN AND THE SUPERINTENDENCY: A STUDY OF
TEXAS WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS

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Education remains one of the most gender imbalanced fields, with disproportionately fewer women in higher levels of leadership. Women who reach leadership positions in education experience many triumphs and tribulations during their tenures as principals, assistant superintendents, and superintendents. The experiences of these women in their various administrative levels of leadership can provide important insight into the reasons for their success as women superintendents in Texas. This research has probed the career trajectory of nine women who have successfully attained and retained superintendencies in Texas to determine what career decisions have helped them and the challenges these women have faced in their positions. A qualitative research method, open-ended interviews, yielded several findings of what women considered important in proceeding from teaching through the various levels and ending in becoming superintendents. According to nine successful women superintendents in Texas, there are specific characteristics one can bring to the table that would really make a difference: Communication, collaboration, compassion, preparedness, hard work, and passion. All nine participants overcame challenges when climbing to the higher levels of leadership in education. These women have achieved success in the superintendency, and several factors appear to have played into the success of these women who have achieved in education’s top position.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Education remains one of the most gender imbalanced fields, with disproportionately fewer women in higher levels of leadership. Nationally, women compose approximately 75% of the workforce in schools, and yet over 60% of the leaders in schools are men (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006b). Even policies that appear friendly towards the acceptance of women in the workplace, only offer the opportunity for women to fit into the same masculine-driven paradigm that has always existed (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). What policy makers communicate with current legislation is that it is illegal not to consider a woman for any position, but when she gets there it may be in her better interest to behave like a man (Skrla, 2000). How do women still find themselves in higher levels of leadership and perform successfully?

A woman’s role has transformed from the young, single female in the one-room schoolhouse to an educated woman with the right tenacity and courage leading an entire school district. While history has seen women play important leadership roles in education, men significantly outnumber women as superintendents. This trend in education is, sadly, the same trend found in the corporate world in society. As women’s importance has emerged in the workforce over the past century, women’s representation in leadership has not necessarily shown the same trend. For example, one study found that women made up 44% of the workforce in accounting firms, but only 19% of the partners were women (El-Ramly, 2014). Another source (Kranc, 2014) looked at the practices of Standard & Poor’s 100 companies and found that although women were being hired in these companies as frequently as men were, the higher the management position, the fewer the number of women represented. Likewise, women have always played a profound role in public education, but women rarely achieved the highest
leadership roles in American school districts until recently (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Today, women still occupy a smaller percentage of the total superintendent positions across the country than men.

The Council of Great City Schools reported in the fall of 2010 that only 27% of the nation’s superintendents were women. According to Skrla (2000), Texas’s frequency for hiring female superintendents mirrors the United States in that the number of men is noticeably higher than the number of women in these leadership roles. There was a time when women held only 11% of the superintendent roles in schools. Blount (1998), reported a sharp decline of this statistic after the 1950s, and stagnating around the 1970s, when women occupied about 3% of the superintendents’ positions. In 1990, approximately 6% of the nation’s superintendencies belonged to women. The early 20th century saw this number increase to a little over 20% (Pascopella, 2008). The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) released a report in 2007 which revealed that women composed 20% of the nation’s superintendents, which is a promising upturn from previous statistics. Based on a list of superintendents published by the Texas Education Agency, approximately 17-19% of the superintendents in Texas in the 2011-2012 school year were women (Texas Education Agency, 2014).

One might think that superintendents’ short tenures might impact the reason for the shortage of women superintendents. While media reports seem to paint the picture of the superintendency as a revolving door, especially in larger districts, the statistics seem to reflect something different. A comprehensive meta-analysis of superintendent tenure stated that the median between 1975 and 1979 showed to be 7.5 years. This same analysis revealed that in the early 1980s and 1990s the tenure of a superintendent in the United States was around three years, especially in large, urban school districts (Natkin et al., 2002). The Council of Urban Boards of
Education (2000) reported that the average stay of a large, urban leader was a little over 4.5 years. This average has increased, as in 2007 the average tenure for superintendents in larger districts was 5.1 years (Council of the Great, City Schools, 2010). According to Natkin, et al. (2002), the myth of the short-term superintendency has consequences for the profession. They indicated that a short tenure has serious implications towards the attitude of superintendent candidates and district stakeholders. “Superintendents…may be reluctant to undertake major reforms…(stakeholders) may be conditioned (with) the ‘this too shall pass’ attitude” (p. 29).

School districts may have in mind certain competencies they think are particular to men. Current superintendents must possess a wide range of competencies, especially if they expect to lead a large school district effectively. Experts often equate the office of the superintendency to that of a chief executive officer or executive director of a company because of the massive scope of responsibilities that require a leader with a specific skill set that must focus on teaching and learning (Fossey, 2009; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Quinn, 2007). Johnson (1996) described the requirement of a successful district leader as needing three types of leadership: educational, political, and managerial. The balancing act of these three leadership types can pose serious complications when a superintendent is deficient in one area. This same report also recognized the value of school leaders knowing the business side of education. These responsibilities, according to deregulation advocates, may be better served by a non-traditional superintendent (Kowalski & Bjork, 2005). Is this to say that superintendents with traditional backgrounds and training cannot be successful? Proponents of placing nontraditional superintendents to lead school districts seem to think so. Part of this study investigated the qualities successful women brought to the superintendent position who have the traditional superintendent background.
This research examined the professional lives of nine female superintendents in Texas. The Texas Education Agency publishes a current (2013-2014 school year) list of superintendents in the state. According to this list, approximately 184 superintendents are women. However, TEA includes directors of charter schools as superintendents. This study defined superintendent as the individual who is the head of an independent or consolidated school district (ISD or CISD) in Texas. In this research, the superintendency is further defined as the individual who is selected and voted on by the district’s school board. These are individuals who hold at least a Master’s degree from an accredited university and are certified by the State of Texas as qualified superintendents. This excludes charter school and academy directors.

**Topic Overview**

Why do women hold most teaching positions in education, yet most of the positions in higher levels of leadership are held by men? This inequity of position holds true not only in the state of Texas but across the United States as well. What is it about the superintendency that seems to leave women behind? What can we learn from existing women superintendents who are successful? There has been significant research in the area of women in higher levels of leadership in education. Most of the research has taken place in the past three decades, which provides a relatively current pool of content about the subject. Having said this, the research was mostly about the inequities experienced by women already in leadership and the discrimination a woman faces while in a leadership position.

The research of Blount (1998), Skrla (2000), Brunner and Schumaker (1998), Riehl and Byrd (1997), Tallerico and Blount (2004), Dana and Brourisaw (2006b), Grogan (2005), and Derrington and Sharratt (2008) are all examples of studies that explored the imbalances of women in the superintendent position. The aforementioned research provides a solid foundation
for what needs to be the next step in researching women in leadership, which is discovering how and why women become successful superintendents. Women overcome many challenges when climbing to the higher levels of leadership in education. Consequently, some women have achieved success in the superintendency. Several factors play into the success of becoming high achieving women in education and this study highlights these factors of high achieving women superintendents in Texas.

Definition of Terms

District size- This research categorizes school districts into three sizes: small (<10,000 students), medium (10,001-30,000 students), and large (>30,000 students).

District type- This research divides the school districts into three different categories: urban, suburban, and rural.

Elementary- Pre-kindergarten – 5th grade.

Geographic region- For the purpose of this research, Texas is divided into five different geographic regions: West Texas, North Texas, South Texas, Central Texas, and East Texas.

Leadership- This research often mentions *higher levels of leadership* or leadership *positions* in education. These leadership positions include principal, assistant superintendents, deputy superintendents, or executive directors, curriculum coordinators/directors, or the finance department personnel of a school district.

School district- For the purpose of this research, school district is defined as a public independent school district or consolidated school district in Texas (ISD or CISD). Charter schools and other academies are not considered school districts.

Secondary- 6th grade – 12th grade.
Superintendent- A superintendent is defined as an individual who has, at least, a Master’s degree from an accredited university and holds a valid superintendent certification from the Texas State Board of Education. Also, this individual is chosen by a school board or designated body for the position of superintendent.

Problem of Study

Women who reach leadership positions in education have many triumphs and tribulations during their tenures as principals, assistant superintendents, and superintendents. The experiences of women in these higher levels of leadership can provide important insight into the factors that make these women successful in the superintendency. Furthermore, when women choose to leave their superintendent positions, they do so for a variety of reasons, including retirement, moving to another district, or leaving the superintendency all together. Although reasons for leaving the superintendency are not an issue for women alone, as men also leave the position for various reasons, identifying the factors that may have influenced why superintendents chose to leave a position may provide a foundation for one searching for the key to becoming a successful superintendent. Identifying the unique characteristics of women superintendents, which make them successful, is equally valuable. Finding out whether there is a preferred career path that leads to the superintendent position may shed some light onto the gender imbalance of leadership positions in education. Finally, knowing what impact the support women superintendents have or had during their careers could explain some of their successes.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore the factors that may have led to the success of women superintendents in Texas. This research looked into the career trajectory of women
who have successfully attained and retained superintendencies in Texas to determine what career decisions have helped them. Furthermore, this research probed into the challenges women superintendents have faced in their positions. Similar research has been conducted in other parts of the United States where the results revealed barriers for women in higher levels of leadership in education, such as social constructs and family issues (Gewertz, 2006; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Shakeshaft, Nowell, & Perry, 1991; Skrla, 2000). Other studies have delved into the lives of the women superintendents in Texas through interviews and case study research (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Sharp, Malone, Walter, & Supley, 2004; Winter, Rinehart, Keedy, & Bjork, 2007). Finding the factors of success for women superintendents and the challenges they face in the position could have implications on the presence of qualified women in education, not to mention the impact on university superintendent preparation programs.

Research Questions

This research attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the internal and external factors that lead women to be successful superintendents in Texas?
   a. What career pathways do women take?
   b. What support do these women have?

2. What challenges do women superintendents face? In what ways does gender affect these challenges?

3. What do women superintendents bring to a successful tenure as superintendent?
Organisation of the Dissertation

There are five chapters in this dissertation. Chapter 1 includes a topic overview, the problem of study, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. The definitions of the terms used throughout the dissertation are also presented in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to the topic. The chapter begins with a history of the position of superintendent in public education. The chapter reviews the role of the superintendent and the role of the non-traditional superintendent. It also covers research on women’s experiences in the superintendency and challenges they may have faced as a female superintendent, such as family issues, gatekeeping challenges, and social constructs.

Chapter 3 covers the research methodology. This chapter describes the rationale for conducting a qualitative study followed by the theoretic perspective for the study. It also describes the participant selection and ethical considerations of working with human participants, and explains the process for data collection and the procedure for data analysis.

Chapter 4 organizes the collected data from the interviews of the nine participants into six sections: the family factor, staying power, gaining access, social constructs, the childhood consideration, and defining success.

Chapter 5 contains the conclusions and recommendations for further research.

Limitations and Delimitations

This research takes an in depth look at nine women superintendents and their careers through interviews. While qualitative study has proved to be a valuable contributor to research in the social sciences, subjectivity comes into play as the researcher works to interpret or analyze collected data. Being an educator in a position of leadership, I brought education background knowledge and experiences as a woman in education. As all nine participants are also women in
leadership, I worked to maintain an unbiased approach to the analysis of data. When a researcher is working so closely with subjects, inevitably, the researcher’s own bias can be a factor when making conclusions about data.

The use of a small sample size is one of this study’s delimitations. However, the sample size of women superintendents in Texas is small to begin with. In addition, I chose to keep the sample size small due to time and resource constraints. Participants were selected from a list of available individuals based on school district size and location. Furthermore, selection was based on the attainment and retention of the superintendent position, and none had ever been forced out of a superintendent position. A second delimitation is the fact that the selection of the women was not truly random. For these two reasons, one could argue the validity of generalizing the data.

Rationale for the Study

Researchers have reached out to women superintendents in order to explore what experiences they have encountered that may shed light on this issue of inequity. What is it about the superintendent position that seems to leave women behind? Why do women hold most teaching positions in education, yet most of the positions in higher levels of leadership are held by men? This imbalance of position reflects not only in the state of Texas but across the United States as well. What lessons can be gleaned from existing women superintendents who are, and have been, successful? Although statistics show an increase of women in leadership roles, inequity still exists. How are women being successful in the highest level of leadership in school districts?

Once women are in a position of leadership in education, it is much more cost effective for a school district to keep her than to replace her. Replacing a superintendent is an expensive
proposition (Tallerico, 2000). Whether a school district hires an outside firm or conducts the search itself, the amount of time and resources needed to find a qualified individual can be overwhelming, especially when the search is at an unexpected time. In light of this, it is of great benefit for school districts and superintendent preparation programs to know what the challenges for women superintendents are and to help women create the foundation of education and support they need to obtain and retain a superintendent position successfully.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE
History of the Superintendency

Research indicates a changing trend in the number of women in the superintendent role. Men outnumber women in this position even though education overall is a predominately female industry. In order to fully grasp the significance of the lack of women in school leadership, one should first understand the historical aspects of the superintendency and second, the historical context of women in education and the superintendency.

Women superintendents have dated as far back as 1909, before women’s suffrage and the 19th Amendment, when Ella Flagg Young “savored the magnitude of her accomplishment” as the first woman superintendent of Chicago schools (Blount, 1998). While Young emerged as a symbol of progress for women in education, many women before her fought the struggles for equality for women in education. Abigail Adams was one of the first women to speak out for the equal education of women. Although mostly ignored, Adams’ fight laid the foundation for others. Catharine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Horace Mann were among those who supported educating women. The early nineteenth century even saw the establishment of academies for women to pursue their education (Blount, 1998).

When states passed compulsory education laws, the demand for teachers increased, and more women became teachers. Teaching soon became a burgeoning profession for many women who sought financial, social, and intellectual independence. According to Blount (1998), the emergence of the school administrator in the early 19th century occurred as “…officials lauded the notion of paid male school administrators who could monitor female teachers and keep them from getting out of line” (p. 26). There were two schools of thought as to how the idea of the
superintendency began. First, because more and more small schools were opening in sparsely populated areas, a school administrator was hired to oversee several different schools. He would travel from school to school to supervise teachers (mostly women) in their roles. Second, as more and more women entered the teaching profession, the administrator position was created to justify the man’s higher salary and status than women in education (Blount, 1998). Furthermore, in order for men to remain in education, men demanded more prestige and money. According to the research of Tallerico and Blount (2004), “the bureaucratization of schooling…was built on separate spheres for women (teaching) and men (leadership)” (p. 642). The authors explored the notion of occupational segregation by gender. Most notable were the changes in men-dominated roles, such as teaching, which were filled mostly by women. Tallerico and Blount (2004) explained that the concept of educational leadership was based on competition and authority, which is a stereotypical male feature. Other research found that the superintendency has been institutionalized as a masculine position (Blount, 1998; Grogan, 2000; Skrla, 2000).

Despite the superintendency being described as a masculine or male-dominated profession, women have found their way into the superintendency and other leadership roles in education. Women filled many administrator roles during the early 20th century, such as principalships, heads of school, and superintendencies. Women held what was considered “less desirable elementary school principalships and… state superintendencies” (Brunner & Grogan, 2007 p. 4). As more men entered the field of education fewer women held positions as leaders. By the 1940s, an influx of men joining the education workforce provided refuge from being drafted into the war, as education was a protected field (Blount, 1998). This practice continued until well past the mid-century. Affirmative Action, Title IX, and the Women’s Education Equity Act of 1974 were the results of the United States government’s attempt to address
inequities in the workforce. These efforts at equality provided Federal funds for research and developed action plans to address the lack of diversity in the workplace.

Literature and research concerning issues of women’s equality in education is found as early as the 1970s. Before then, feminist research dealt mostly with the woman’s place in her own education and the availability of higher education for women. However, even that research characterized career or goal oriented women as having more masculine traits (Baruch, 1967; Rand, 1968). Research in the 1980s finally asked the question, “Why are there so few women in education leadership positions?” Studies from this time period noted the lack of women in higher levels of leadership and discussed the challenges of women who held these positions encountered. Issues such as gender discrimination among board members, age discrimination, and lack of mobility were found as significant obstructions to women taking a superintendency during this decade (McDade & Drake, 1982; Revere, 1987; Wiggins & Coggins, 1986).

Gaining Access

Over the past four decades, women’s appearances in leadership roles burgeoned except in the superintendency (Stephens, July 2009). Part of the problem was that many still saw the superintendency as a male-defined role, which led to how the discourse of the superintendency is shaped. “Once in administrative positions that have been defined and institutionalized as men’s work, …barriers become pointedly overt to most who experience them” (Brunner & Grogan, 2007 p. 39). The superintendency being a male-defined role is evident in the selection processes put forth by school districts. The headhunters, school boards, or gatekeepers who searched for candidates often have a mindset on what the profile of a successful superintendent should look like. This profile is usually equated with the qualities of White, male, and married (Derrington & Sharratt, 2008; Grogan, 2005; Tallerico, 2000). Gaining access to the superintendency seems
to have road blocks that other leadership roles in education may not have had because of these preconceived notions of who belongs in the superintendent position.

Tallerico (2000) identified underlying issues with school boards’ mentalities when considering candidates for a superintendent position. School boards considered the quality descriptors of a candidate to be “strong disciplinary” or to have “other noninstructional technical abilities” as unquestionable male qualities and questioned female candidates’ abilities to “do” discipline or a budget (p. 32). Too often the female candidates in a pool of interviewees were the token candidates for the sake of diversity (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006a; Riehl & Byrd, 1997).

Tallerico’s study revealed ideologies that captured school board members’ biased feelings towards affirmative action in the superintendent selection process. One school board member said:

   We’re all for equal employment opportunity, and we say that in all our job announcements. But that doesn’t mean affirmative action. We don’t believe in giving any special preferences to Blacks or Latinos or whatever. We just go by who is the strongest applicant for the job. (Tallerico, 2000 p. 33)

Many selection committees found candidates who had the kind of experience the committee felt was valuable for the superintendent position without giving consideration to less traditional avenues of promotion. This kind of thinking often left out women candidates who may not have had the background in finance or multiple years of experience as a high school assistant principal dealing with discipline. Other sentiments expressed included board members assuming strong disciplinary background and other attributes commonly associated with a typical male candidate but questioning the qualifications of female applicants by asking whether or not the female applicant could handle discipline or the budget. The right fit involved finding a candidate that has the right “chemistry” with school board interviewers (Tallerico, 2000 p. 35). Committees selected candidates with whom they thought they could spend an amount of time. This
subjective and very partial selection process inevitably led to committees choosing superintendents who are more like themselves. If the selection committee is the school board, the likelihood of it being predominately male may be high.

The career path to the superintendency tends to favor the individual who comes from the secondary administration level. Tallerico (2000) explained in a case study in one state that “…(m)oist consultants and board members were found to value line over staff administrative roles and secondary over elementary principalships” (p. 30). The general (line) career path for a superintendent tended to be teacher (sometimes teacher/coach), assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent. The elementary administrator position was not as valued as the secondary experience (Kim & Brunner, 2009; Sharp et al., 2004).

Women in elementary administrative positions far outnumber women in secondary administrative positions. In 1993, women held 41% of the campus administrative positions in elementary education and 16% of the campus administrative positions in secondary education in the United States (Montenegro, 1993). If ideal candidates for the superintendent position tend to come from secondary leadership positions, this greatly lessens the pool of female candidates. Even at 41% in elementary leadership positions, women are leading less than half of schools where teachers are predominately female. The Rand Corporation released a report that placed women in 44% of the public school principalships between 1999 and 2000, with no discernment between elementary and secondary (Gates, Ringle, Santibanez, Chung, & Ross, 2003).

In a study of career paths of superintendents in the United States, Kim and Brunner (2009) found that a woman’s career path to the superintendency was different than a man’s. According to the study, 65.3% of the women superintendents had secondary teaching experience while 63% had experience at both the elementary and secondary levels. A typical route for a
man began with teaching on the secondary level, then athletic coach, assistant principal on the secondary level, secondary principal, and then superintendent. This study showed men’s career advancement into the superintendency five to six years faster than women’s. Furthermore, a woman’s typical career path to the superintendent started as an elementary or secondary teacher, club advisor, elementary principal, director or coordinator, assistant or associate superintendent, and finally superintendent. Many of the participants’ first teaching experiences were not in secondary education. Pascopella (2008) stated that according to a report released by the American Association of School Administrators, nearly 40% of the female superintendents entered the position from an assistant superintendent position. Conversely, 53% of males entered the superintendent position from a secondary principal position.

An exception to this study is Michelle Rhee, a former high-profile superintendent in the United States. Rhee is probably the best example of a non-traditional career trajectory into the superintendency. She began her career as an elementary teacher. In 1997, Rhee left teaching to develop her own organization called the New Teacher Project. In June of 2007, District of Columbia Mayor Adrian Fenty appointed Michelle Rhee chancellor. District of Columbia Public Schools’ (DCPS) school board was abolished and the mayor was given control of the schools (Hopkinson, 2010). Fenty gave Rhee complete control over DCPS which shocked many due to the fact that Rhee had absolutely no experience running a school. She had never been a campus administrator, let alone a superintendent. Furthermore, she was walking into a school system with a large African American community, with which she had no experience. Rhee readily admitted that she took the position with no intention of moving into another school leadership position in the future. She saw her job as having to fix the system and get out (Guggenheim, 2010).
Rhee’s resignation came when Fenty failed to win over voters in his re-election bid. Some argue that Rhee’s affiliation with Fenty was the key polarizing factor in his campaign (Hopkinson, 2010). Part of the controversy surrounding Rhee’s tenure as chancellor of DCPS was her quick and abrupt fashion of making sweeping changes. In her first year and a half at her position, she shut 21 schools, fired more than 100 of the 900 central office employees, dismissed 270 teachers and removed 36 principals from their positions, including the principal at her own daughters’ school (Ripley, 2008). Rhee tried to negotiate a different kind of teacher contract with the teacher unions. In her version of the contract, teachers could choose between two different pay scales. One would offer a teacher the opportunity for tenure at a lower salary. The other would allow teachers to make much more money based on classroom performance but without tenure. The teacher unions rejected this plan and did not even allow a vote (Guggenheim, 2010). Teachers balked at the idea of taking away their tenure. Many in the community felt this was an attack on their beloved veteran teachers. While aggressive tactics with personnel is not a move saved for non-traditional superintendents, Rhee’s reputation likely suffered as a result.

Other examples of women superintendents, such as Arlene Ackerman, commonly associated with an almost million dollar buy-out in Philadelphia, and Diana Lam, whose last superintendency was in San Antonio Independent School District (ISD), follow what studies consider the typical career pathway to the superintendency. Both women began teaching in elementary and middle school and then moved to a middle school principalship, and from there, district-level administrative positions (Fossey, 2011; Strauss, 1998).

A longitudinal study found a stark difference in the recruiting and hiring practices of superintendent search consultants in Long Island over a ten year period. In 1995, search consultants used community focus groups to develop a candidate profile only 50% of the time,
while in 2005, all search consultants used community focus groups all of the time (Kamler, 2009). Also, in the 2005 study, one consultant indicated that he had advertised the position in the *Los Angeles Times* and a Hispanic paper in New York City, which implies the active search for diverse candidates. All consultants indicated that there were no barriers to women being superintendents. However, one “…consultant…told of a board member who said, ‘Don’t give us another woman.’ The consultant…responded, ‘When a man got pushed out, you didn’t say don’t give us another man. Why are you telling me now not to give you another woman?’” (Kamler, 2009 p. 134). Despite changes over the years in the recruiting and hiring processes of superintendents, the subjectivity of whom one prefers over another still can have gender bias.

In a meta-analysis of the succession of the superintendency, Ortiz (2000) identified three ways superintendent candidates found their way into the position. The first was the pipeline or line tradition, which was described in the career pathways in the studies of Tallerico (2000), Derrington and Sharratt (2008), and Kim and Brunner (2009). This pathway has proven to be biased against women who seek the higher levels of leadership in education because men usually follow this traditional path, and women usually follow a slightly different path into the superintendency as Riehl and Byrd (1997) illustrated in their study of women in the superintendency. The second was sponsored mobility, which is best described as a mentored movement into the superintendency. The third was through personal contacts, which are the networking advantages of knowing the right people in the right positions. While there is limited research that addresses the last two career pathways for women, without adequate representation in higher levels of leadership, women are not likely to emerge as superintendents through mentorships or networking contacts.
The Non-Traditional Superintendent

An individual’s training and background are often considered when school boards are making the important decision of who to hire as the leader of their schools. How important are these external factors to the successful tenure as a superintendent of a school district? Superintendents are required to draw upon a variety of skill sets in order to be successful. Schools require superintendents to be visionary leaders and good managers (Glass, 2005). School boards are looking for candidates to have expertise in finance, human resources, facilities, and support services. The lack of “…competent fiscal and operational management skills is a leading cause for boards dismissing superintendents” (p. 34). Sharp et al. (2004), also found that school boards preferred candidates with successful experience in the management of financial resources as a key factor in hiring. Kamler (2009) found that school boards look for candidates who can work with families and the school community.

Consequently, there is a growing trend of recruiting and hiring of non-traditional candidates for the districts highest position. Army Major General John Stanford became the first non-traditional superintendent in 1995 to lead the Seattle School District (Quinn, 2007). According to Kowalski and Bjork (2005), as early as 1890, policy makers expressed a concern regarding the traditional superintendent’s ability to effectively lead large districts. In a compelling case study of Houston Independent School District, McAdams (2000) voiced his support for the promotion of non-educators as urban superintendents. In 2001, Eli Broad started the first superintendent preparation program designed to train future candidates like executive managers (Quinn, 2007). The Broad Academy recruits and trains aspiring superintendents who come from education, business, military, or government backgrounds in a ten-month, rigorous program. Quinn stated:
...most current educational leadership programs are not preparing leaders—whether traditional or nontraditional—to handle the realities and complex challenges of leading an urban school district. Being a ‘certified school administrator’ is not the same as being a ‘qualified urban school system leader.’ (p. 56)

The Academy employs a business-like model to train superintendent candidates and justifies an individual not needing an education background to be successful because a top leader would be surrounded by those who know education. However, other education experts would argue this philosophy. In order for schools to survive, leaders must focus their attention on instruction and standards-based reform. A district leader’s competence in instructional or educational leadership is important (Blankstein, 2011; Fullan, 2007). Fullan also highlighted the importance of business and politics in leadership, stating that there must be a careful balance of all three types of leadership at a district’s highest level. Even with these conflicting views, 91% of superintendents are traditional educators, while more non-traditional superintendents are found in larger districts (American Association of School Administrators, 2007; Council of the Great, City Schools, 2010). Clear evidence exists that the requirements of a successful superintendency include a broad range of skills, knowledge, and experience, regardless of gender. Furthermore, studies show that the context in which a superintendent functions plays an important role in establishing his or her priorities, practices, and challenges (Blankstein, 2011; Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2011; Fullan, 2007).

Studies have looked at superintendent preparation programs and their ability to appropriately groom candidates for the position. For example, Kowalski and Bjork (2005) studied the rigor of superintendent programs. They stated that changes “…that would have increased the rigor in preparation and licensing were proposed a number of times by school administration professors; however, they were rejected by policy makers and other members of the school administration profession largely for political reasons” (p. 88). Dana and Bourisaw
(2006a) reported that administrator preparation programs were filled by mostly women, and state certification agencies reported that those who were licensed to be superintendents were mostly women. This statement illustrated an obvious disconnect between Dana and Bourisaw’s report and the actual number of women superintendents. Looking at the overall preparation of superintendents and the required skill set, there may be a growing need for a different kind of preparation for superintendents.

The Texas Education Agency (2014) identifies three main areas, or domains, in which prospective superintendents should be able to navigate well. The first domain is leadership of the educational community, which includes knowledge of the state’s Code of Ethics and Standard Practices for Texas Educators, school law, and the ability to advocate for children and interact with stakeholders. The second domain, instructional leadership, includes planning, facilitating, and implementing a teaching and learning system in addition to the supervision of curriculum resources for the district. The third domain, administrative leadership, includes the management of business operations in the district. This domain defined the superintendency title years ago before students’ measured performance became such a critical factor.

With more women than men entering superintendent programs and a seemingly increased call for non-traditional superintendents, how are fewer women finding their ways into superintendent positions? How does TEA’s domains of effective superintendent leadership stack up against a company’s CEO when it comes to the business of running a school district?

Staying Power

The growing of demands on superintendents from the community, state agencies, and school boards are large factors in why superintendents leave a district. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the tenure of a superintendent has been plagued with rumors of quick turnovers. However, in
the mid to late 1970s, the median tenure was 7.5 years for superintendents in the United States (Natkin et al., 2002). In large, urban school districts, the tenure was reported around 3 years in the 1980s and 1990s (Council of Urban Boards of Education, 2000). Between the years of 1990 and 1994, Natkin et al. (2002) reported that the median tenure was 6.5 years. The Council of the Great City Schools (2010) indicated that the tenure of large, urban superintendents increased to a little over 5 years. Meanwhile, the American Association of School Administrators (2007) released a report that indicated the mean tenure for superintendents was 5.5 years and the median tenure was near 6 years. The rumors of quick turnovers appear to be false. According to these reports, the overall tenure for superintendents in the United States has not dramatically decreased since the 1970s.

There are common themes that explain why superintendents leave a position. Issues such as organization, finance, personnel, and student-related challenges are all factors in the departure of a superintendent, whether the departure is voluntary or involuntary. Problems with the school board are a prevalent cause of superintendents leaving a position. The case study of the Houston Independent School District by Donald R. McAdams (2000) told the story of a highly political school board spanning the years 1990-1997 that fought to reform the district. The school board pushed out two superintendents due to philosophical differences with part or all of the school board. A school board answers to not only the people directly affected by its decisions (educators and students) but also a business community, which can impact decisions regarding whether a superintendent stays or is released from a contract.

Former urban superintendent, Diana Lam, also dealt with a school board that pushed her out of the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD). Lam began her superintendency in San Antonio in 1994 after serving as a superintendent in Dubuque, Iowa for a short while. In
San Antonio, test scores were at an all-time low, the Texas Education Commissioner mandated that the staff be transferred from three schools and the district was battling a high drop-out rate. For the people of San Antonio, Diana Lam seemed like the go-to person who could face these challenges successfully. Lam learned that four of the board members were not on her side. She worked to make needed changes to the instructional programs, school buildings and staffing not only of schools but central office as well. She hit the brick wall of a system that had been in place for years. According to the *Houston Chronicle* reporter Herrick (1998), “the board of trustees doled out jobs and favors in the best tradition of local political patronage. The result was a bloated, often inefficient school system (that had) little regard for learning” (p. 1A). Lam quickly accumulated many enemies in a very short time.

On several occasions, the board did not allow her to make what she considered necessary staffing recommendations and changes. Lam was reduced to negotiating with a few of the school board members in order to hire the people she wanted to hire. She was confronted with a school board who clearly by their actions did not support her. In a controversial decision to get rid of the administration of one of San Antonio’s high schools and require teachers to reapply for their jobs, during a school board meeting, one angry parent stood up and told her, “Go back to Peru” (Herrick, 1998 p. 1A). In spite of all of the hoopla of Lam’s controversial changes, she was able to turn around 36 of its 42 low performing schools (Brown, 2001).

Twice in her tenure as the leader of San Antonio schools, Diana Lam faced an opposing board who wanted her to leave the district. In 1995, Lam narrowly escaped a vote that would have ended her career in Texas, but substantial backing from prominent business leaders and even teacher groups worked against the board of trustees as they withdrew their agenda item to terminate her contract. In 1998, the school board once again attempted to vote her out and their
efforts this time proved successful. Although Lam continued to have the backing of local business leaders, teacher groups turned against her. Diana Lam walked away with a $781,000 settlement to leave the district. The Texas Education Agency investigated the legality of the buy-out. Under the Texas Education Code, TEC § 11.201(c), TEA has the authority to withhold money from school districts that pay their superintendents to quit. Consequently, school boards can no longer simply pay a superintendent to leave when he or she is not meeting the expectations of the board.

The problem of dealing with school board conflicts is only a small part of the stresses that come with the superintendent position according to Grogan and Brunner (2005) who said, “…the lack of job security at the hands of dysfunctional boards of education, the politically charged environment and the 24/7 nature of the job make it a daunting prospect…” (p. 50). The authors go on to explain that most superintendents indicated that they would “do it over again” if given the opportunity (p. 50). Keeping a superintendent in place for longer than a couple of years is in the best interest of the school board and students of the district as a superintendent’s tenure has a positive correlation to the student achievement in the district (Simpson, 2013; Trevino, Braley, Brown, & Slate, 2008).

In another study investigating why superintendents leave their positions, Grissom and Andersen (2012) found that conflict with the school board is often an important factor in leaving. “…poor relationships with the school board- pegged to board operational ineffectiveness and conflict more generally- are important predictors of superintendent exits…” (p. 173). Retirement was also a common answer in why superintendents departed from a school system. They also found that there is no evidence that superintendents left their districts to go to other districts with higher student achievement; however, superintendents tended to move to more prestigious
positions, which usually meant a larger district and more money. They tended to move from rural districts to suburban districts. Trevino, et.al (2008) and Grissom and Andersen (2012) discovered even another reason by investigating the differences in outside superintendent hires and internal superintendent hires. Their studies revealed that internal candidates found demographic and economic issues less challenging than outside candidates. Also, internal candidates had fewer disputes with school boards.

Social Constructs

Every superintendent faces the trials resulting from conflicts with school boards, implementation of curriculum reflecting progress on state tests, and management of operating expenses. However, once women penetrated the threshold of the superintendency, a different set of challenges emerged. More current research shows common themes in the studies of women in the superintendency. The first notable theme is social constructs that may hinder a woman’s ability to successfully hold the role of superintendent. Social constructs are the categories or groups that society has created based on its notion of how people should function. Research shows that even today the historic view of women as the caretaker, passive nurturer resonates with people. Sharp, Malone, Walter, and Supley (2004), indicated that 57.6% of the women in their study believed that society viewed the superintendency position as a man’s position. Tallerico, Poole, and Burstyn (1994) commented in their study, “…women superintendents continue to be ‘outsiders’ in the systems they are expected to navigate” (p. 445). They go on to explain that this may be an important key into understanding why women leave the superintendency. In the same study, the authors concluded that 80.3% of the participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked, “…if they agreed that the superintendency was a man’s territory and that they needed to be careful about what they said” (p. 29).
“Gender is constructed through socially shared and agreed upon meanings created in interactions, the role of the superintendency is also socially constructed.” (Skrla, 2000 p. 296). Tallerico, et.al (1994) argued that the standard for leadership in the United States is masculine and that these socially accepted perceptions of leadership are disadvantageous to women. Skrla’s (2000) case studies of women superintendents delved into “…the ways in which ‘social constructs’ of gender operate in public school superintendency when the superintendent is a woman” (p. 294). In what ways are women seen as or treated differently than their male counterparts because of gender? In the first social constructs, Skrla’s subjects spoke of were the characteristics of passivity and subservience. One subject told the story of being hired at a district and a male board member asked her, with a smile, whether she thought she could handle a $500 million budget. School board members seem to favor candidates who possess skills that have nothing to do with curriculum and instruction, such as discipline (Tallerico, 2000). Some assume a woman can navigate instruction and curriculum, but when it comes to the other, more traditionally male-oriented aspects of the job, such as finance, facilities and maintenance, there are those who question a female’s ability to manage them effectively (Gewertz, 2006; Riehl & Byrd, 1997).

Dana and Bourisaw (2006a) suggested that a woman’s own cultural bias prohibits her from supporting another woman in a leadership role. “Strong evidence exists that women do not support other women in getting and keeping a superintendency” (p. 29). Not only are women facing the gender bias from men, but women also face the challenge of gaining support from the people most like them. Dana and Bourisaw shed light on this view of women in leadership. In some of the participants’ minds, women did not belong in high levels of leadership. Women were characterized as soft; some interviewees in Skrla’s (2000) study saw this as a source of
strength. “They actually embraced other ‘soft’ female characteristics and presented these as sources of strength- often as strengths unavailable to or unused by men” (p. 305). Hawk and Martin’s (2011) research studied the stressors of superintendents. Both men and women indicated that showing stress would be perceived as weak regardless of gender. However, one woman superintendent indicated that women “…are nurturers by nature, and this leads to occupational stress because we want to take care of everyone” (p. 373).

How women socialize emerged as a challenge to the superintendent role. Women do not socialize in the same manner as men, which can sometimes negatively affect a political role such as the superintendency (Skrla, 2000; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). The practice of men on a golf course, wheeling and dealing, stands as a historical portrait of how men often do business. Some women do not participate in that kind of social discourse. Skrla’s interviewees agreed that men have an advantage in social situations because of this interaction. One subject said she “refused to go to those coffee shop places” and that she would feel “uncomfortable, and they [the male community members] would have [also]” (p. 309). This is not to say that women do not socialize; in fact, one might argue that women socialize more than men. The Skrla research addressed the type of socialization in which men and women engage.

An abundant amount of literature and studies exist that addresses how women lead differently than men both actual and perceived. The work of Deutsch (2007), Lahelma (2014), Powell (2012), and Sung (2012), all addressed the subject of women’s discourse in the workplace and how differences in leadership and communication exist. Deutsch (2007) and Powell (2012) specifically addressed the changing perceptions of women as leaders in the general workplace overtime, but acknowledge that differences in men’s and women’s leadership still has impact. Leadership style, according to Blount (1998), began with the gender-biased
research in Herbert Simon’s book, *Administrative Behavior*, which described administrative decision making as a linear, right and wrong process. There was a clear answer and procedure for every task. “Contemporary feminists have argued that these studies of leadership behavior have presented problems for women generally because the scientific, positivist underpinnings of such works are inherently gender-biased” (Blount, 1998 p. 121). Men tend to utilize a more top-down approach to lead an organization, while women lean toward a more collaborative approach (Mountford, 2004; Wiggins & Coggins, 1986).

Owens & Valesky (2011) discussed the differences between classical organizational theory and the human relations perspective. In their discussion, schools tend to lean more toward the bureaucratic side of organizational management while trying to move towards a more human relations model. This organizational theory mirrors the male-dominated leadership trend in schools today. Dana & Bourisaw (2006b) concluded that the “cultural conditioning” of women steer them to taking on a “power with” approach versus a “power over” mentality (p. 69). When women choose to adopt the power over approach, stakeholders’ reactions are usually negative. Women superintendents who exercise their authority of power are seen as “unfeminine.” Likewise, women who exhibit aggressive, authoritative behavior commonly exhibited in men leaders were referred to as “cold and hard” or “a bitch” (Skrla, 2000 p. 6). Research indicates that the concept of power is different for men than it is for women. How a woman defines and utilizes power is very different from how a man defines and utilizes power. While the need to have the power to control one’s own destiny is the same, women will face controversy when their power takes on the characteristics of the power over model (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006b).
However, in Sharp’s et.al (2004) study of women superintendents, participants’ responses to questions about power contradicted what Dana and Bourisaw concluded. When researchers asked participants if power meant dominance for men and collaboration for women, 45.2% disagreed with the statement, with 9.6% strongly disagreeing. Furthermore, when asked if men listen for facts while women listen for feeling, 82.8% of the participants responded with disagree or strongly disagree. Finally, when asked if male administrators are more authoritarian and women more participatory in leadership styles, 56.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed. With this said, 67.8% of the participants agreed that women were more collaborative than men.

The Family Factor

Another barrier impacting women is the family factor. Derrington and Sharratt (2008) replicated a study they conducted 14 years earlier surveying women superintendents in the Washington State area. They discovered when comparing the results of participants’ responses, barriers to the superintendency tended to be more self-imposed, rather than “sex role stereotyping and sex discrimination” (p. 9). These self-imposed barriers included “family responsibilities, including the inability to relocate because of family concerns” (p. 9). This barrier is not exclusive to women in the United States. In a study of women in The Netherlands, researchers found that many women put aside their work ambitions in order to take care of children at home (Benschop, van den Brink, Doorewaard, & Leenders, 2013).

Women tend to enter principalships and other leadership positions at a later age than men. Brunner and Grogan (2007) argued that many women choose to raise their children first before entering the competitive levels of leadership in school districts. Furthermore, their study showed that it took at least 10 to 12 years for a woman to go from the principalship to the superintendency. This data is supported in a later study that placed men in higher levels of
leadership four to five years earlier than women (Kim & Brunner, 2009). In 1982, most of the women in a study of superintendents were between the ages of 40-59 (McDade & Drake, 1982). Even current research supports this data. Overall, women will enter the higher levels of leadership in education at a later age (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006b). Women tend to exit the classroom with more teaching experience than men do. This could be one reason more women are found in the curriculum and instructional leadership roles than men. Although some argue that superintendent candidates tend to not be pulled from instructional roles, others argue that this trend may be changing with increased academic accountability.

Derrington and Sharratt’s (2008) survey also revealed that women felt that they had a greater home responsibility than their spouses did. In addition, women felt that they had less support from family. This same research revealed that that parenting issues often played a role in the career decisions women made. “Women with children in grades K-8 are rarely superintendents…the smallest percentage of women superintendents had children between 1 and 19” (p. 10). Women view these barriers as ones they have chosen for themselves versus a barrier they had no control over.

A three-state study of female superintendents revealed a different perspective of the family factor when it comes to the decisions women make between home and work. Sharp, Malone, Walter & Supley (2004) surveyed women superintendents in Illinois, Texas and Indiana asking whether they felt “restricted in applying for superintendent vacancies because of their spouse’s position or because of children” (p. 30). Almost 70% of the respondents disagreed with the statement. The research results revealed that of those respondents, about 65.5%, did not have young children. Riehl and Byrd (1997) indicated that although the separation of family and work has become increasingly difficult for men, the “bifurcation of public and private lives is
especially untenable for women with families” (p. 62). These issues may not be power issues, but issues of one’s own reality (or perhaps self-imposed responsibility) in life. Natural laws, as a postpositivist approach suggests, prohibit women from the benefits of family mobility or childlessness.

Successful Women Superintendents

Much of this chapter focuses on why there are so few women in the superintendent position. One cannot deny the wealth of literature revolving around the inequities of women in high levels of leadership in education, as many have studied the phenomenon of gender imbalance in the superintendency (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006a; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006b; Derrington & Sharratt, 2008; Gewertz, 2006; Grogan, 2005; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Hopkins, 2012; T. J. Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; Ortiz, 2000; Sharp et al., 2004; Stephens, July 2009; Tallerico, 2000; Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Wiggins & Coggins, 1986). However, one would be remiss to exclude the literature that also describes what studies reveal as why and how women do become successful superintendents.

For example, Dobie and Hummell (2001) identified five thematic categories that women superintendents found to be most helpful in their positions. They were, “(1) awareness of a need for spirituality; (2) dependence on a trustworthy person; (3) cognizance of leadership styles and power; (4) an inclination to utilize metacognition; and (5) silence caused by denial or repression” (p.25). Spirituality was described as a value placed on religion, prayer, or other spiritual practices. Dependence on a trustworthy person meant the need to have at least one individual the participant could rely on to discuss any problem associated with the position. Acknowledgement of leadership styles addressed the participants’ ability to realize the need for different leadership
styles in different situations. Using metacognition referred to the ability to reflect on one’s own actions and practices for the sake of improvement. Finally, the researchers in this study focused much of their discussion on women’s denial of having any difficulty in their positions because of gender issues. This conclusion was based on the interviews with two South Texas female superintendents.

The conclusions of other studies seemed to focus on other factors to women’s success. In a 2010 study of women superintendents in Texas, Sampson and Davenport recognized encouragement and mentorship by others; experiences that developed important skills and knowledge; strong professional relationships; and knowing all aspects of the job, such as finance and policy. Building strong relationships with the community and having a good mentor were also important factors (Sampson & Davenport, 2010). This study mirrors the findings of another study that indicated the most frequent advice female superintendents had for aspiring women leaders in education was to “learn as much as possible before applying for a position” (Wallace, 2014 p. 51). Derrington and Sharratt (2008) identified that using the strategies of resolve, balance, negotiate, and decide as factors that can lead to a successful woman superintendent. Resolve addresses the fact that women have to work harder and wait longer to get the position. Balance refers to the need to balance the “dual role” a woman may face when trying to juggle family time, privacy, and work (p. 11). Negotiate means not being afraid to ask when it comes to negotiating boundaries to time and personal commitments. Finally, as women are expected to adopt the “same work patterns as their male counterparts on the job and still perform all the traditional female duties at home,” deciding how to maintain that kind of schedule becomes imperative (p. 11). This includes deciding whether or not a spouse or significant other shares the same values (Derrington & Sharratt, 2008).
Despite the overwhelming evidence that shows that there are far fewer women in the superintendent position than men, the simple fact remains that some women find they are successful in the position. The next step is to equip aspiring women superintendents with the knowledge of women’s history in the superintendency and to ask the question, What can we learn from our predecessors? The method, results, and conclusions that follow addresses this next step.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the types of challenges women faced while in the role as superintendent and the types of attributes women bring to the role of superintendent. This research delves into the stories of nine women through interviews, building upon the existing research that has been documented in Chapter Two. I used qualitative research in the research design. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative study as a “situated activity” that takes data to “turn the world into a series of representations…” (p. 3). They further describe the qualitative research as an intimate relationship between the researcher and the subject matter. Using the ideas from these two descriptions of qualitative research, I conducted an in-depth study of women in the superintendency and communicated the experiences of these women in plain, everyday language from the perspective of the participants.

Research Design

The research of women in the superintendency fits comfortably in the realm of qualitative research. First, feminist research has traditionally found a home in qualitative study. “Qualitative case study is characterized by researchers…personally in contact with…the case, reflecting, revising meanings of what is going on” (Stake, 2003 p. 150). Hesse-Biber (2012) describes feminist theory as a way “to challenge knowledge that excludes, while seeming to include” (p. 3). She goes on to emphasize that feminist research seeks to find a new understanding of “traditional ways of knowing” about women’s lives (p. 3). The goal of this kind of research is to bring forward the importance of women’s experiences to challenge what one thinks about gender and power in order to construct new meanings. It is the practice of taking what has been considered in the past as marginal and putting it front and center. A new
context of feminist study sees the research through the lens of a woman researcher. As a female educator, I attempted to take these women’s stories and retell them so that their experiences create a bridge between their perceptions of reality and the readers’ knowledge of women’s role in society.

Through qualitative study, women are able to tell their own stories. Harding (1987) explained the importance of this viewpoint. The importance of women’s experiences through the eyes of women breaks through a gender barrier of research that has only become real in the past 30 years (Lincoln, 2009). In addition, each woman’s experiences varies across cultures and histories. Thus, the role of the researcher is not “an invisible, anonymous voice of authority” but a “real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests” which relates each woman’s experiences across cultures and histories (Harding, 1987 p. 9). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) further argued that the researcher should blend her own observations with participants’ experiences. As a female administrator in education and researcher, I was able to sit face to face with nine women superintendents who told their stories to me to blend into observations of new research.

I describe this research as feminist research because the participants are women. Inevitably, this research deals with issues of power, delving into critical theory, of issues of inequality and gender (Gannon & Davies, 2007). “Power tends to be seen within critical theory as oppressive and unilinear, and it is enacted by certain groups on other groups” (p. 77).

Conversely, feminist research can also be described in postpositivist theory where concepts such as capturing a subject’s point of view, examining everyday life, and using “rich description” come in to play (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005 p. 12).

The research is designed around the following research questions:
1. What are the internal and external factors that lead women to be successful superintendents in Texas?
   a. What career pathways do women take?
   b. What support do these women have?

2. What challenges do women superintendents face? In what ways does gender affect these challenges?

3. What do women superintendents bring to a successful tenure as superintendent?

Participants

Nine participants were chosen for interviews based on interviewees’ willingness to participate in the study, current position, location, and size of the school district. The ethnicity of the participants was not considered in identifying participants. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) provides data on ethnicity through data collected by the State Board of Education Certification (SBEC). However, this data reports the ethnicity of individuals who took the superintendent certification test from 2008-2012. Furthermore, the data do not disaggregate how many Black or Hispanic individuals were male or female; only that there were five Black, 28 White, and four Hispanic people who received a superintendent certification in the 2011-2012 school year (Ramsay, 2013).

For the purpose of this study, research participants were selected based on willingness to be interviewed, current position, location, and size of the school district. Seven participants are current superintendents of school districts in good standing with the TEA. Two of the participants are retired superintendents whose school districts were in good standing during their tenures. Overall, these nine women can be described as successful individuals. The question,
Do you think you are successful?, is included in the interview questions. Each participant was asked this question to gauge her own definition of success.

The selection of the participants began with a comprehensive list of Texas superintendents in the 2012-2013 school year from the TEA website. Since this list does not indicate gender, I identified approximately 203 female superintendents by picking out names that were easily recognized as female names, such as Susan, Linda, or Elizabeth. Also, I separated the Consolidated Independent School Districts (CISD) and Independent School Districts (ISD) from the list and identified 1026 school districts that fit the criteria for this study. This conclusion came after taking out directors and superintendents of academies, charter schools, and other institutions that are not considered CISDs or ISDs. From the list of 203 superintendents, I selected possible participants based on where the district was and the district’s enrollment. Fifteen women were identified as possible participants for this study. Of these 15 women, two were retired superintendents not included on the TEA list of superintendents. The two retired superintendents were women I had heard of through course work and colleagues. From this list, I asked colleagues if they knew any of the superintendents. I was able to shorten the list to nine women superintendents. Out of the nine, I was able to make contact with five through colleagues. One of the superintendent participants was recommended by at least three different colleagues, including one participant of the study. I made contact with one superintendent through a family member who happened to be familiar with the area and knew people in the district. I contacted two participants by simply calling their offices and speaking to their administrative assistants. I was able to make contact and interview all nine superintendents that I had originally identified as possible participants.
Table 3.1 illustrates selected demographic information about the participants. Pseudonyms are used instead of their names. Only the researcher has the data that contains identifiable information about the participants.

Table 3.1

Demographics of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Community Type</th>
<th>District Size</th>
<th>Approximate Number of Years as Superintendent</th>
<th>Years in Same or Different Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Enrollment data was taken from the Texas Education Agency website’s Instructional Materials Allotment report for the 2014-2015 school year.

All of the participants’ ages ranged from 55-65 years. Four of the superintendents were in the North Texas area, one in West Texas, one in East Texas, one in South Texas, and two in the outskirts of the North Texas area. I attempted to use participants from different parts of the state in order to provide a variety of experiences from women in different areas. Would a superintendent from West Texas have different experiences than a superintendent from South Texas?
Procedure

Once my research questions were approved, I submitted an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application to the University of North Texas. I completed the online federal course, Protecting Human Research Participants, and obtained the certificate of completion for the course. None of the participants came from vulnerable populations, children, disabled, incarcerated, etc. Participants completed a signed consent form in order to participate in the interviews. After the interviews, I sent a copy of the signed consent form to each participant. No known harmful effects exist in this research. However, participants may have felt reluctant to share experiences and have them documented since comparatively there are many fewer women in the superintendency than men which may make the stories they share more identifiable. Consequently, the identities of the participants were protected. I used pseudonyms for both participants, and names of school districts were not used at all. Only demographic information, such as age range, community size, approximate number of years in the superintendency, and size of school district are revealed in this dissertation.

The procedure modeled the qualitative interview process, which is different from the traditionally structured interview process. Yin (2011) characterizes structured interviews as the researcher creating and executing the same process for each interview. The questions are exactly the same for each interview, and the researcher adopts exactly the same protocol and demeanor when interviewing the participants. Characteristics of a qualitative interview, according to Yin (2011), are no script for the interview, open-ended questions, non-uniformity in each interview, and a line of questioning that “…is not controlled by a questionnaire…” (p. 135). My interviews began with guiding questions. I did not require each participant to answer each of the questions. An interview guide is listed in Table 3.2.
The freedom of using an interview guide instead of a scripted interview allowed me to adjust my interview questions as possible themes emerged from an individual’s interview. For example, in the second interview I conducted, the participant began talking about her childhood.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview Guide</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topics and Questions: Women and the Superintendency</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.  Tell me about the time in your life when you realized you wanted to be a superintendent.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| II. Can you tell me how you felt about the level of preparation you received in your prep program?  
  a. What class do you remember as being the most beneficial for you?  
  b. Overall, do you feel you were prepared for being a superintendent?  
  c. What would you have liked to have seen in the preparation classes? |
| III. What do you believe has been the biggest contributor to your becoming a superintendent? |
| IV.  Tell me about your family situation during your career promotions in education.  
  a. How old were your children when you attained your first superintendent position? |
| V.   Can you tell me about a time when you had to make a difficult decision between family and work? |
| VI.  How would you describe your relationship with your current school board? |
| VII. What are the most difficult aspects of being a superintendent?  
  a. Do you think these difficulties would exist for any superintendent regardless of age or gender? |
| VIII. What do you think you bring to the position that set you apart from other candidates?  
  a. Who were your mentors as an aspiring superintendent?  
  b. Who or what would you say is your most valuable support? |
While she was talking, she explained how she was a part of different groups as a young girl and how she was a leader even at a young age. This prompted me to ask other participants about their childhoods and possible leadership opportunities they had as young girls. Did successful women superintendents have leadership opportunities early in their lives? This opportunity was only possible through the flexibility of unstructured interviews.

Interviews of the nine participants were conducted using a recording device so that transcripts could be produced for analysis. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Once transcripts were produced, they were uploaded into NVivo. In the software, I conducted initial coding of the data. Although NVivo references these as nodes, I adopted the term initial codes for this study. Strauss (1987) terms initial coding as “open coding” (p. 28). The goal of initial coding is to review the data, in this case manuscripts of interviews, often line-by-line, to develop ideas that make sense in the data. The initial coding was based on grounded theory coding. Charmaz (2014) describes grounded theory methods as a “systematic, yet flexible guideline…for…analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves” (p. 1).

Did the women discuss the same type of issues in relation to barriers to becoming superintendents? What were the career paths of each woman? Specific conversations and answers will be quoted and discussed in Chapter 4 and 5 of this dissertation.

Ethical Considerations

Each participant knew the purpose of the study and participated on a volunteer basis. No participants were from a vulnerable population. All participants signed a consent form before being interviewed. Because some participants may have felt uncomfortable sharing some experiences from their careers, pseudonyms were used for participant names and districts. No harmful side effects are expected as a result of this research.
Data Analysis

As mentioned before, data analysis began with initial coding of the interview transcripts. Using grounded theory allowed me to take one transcript and code it to identify emerging pathways from the text in order to decide if other paths needed to be explored in subsequent interviews. I did not wait until all interviews were completed before I began to code. Furthermore, I began the initial coding with gerunds instead of coding for topics and themes. While the coding was not always line-by-line, coding with gerunds made the data easier to compare with other data using similar word searches once all of the coding was complete. “This type of coding helps to define implicit meanings and actions, gives researchers directions to explore…and suggests emergent links between processes in the data to pursue and check” (Charmaz, 2014.) Once all of the initial coding was complete, I began categorizing the codes by similar concepts. Strauss (1987) describes this categorizing as creating core categories. Core categories essentially are the larger categories in which the initial codes fit. For example, in one manuscript of an interview, I created 129 initial codes. As mentioned before the initial codes were gerund codes, such as, realizing the impact of taking care of young siblings and finding a way to become a teacher. After all of the interview transcripts were coded, I created classification categories to combine similar codes together by identifying recurring words and phrases in the initial coding. For example, keywords, such as husband and marriage were in at least 45 of the initial codes which was approximately 19% of the 835 initial codes. This prompted me to create a classification category called marriage.

Thirteen classificatory categories emerged from all of the codes. The classification categories were: career path, dealing with discrimination, defining success, how they gained access, gaining access addition, marriage, mentors and role models, parents/growing up,
preparation for the superintendency, school board, tenure, family, and young leadership. The thirteen classificatory categories combined the codes with similar text. In the classification of marriage, the initial codes with words included, married (or any derivative), spouse, husband, family, divorce, wife, and relationship. Words such as family and relationship, although related to marriage, formed their own coded categories. From the 13 classification categories, I combined a few, such as parents/growing up and young leadership to create finding 5: childhood consideration. I combined marriage and family to create the family factor with two subheadings, marriage and children. Once all of the initial codes were classified, I was able to find similarities in participants’ stories to create the findings for Chapter 4.

Summary

This chapter outlined the importance of qualitative study in the investigation of women in the superintendency through face to face interviews. Also, this chapter described the research design and participants, and presented ethical considerations. Although I used some grounded theory methods for coding, the data analysis itself was not constructed on grounded theory. The chapter concluded with a description of the procedure and data analysis.
CHAPTER 4
DATA RESULTS

The purpose of this research is to explore the factors that lead to the success of women superintendents in Texas. This research has looked into the career trajectory of women who have successfully attained and retained superintendencies in Texas to determine what career decisions have helped them. Furthermore, this research probes the challenges women superintendents have faced in their positions. This chapter examines the data collected in the nine interviews of women superintendents by dividing it into six sections of findings: the family factor, staying power, gaining access, social constructs, the childhood consideration, and defining success. The data presented in this chapter is based on the perception of the nine participants.

Finding 1: The Family Factor

The family is a factor for every wife and mother, especially one who is ambitious enough to seek a high level of leadership in any organization. Every participant in this study is either a wife and/or a mom. These nine high achieving women who had to consider someone other than themselves when moving up their career ladders led me to create the category the family factor.

Having Children

Two participants did not have children of their own. Betty spoke about having stepchildren in her second marriage, but because the second marriage was a later marriage, the stepchildren were not a factor in her career.

When [husband] and I got married, he was ten years older than me. So I’m in my late 30s. [husband] is in his late 40s. He had kids that were grown, so this notion of adding a baby at that time did not work for us.
I just didn’t have to juggle that. I was free to work 80 to 100 hours a week and nobody was saying a word to me about it.
I also asked Betty if she thought that making choices between family and career was different for men than it was for women.

Amen. Oh, my gosh, yes… I was talking to one woman that is in a district and wants to make a move. I said, “How mobile are you?” She said, “Quite frankly, we waited late to have kids. We’ve got little kids. Quite frankly, I need to be in this locale of the state because we have parents and in-laws who can help us with our children.” So that’s a factor. I guarantee there’s a ton of men that go after jobs and do not have to worry about that. But she does. It’s an issue… It’s just that balancing act and women have to make the choice… I watched a really good friend and mentor parent kids as she was a female superintendent. It’s a juggle. It’s a big juggle. It takes everybody: her family, all of her staff. It took everybody working with her and her kids to make that work.

Elsa’s case was a little different, as she and her husband did not have children of their own.

When I asked her if this was a conscious choice or if there was another reason she did not have children, she responded with:

That was just something that never worked out for us. No, it wasn’t a conscious decision… I think it would have been far more difficult because I certainly would have had the obligations and the desire to be with my own children at numerous activities. I think the pathway may have been slower or may have been more difficult; it would have been more challenging to balance the home front with a work life.

The other seven participants had children during their teaching and administrative careers. Each woman had a slightly different perspective on how having children impacted what they did. Furthermore, each woman handled her family factor in her own way. Two of the participants were the only women who were single parents at one point during their careers. One was a single parent of three children for 16 years, and the other was a single parent of two children for three years.

While interviewing Barbara, she talked about a fellow female superintendent from South Texas who raised her children on her own because of a commuter marriage. Barbara seemed to understand how unusual her circumstance was to be a single parent and a superintendent at the same time. When the participant took her first superintendent role, her three children were all
under six years old. She became a single parent three years later. From her first to current superintendency, she worked in at least four different districts. When I asked her about the impact of moving that impacted her children she responded,

My decision was: “We’re a family - we’re not a broken family; we’re a great family. We all love each other; we all know where our power source is. And a part of being our family is your mother’s a superintendent and that means that we have a little refrigerator in this closet with snacks, and we have sleeping bags in this closet. So when school is out today, I have a board meeting. Come on over to my office, and we’ll turn the TV on in the boardroom, and you can get your homework done. You can have your snack, and then you can come in my office and roll your sleeping bags out, read, and go to sleep.” And they did. They just did. They just stayed with me…They also moved a lot. The girls were in the first four schools where I was the superintendent…All of my kids went to four different school systems…They would say, “Mom, we don’t want to move.” And I would say, “Guys, is there anybody here who can pay the mortgage besides me? So here’s your boxes.” Some of the things I say like that sound harsh. And if anybody ever said, “That’s not fair.” I would say, “The fair comes to Dallas the last weekend in September. I’ll get tickets, and we’ll all go. But that’s the only fair there is, so suck it up.”

She also believes that the frequent moving of her family has made her children well-adjusted as adults. She states that her daughters are “happy about it now.” As the participant was talking about her daughters, she described young ladies with stable jobs and who appeared happy to their mother. Earlier in the interview, the participant said that she thought because the girls were older, they may have taken the moving around so often better than her younger son. She seemed to harbor some lingering concern for her youngest child.

Of course as mothers we doubt ourselves. Of course I did. I worried about - especially with [son]. My baby was not yet a year old, and I took the helm of a school district. I worried that I didn’t spend enough time with my son in my lap reading to him.

She does not deny the possible negative impact being a single mother of three children and a superintendent had on her kids.

But I’ve gone into situations where schools were broken, where governance was a problem, where people had to be let go, where feelings were hurt, where the money had to be tightened up, where changes had to be made, and it doesn’t make people happy. So my kids were caught right in the middle of all that with both teachers and their peers sometimes. It’s bad enough for a girl to be bullied, but for your son to hear, “Oh, you think
because your mommy is the superintendent…” can be devastating. So I think it’s more
difficult is for my son to live up to the expectation.

She told me two different stories that involved people who worked in the district who
targeted her children because they were unhappy with what she did as a superintendent. At times
comments about her not being married made their way to her children. In one case, a former
district employee called her son a “bastard” as her son was walking past the former employee at
a baseball game. This left her son asking his mother what is a bastard. This situation became so
extreme that Barbara felt the need to carry a gun with her as she went home at night to protect
her family from this man. This example appears unique when it comes to women in the
superintendency because of the number of years she remained a single mother and a
superintendent.

In this research, only one other participant spent any time being a single parent. Ann was
a single parent for three years before she remarried. During this brief time, she talked about
having to balance her small children and her job. By then she was an assistant superintendent.

It was in the cafeteria of a high school. I set the kids up right outside the cafeteria. There
were benches. I got them coloring, and got them all their stuff. I got them a drink. So, I
went inside to lead everything, and I would check on them. Well, [son], being the 7-year-
old brother, thought he could handle everything. He got his little sister to the bathroom
doors, and that was it. She wet her pants. She started crying. So then she was traumatized.
He brought her back. I saw them outside, and she was bawling. So, I went outside. The
poor little child had wet her pants. That was horrible for her.

The participant now finds humor in this episode with her children, and she often remembers the
times when being a leader in a school district and single mother was difficult.

In both participants’ family situations, the women adamantly declared that they would
not have changed anything. Although admittedly things were more difficult with small children,
both women compensated when family time infringed upon work time.
Five participants shared stories of raising children and working their way up in their careers. Two participants put either an education or career on hold in order to have or raise children. Jennifer recalls the relief she felt when she no longer had to make the difficult decisions between family and work.

I completed my two years and got an associate’s degree. I dropped out of school and had two babies. I wanted to stay home with them. I did that… I can absolutely remember when [son] graduated from high school the feeling of relief that washed over me. I hated him going to college. I was sad about that. But I thought, *I do not have to leave work at a certain time today. I can stay until I finish.* (Italics indicate participant’s thoughts)

Sandra took a 13 year hiatus from her teaching career to raise her children. After those 13 years, she went back into teaching for a brief time and then began moving to administrative positions in education. She said she was glad that she was able to do this for her family but equally glad to get back into education when the time was right for her and her family.

The last three participants spoke about making those difficult decisions between their own children and the children they were hired to serve. Vicky talks of the possible impact being a superintendent may have had on her son and what may have been different had she had more than one child.

Sometimes I think back on the pros and cons of me being so busy and me being so tied to work, and I wonder the impact it’s had on [son]. Overall, he seems very well-rounded and seems to be okay. But there are times when I see him struggling I think *I wonder if I had been around more when he was in high school if that would have made a difference?*

Like I said, there are times I feel guilty…

But I just think that there are still women who don’t move forward in those roles because they want to spend. It’s not that they have to spend more time- but they want to spend more time with their children.

I only had one child. If I had had two children, I would not be a superintendent. I just know because of the way I am.

Irene’s son was already grown when she moved into administration. As a teacher/coach, she and her husband, in law enforcement at the time, were able to work around their schedules to get their son where he needed to be when he was younger. She said she never felt torn between
doing things for her son and work. Similarly, Elizabeth’s children were “already out of the house” by the time she became a superintendent. However, she digressed on how she missed some of her children’s activities because of her job demands as an administrator.

I can’t tell you the number of plays my children were in, the recitals, the school events that I didn’t go to because of my work. We’ve got PTA night and that’s the same night that the choir has its Christmas performance. I didn’t know that three months ago when we scheduled our fifth grade music program at Christmas time, and I’m the principal of the school. I can’t opt out and go over to my son’s program and watch it there. So my husband went or my parents went.

Sometimes I thought, *Oh, life just isn’t fair.* I remember what a friend once told me. I was the Executive Director at the time and I missed something my child was in. I was just feeling so sorry for myself about it. She just put it in perspective for me. She said that we all have choices to make, and we have a job to do. More importantly, our kids are going to survive. They really are going to survive.

Marriage

All nine participants are currently married. Three of the participants are in a second marriage, and all of them describe supportive husbands who are not intimidated or bothered by the fact that their wives hold, or have held, the highest position in a school district.

Vicky: He always sees these as opportunities for me and opportunities for us. It’s turned out to be good for us because there are certain things that, as I’m moving up over here, he’s done things that have been important for him; but because he works for himself, it’s not like he’s got a leadership ladder to go through. He’s illustrated some books. He’s done some things like that that have been important to him and important to his career...I’ve always been able to support him, and he’s always supported me. He’s such a laid back, easy going kind of guy He’s not the kind of guy who’s got the ego that can’t deal with my success. He’s always been happy about it.

Jennifer explained that she met her husband of 38 years in high school. She described his support and ease with her being in the highest leadership position in a small district. At one point, he worked in the same district as she in the maintenance department without any feelings of resentment toward his superintendent wife.

My husband has always pushed me to continue my education. Of course, you have to know my husband; he’s pretty much a jokester. He’s a product of his upbringing, that’s for sure. He’s country. There’s no doubt about that...So he’s always been very supportive...He’s
always worked, and he put me through college and then our two sons through college at A&M. So he very much supports us.

Ann describes her second husband, a man she has been married to for several decades.

“And then I found this guy 26 years ago that is totally and completely supportive and every time anything happened to me it would be like, Oh, it’s about time!”

Support is a common factor among all nine women when describing their current marriages. Barbara reflects on whether or not her second marriage would have been the same had they met when they were much younger. She explains that their age and experiences make them right for each other and able to cope with her successes.

He is an independent businessman. He has a…company. But he’s also in the oil and gas consulting business…So he spends about half of his time in North Dakota in the oilfield or someplace else in the oilfield. We’ve talked about this. Had we been together when we were in our 20s or 30s, would my profession have intimidated him a little bit? Maybe so. But now, in our 50s, it’s not a big deal. He’s supportive; he’s proud of me, and I’m supportive of him and proud of him. Also, he’s from [city]. He was on the school board in [school district] for 18 years. We’ll go to a conference and he knows school people, and he likes schools.

Sandra also describes a marriage with an extremely supportive husband, which made her mobility more feasible.

He stepped up and kind of made it possible because it wouldn’t be possible without him helping quite a bit. He’s always been very supportive. He has worked when we needed to. Like I said, he did a part-time at the corporate office and part-time in the [city] office just to make it work. So he’s been very supportive and made it to where I could do what I needed to do. He’s just been great…He was just always supportive. He would pick up the pieces wherever they needed to be.

Elizabeth also describes a young marriage to a man who has given her unconditional support in what she chose to do in her life.

I’ve been married 41 years. I got married when I was 19. Still married to the same man…I got married while I was still in college.

He knew my career goals, and [husband] has always been 100 percent behind me, supportive and helped make anything I need to have happen, happen.
Finally, Elsa describes a similar situation with her husband of 34 years.

He was working for [company]. When I finished my doctorate, he encouraged me to apply all over. He was very supportive. And then I was offered the position in [school district]. He was offered a position in the Dallas area.

“We will make it work. This is an opportunity for both of us.” He’s been my number one advocate all the way through. He’s been phenomenal.

While all nine respondents are currently married, three of them endured unsuccessful marriages early in their careers that they said were impacted by their rising job status. The participants’ discussion of their first marriages contained elements of power imbalance, role reversals, and husbands’ unwillingness to generally support their wives. Two participants described their first marriages right out of college:

Ann: I think when it became apparent to him that I could move into that administrative circle, make a much better salary than I was making, and make equal or more than he did, it changed the balance of power in the relationship; no doubt about it. There was a much bigger time commitment for my job, and he demanded more of my time. And of course I wouldn’t give it. That was probably more tied to who he was and who he wasn’t…We divorced when I was working. I was a high school assistant principal and started working on my doctorate and divorced at that time…My career changed the dynamics of power in the relationship when I began my administrative career. No doubt about it.

Betty: I think he resented that I had a push in my heart for something bigger and better and more responsibility and more impact. And I think he did not like that in me, and I’d changed. Now, when he married me at 18 I was a kid, and I grew up to be something entirely different…The other part is that when I started moving out of the traditional teacher role, he wasn’t supportive at all…I got my master’s, and that was okay. But he didn’t really see any reason for it. He never did it…Well, he just didn’t think I needed to do that at all. Then when I started getting administrative appointments, he became even less happy. So, yes, he was fine as long as I was a teacher; outside the teacher role, no…We had a role reversal. And that really was the death nail of the marriage eventually…The marriage fell apart when I was Director…

A husband’s lack of professional goals and support were prime factors in Barbara’s first marriage. She paints a precise picture of a wife working to better herself in her career and a husband unwilling to support her. Perhaps the most compelling part of her story is the matter-of-fact demeanor in which she told it.
Part of what happened was that I fulfilled my professional goals, and he didn’t have any other professional goals. He wasn’t comfortable with me making more money than he did. He wasn’t comfortable with me being the person who was seen as the decision maker. It did have a negative impact.

I don’t blame it on my being the superintendent. I blame it on his lack of ability to progress in his own life. In fact, I would probably go back to a little piece of research called Erikson’s Stages of Development and say that at that point in time when all people either stagnate or become super-productive, I became super-productive and he stagnated. And that was his choice…That probably was the nail in the coffin now that I think about it because when we were at [school district] and I got offered the job out in [school district], the conversation was “What do you think?” And his response was, “Do what you want.” Except it wasn’t, “Do what you want, honey.” It was, “Do what you want.” Well, I kept trying to talk to him about it. This is a decision we make together. But finally, probably about after the third time, he sarcastically said, “Do what you want.” I said, “Okay.” I know he didn’t like that, but he didn’t hold up his end of the bargain.

These participants faced internal challenges when they were faced with whether or not to allow an unsupportive husband to stand as a roadblock of their professional ambitions. They decided not to let anyone become an unnecessary obstacle to the success available to them as it was to any qualified person. These three superintendents described the common experiences of dealing with unsupportive spouses who, to varying degrees, resented the fact that their wives were making more money and had more prestigious positions, at least according to the husbands. In two of the cases, the husbands were teachers themselves. Thus, the support of the marriage partner was essential to the career path of each woman to achieve her goal of being superintendent.

Finding 2: Staying Power

How long a superintendent stays in a position may be an indicator of whether or not that superintendent is successful. This section displays the tenure of each participant in each of the positions she has held. Because the relationship a superintendent has with school board becomes a factor in her or his tenure, this section peeks into a key ingredient to that relationship.
Tenure

One of the reasons these nine participants were chosen for this study was that they had never been forced out of a superintendency. There were no controversies surrounding quick exits in any of these women’s careers. Many of the women had been honored with various awards from the different organizations including the Texas Association of School Administrator Superintendent of the Year award. Furthermore, most of these women have served and currently serve on boards of prestigious foundations and committees. The tenure of each woman’s superintendency varies. Table 4.1 shows the number of years each participant has spent in each superintendent position.

Table 4.1

Superintendent Tenure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Tenure 1</th>
<th>Tenure 2</th>
<th>Tenure 3</th>
<th>Tenure 4</th>
<th>Tenure 5</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>7 years*</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>7 years*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>2 years*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
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<td>4 years</td>
<td>3 years*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>8 years*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Indicates a present position.
School Board Relationships

Unequivocally the most important factor of a superintendent’s tenure is her relationship with the school board. In some cases, the school boards are not the initial gatekeepers to the position. Sometimes a headhunter agency is the first hurdle candidates must clear before being presented in front of a school board. However, school boards are often the reason why superintendents do not stay. When directly asked about participants’ relationships with the school boards (past or current), most participants echoed the same words and phrases, “Excellent,” “great relationship,” “Very good,” “They are a great school board,” “strong relationship,” and “Very strong.”

When the participants described why their relationships with their school boards were so strong, participants indicated that communication was imperative.

Vicky: You communicate. If one person answers the question, everybody gets the answer. You have to communicate with them equally. You have to make sure that everybody feels that they’re an important part and that the superintendent is constantly communicating with them…and I try to be very honest with them. I don’t hide things from the board. If something’s bad, I’ll say, “This is bad, and we’re working on it. This is what we’re doing.” I try not to keep things from them.

Betty: I wanted to ensure that if I knew it and thought it was important then they knew it. And that they were always prepared ahead of time for what might happen and if something did happen, the crisis kind of things, that we called them first…But I worked hard at keeping them informed. I think boards work best when they’re well-informed.

Barbara described her role with her school board.

So what I’ve always said to my board is, “You pay me to take the heat. So give it to me. When people call you, call and tell me. Let me deal with it. I get paid to do that. You don’t. You don’t get paid for people to be mad at you at church. So let me have that. Let me bring you my expertise. If you don’t like it, I’ll bring you more expertise. I’ll bring you a different piece of expertise, but you don’t have to fool with that.”

She also spoke about the result of a contentious school board election where an individual beat an incumbent board member who supported the superintendent. She described a campaign that
included derogatory campaign tactics that attacked her character and leadership. This is how she dealt with this newly elected school board member:

I have a board member who was elected...He beat an incumbent, a very popular incumbent who was very supportive of me. He ran a very, very ugly campaign...He got elected. Now I work for him...Whose job is it for me to be able to work with him? It’s my job. It’s not his job. It’s my job...He got elected. He’s a board member...I brought him in and I said, “Congratulations. I’m so happy to have you. I’m going to give you a schedule of some training, but let’s just start with you telling me what you want to accomplish. Now that you’re elected, what do you want to see happen?”

After a conversation with the newly elected school board member about schools’ performances and the goals of the district, she began to involve him in school visits and as many activities as she could. The participant described her actions to her assistant superintendents.

And here’s what I called it. This is internal. And I told all my folks this...I said, “We are going to date him. This is a man who needs a date to the prom. We can date him or the people out there who are mad because we have to teach about Islam can date him. We can do it or they can do it, but he’s our boss.” And he’s turned out to be a really good board member.

Irene described her role with her school board member as a “catalyst for things that get done.”

She explained,

It’s part of my job to create energy in the board. Why are we here? What’s our story? Let’s talk about our kids. Let’s talk about our community. And why we’re the center of that and why it’s important that we do the things we do...They look to me to be the person who understands and knows the school business and to share that and communicate with them. I generally start the conversations, inform them, and then allow them to come to some conclusion. That’s kind of how I help lead them. There’s no contention.

Most of the descriptions of the participants’ relationships with their school boards were positive.

Vicky: We’ve always been kind of like a family...Our people have been very focused on what their role is...they’re not calling me and telling me what I need to do. But they call me and ask me questions and call me and tell me, “Hey, I’m hearing this. Would you go check on it?” They’re very supportive of making sure that they want [school district] to look good, and they want us to do the right things for our children.

Jennifer: One of the board members said to me the other day, “I love you being superintendent. I feel like I’ve retired. Nobody’s calling me, and you’re not calling me two or three times a week having to ask me things.”
Betty: I really learned from [former superintendent] about how to take care of the board and the fact that [former superintendent] said this, and I believe it too, that my number one job is to make sure that my relationship with the board is working well on behalf of the district.

Ann: …they are a great board because they listened to me.

Sandra: I’ve got one of the best school boards in the state. They stand up for our administrators and our school district.

Elsa: When I went to work in [school district], I actually had the same board who hired me for the first four years that I was there. So tremendous stability, lots of ownership in that decision; just a lot of stability, a lot of continuity. It was a wonderful experience for a first superintendency.

While most of the descriptions of their school boards was positive, one participant described a situation with a school board president in a previous district where she was the superintendent. “The current school board president in [school district] told me when he first came on the board that women talk too much and they’re always on the rag.” She attributed this school board president’s comment to an individual who was not used to seeing a woman in a leadership position. The participant did not describe that relationship with that particular school board to much extent, but remained positive when speaking of subsequent boards with which she had worked.

Finding 3: Gaining Access

Since school boards are a usual pathway to gaining access to the superintendency, I wanted to find out about participants’ career trajectory to see if there was any commonality among the participants. Were the women all secondary educators? Did they serve in assistant principalships and principalships? Did they come from a curriculum background?

Career Pathways

The career pathways of the participants in this research was unexpectedly very diverse. Three participants had what would be considered the traditional career path for superintendents:
teaching, assistant principalship, principalship, administration directorship and/or assistant
superintendency, and then a superintendency. All three women had secondary experience. Their
teaching fields included choir, PE, home economics, science, and English. Another participant
had a similar career pathway, except her teaching experience was in elementary.

Irene had a coaching background, which she said may have impeded her ability to move
into administration.

Now, the superintendent clearly said, “You might need to move out to move up.” But
apparently I didn’t listen to him well enough and continued to apply in the district. They
saw me as what I had done. They didn’t see potential in a physical education teacher/coach,
and in the mid-80s was the time when we were really transitioning out of Madeline Hunter
and in that role where you’ve got to be an instructional leader. Sometimes people see you
as your title, as opposed to what you can do. I think that was part of it.

Three of the participants commented on the advantages male coaches may have in some
communities, as some districts prefer to see a certain kind of leader. Several of the participants
indicated that discrimination in that form depends in what district one is working. Barbara was
also a teacher/coach but did not indicate having any difficulty breaking into administration.
When both Irene and Barbara were teacher/coaches trying to go into administration, each woman
was in a different part of the state, both women were in small school districts.

The interesting career paths come from five of the participants. None of them had
traditional building principal experience, although two were close. All five participants taught
on the secondary level in some capacity. One was an assistant principal at a high school for one
year before she moved into a central office position. Another worked as an assistant principal at
a middle school before she moved into a central office position. With that said, she was also
named principal of summer school one summer before she moved into a different role. Barbara
functioned as a superintendent and principal during the same school year, which is a different
principal experience than most superintendents’ experiences.
I applied for that principal job, and I was hired as a principal. It was going to be kindergarten through eighth grade principal. I started that new job on July the 1st, ...and I took this little principal job at this little bitty school. I was really excited about it. And 19 days into the job, my first board meeting, the superintendent resigned at the board meeting. The board went into closed meeting and they came out. The board president looked across the room at me and asked if I would be interested in being the superintendent. Not the interim superintendent, the superintendent...So I said, “Of course I’ll be your superintendent.”...It was a very small school. So I didn’t hire a principal. I did both of those jobs. And that sounds a little crazy, and looking back it was very crazy. But it did give me an opportunity to have that level of principal experience, and I’m glad I did that.

The remaining participants had no building administrator experience at all.

Jennifer moved up her career path through counseling. After teaching high school, she moved into an elementary counseling position, where she quickly learned that she preferred older students. From elementary counseling, she transitioned into high school counseling and from there she was a curriculum director at central office. Vicky makes no apologies for never being a building administrator. In fact, she admits that she never wanted to be one.

I started doing some little leadership things at the district level, meeting people from other campuses, and meeting the program director. I was exposed to what that job was about. Then when that job came open - and I had to decide, Do I want to go AP route or do I want to go AP and principal? But when that job came open, I thought, But I enjoyed my work that I did with curriculum, and I enjoyed the people that I had met. So I decided to go for that job, and I got it.

One of the directors, who was over a several campuses, really wanted me to go and look to be an assistant principal. I went and interviewed. Really and truly, my heart wasn’t in it, and I knew all the people on the committee. I didn’t feel like I had had a great interview...So I went and interviewed, but it was because I was encouraged to do that. It wasn’t really in my heart at that point...What happened is the other position came open and I wound up going back and saying, “I really would rather not be considered.”

The surprising outcome of this data collection was that out of the nine superintendents who participated in this study, four of the participants have never been building principals during a school year, and one participant was a principal and a superintendent at the same time.
Catalysts and Gatekeepers

As discussed in the career pathways of the nine participants, the track each woman held before achieving a superintendency were different. Only a few of them would fit what is considered a traditional career pathway to the superintendency. So, how did these women gain access to education’s highest level of leadership in a school district? Where was the proverbial glass ceiling that was supposed to have held them back in their careers? When studying the transcripts of the interviews, I saw a recurring theme in the texts. Many of these women were asked to interview for positions and/or encouraged by others, some of who were decision makers.

In Vicky’s situation, she was met with encouragement through several stages of her movement up in her school district.

I really looked at the positions there in the Curriculum Department because when I was a program director, I was very happy to do the work that I was doing there. Then suddenly the director left. Because of the credibility that I had with the principals at the time, a lot of people said, “[Participant], are you going to go for that job?” Really and truly, that’s the kind of job I was thinking about.

People began to come to me to encourage me to apply for the job. Even though my supervisor wanted to be fair to everybody. She did say, “You certainly should consider this. This is something you can do, and I certainly believe you will have the support of the board. But you certainly have as great a shot at this as…” She encouraged me and said, “This is something I think you could do, and if you think you’re interested, you need to go ahead and apply for it.” I’m sure she said the same thing to the other people, too. But I had worked with her very, very closely. So I decided to do it.

Jennifer experienced similar encouragement.

The district had decided to add a curriculum director because I had said to the superintendent repeatedly, “This is a bigger job than we can do on campus.”…And they decided to add that position. The superintendent asked me if I would like to interview for it. I said, “Sure.” I thought with no proper background, I would not get the job. But, in fact, I did.

Ann describes her situation by crediting women she worked for who had a large role in her advancing in her career.
I’ve just been blessed with these women who have taken it upon themselves to risk hiring me, and watching me grow and helping me when I made mistakes because I made plenty. So that’s how I ended up in central administration and got there quickly.

In another example, Sandra talked about working for her superintendent and getting a call to apply for his job. “He had called me and he said, ‘You might want to interview. I’m leaving.’ Because he had just riled up the community, and he was out of there. So I interviewed there and went there.” Elizabeth describes similar encouragement from the people around her.

I got that executive director’s job and the next thing you know I got people saying, “You really ought to try for the superintendency.” So sometimes, it is that external force that says, “You can do this.”

I was doing some things like that in the building. Our Executive Director of Elementary Education retired. I had been a principal at this time - I was principal four years. And the instructional coordinators came to visit me and asked me if I would apply for that job. I just laughed and said, “Guys, I’ve only been a principal four years. I do not think so.” And one of the teachers on my campus, her husband at the time was superintendent in [school district]. She encouraged me to go ahead and apply, as well. And I did.

In another account, Elsa explains a lack of feeling discriminated against because of the encouragement she had from her colleagues. In addition, she was able to work under the supervision of a superintendent that gave her some valuable experiences.

He knew I had superintendent certification, and he knew I had the mid-management certification. He said, “You know, this is something you really need to consider.” He was wonderful to include me in all of the meetings with board members and all of the meetings with bond planning and community presentations and really was just a tremendous role model and offered me lots of experiences. Anything he participated in, he let me come along and hear the conversations with the financial advisors and with the architects.

Having the right experiences to get where they needed to be seemed important in the participants’ careers. Elizabeth spoke specifically about this. “It’s a matter of - Do you keep looking or do you give it up? Do you accept someone else’s perception of what you can do because of anything or do you get yourself prepared?” Other participants took advantage of
opportunities to take on leadership positions in their districts without needing the leadership titles in order to get experiences they thought they needed.

Vicky: I was working on curriculum, and I would do some summer work. I was on a textbook committee. I started doing some little leadership things at the district level and then meeting people from other campuses, meeting the program director. So was exposed to what that job was about.

Jennifer: I started doing a little internship with her where I would work one hour in the counseling office. I loved working with the kids….the first thing I did when I was hired was have to recreate the entire master schedule,…I sat in central office day and night for about three weeks doing a master schedule, checking data bases, making sure that things were in there correctly. So unbeknownst to me, the superintendent is sitting there thinking, Boy, she’s smart. Boy, she’s got a work ethic. This is great.

Barbara: My superintendent at the time in that little bitty school came to me and asked if I would write a curriculum for the school. He gave me an opportunity to really start thinking of myself as more than someone who had good classroom management or could organize a schedule or build a master schedule but as an instructional person. That was a turning point for me.

Irene: I built myself up and learned a lot about curriculum - math, the Honor Society – all of those to satisfy what some people had said, “Oh, she’s just a coach.”

These women superintendents did what they needed to have the right job experiences to move ahead in their careers; inevitably some of them had some challenges. Three of the participants talked about being the token interviewees in front of the school board. Two of the participants were taken aback by a comment a school board member made during her interview.

Elizabeth: I interviewed for a superintendency, and I won’t name the district. I was invited back for a second interview. There were two of us being considered, me and a man. One of the board members in that interview said, “You know, we’ve never had a female superintendent in this district. What will we tell the guys at the corner café if we hire you?” And I stood there thinking, Well, you can tell them about being sued. But the thing that I said was, “You tell them you hired the best person for the job. That’s what you tell them.”

Betty: I was interviewing for a superintendent’s position. It was all males on the board and one of the members was so inappropriate; he had cursed in the interview. He said, “Well, I’ll tell you, we do a lot of work out here with [well-known person]. And when [well-known person] and the boys come out and want to do something just how in the hell are you going to handle that as a little woman?” You just answer the question. Obviously, I did not get that job. I was the token female on that interview.

The other two participants told stories of being the female candidates in an interview pool.
Barbara: He talked with me and wanted me to come out to [school district] and interview. I said, “I’m not interested.” He begged me, and he kept calling me. Finally he said, “[Participant], I need to take them a woman to interview. Just come interview. You don’t have to take the job. Just please come and interview.”

In this participant’s case, she actually got the position for which she was the token female interviewee. Her case is an outlier, though. Betty’s story did not end in the same way.

As I went out to become a superintendent, there’s no doubt that there were times when I was the token female in the interview pool. They just felt like they had to have a woman in the pool, but they weren’t hiring a woman. It was clear they weren’t hiring a woman, and they didn’t hire a woman.

One intriguing story about interviewing in front of a school board came from Barbara who was interviewing in a district in which she had heard there were rumors about her.

I started an interview one time by saying, “I guess the first thing I should tell you is no matter what the rumor is, I’m not a lesbian.”...And I followed that up with, “Not that it would matter, but I know that’s been a topic of conversation here.” And they hired me anyway. And the other finalists had started that rumor thinking it would shut me out.

Because she became a superintendent early in her career, she talked about some of the negativity that came with being a young woman in a high leadership position. “I still got accused of inappropriate behavior. ‘How did she get to be the superintendent? Who did she sleep with?’”

This kind of behavior from outside people was also evident to Ann who moved into administration early in her career. “You go home and you try to explain that to your husband. He would hear rumors that I was sleeping with [colleague] or that I was sleeping with somebody that I didn’t know...”

Preparing for the Superintendency

All of the respondents in this research study were involved in some kind of superintendency preparation program. Generally speaking all participants said that their superintendency programs were good. No participant spoke negatively about her experience in a preparation program. Some felt prepared to be a superintendent when they left their program and
others felt, as Jennifer stated, “I had enough knowledge to make it through the interview, but it really was not enough to get you through the job.” These women felt that in order to fully understand the enormity of the superintendent position, one has to experience it for herself.

Several of the superintendents indicated that one of the most valuable parts of their programs were the cohorts and contacts made with fellow students and instructors that made the experience worthwhile. When I asked the participants what should have been included in the program that was not there, several gave me good feedback.

Betty: Add the piece in about how to lead change, how to lead transformation… certainly just the thinking about the context of change, the theory of change, the case studies around change, and that sort of thing.

Ann: My suggestion would have been to make more room for how you maneuver that maze. How do you work through that and don’t come off as a bitch? Pardon my French. But that’s what they’re going to call you and me.

Barbara: The part that there was no preparation for is marketing because that was a dirty word back then. The other piece of that is the impact of social media and all of those things now that we’ve kind of had to figure out.

Two of the participants described unique preparation programs. Barbara took her superintendency preparation from two different institutions. She said that one institution based their program on theory, “almost new-age” and “leadership in the new world…” The other institution provided a traditional program. Elsa described her preparation program through a university that partnered with the Texas Education Association. “We had that wonderful experience of being able to visit districts all across the state and engage in active conversations with teachers, staff, administrators, trustees, and board members and ask questions and audit every aspect of the school district.”

Finding 4: Social Constructs

Social constructs are the categories or groups that society has created based on its notion of how people should function. Despite any gender related barriers present in their careers, the
participants in this study were able to either break through or avoid the notion of a glass ceiling altogether. In the nine interviews, only Elsa had very little to say about gender-related issues in her career.

I think some people assume that there is a glass ceiling and things that they can’t do, but I’ve never personally experienced that… I’ve seen men’s leadership styles from A to Z and the same with women…I’ve seen very relationship-focused female superintendents and male superintendents. Then I have seen very progressive change agents who look more at the data first and then the people second. I’ve seen that with both genders.

Other participants agreed that they had never personally experienced direct discrimination because of their gender, but they also agreed that it exists.

Vicky: When there had been openings for some other school districts, because they’re different in their make-up, I’m sure, and people would say, “Oh, I bet they’re going to call you and ask you to apply for that job.” No. But a couple of times they’ve called our deputy superintendent. Well, it’s a man. There are some districts where you don’t see them going with a woman. You see them going for a man.

Irene: I’m sure there’s probably that faction out there, but I haven’t really had anybody say it to my face. I have had colleagues and people come into the district say, “Oh, you’re the superintendent.” Kind of like, “Well, this is [region of Texas]. Shouldn’t it be a man?”

I do think that there’s some stereotype in leadership. I think when people are given opportunities or invited to do things it tends to follow that, Well, you know we want the man to lead us. Those are the people that get invited.

Elizabeth: I’ve heard that there was early research that said women prefer to work for men. I heard what someone said they thought the answer was, which I thought was interesting. Women think that they can manipulate men easier than they can manipulate other women.

I’m just having a harder time accepting that there is such a dramatic difference in today’s world between how men lead and how women lead…I personally didn’t struggle with it at all, but I think there are people who must have.

The perception of women leaders in a community seems to be the major determining factor in how a woman is treated in her job. Does a community value a woman’s leadership as much as a man’s? Several participants shared their stories of dealing with a community or person who did not see equality between men and women’s leadership abilities.

Jennifer: But the community very much perceives women as not being able to handle secondary students, so why should you be able to handle personnel? Not being able
to discipline, not being able to make the tough decisions. They still see a man as someone they want to work with. They feel more comfortable working with a man. People always operate within their own comfort zones. I think that’s a major issue.

Betty: I had an assistant superintendent who came to see me in January or February. He sat down in my office. He said he wanted to talk to me about something. He said, “Well, some of the men that you work with, some of the men secondary principals are having a little trouble with you.” I said, “What have I done?” He said, “Well, nothing. But you’re not calling them. You haven’t asked for help from them.” And he said, “I know that you probably don’t see them doing anything you want to emulate.” He said, “I think because you’re finishing your doctorate, you aspire to move into central office, curriculum instruction area, or something. You’ll need to know that in order to do that you’ll have to have their support. So I advise you to start calling them and seeking their help for things that you don’t really need in order to make them feel better about you.” I thanked him for coming. I said, “Oh, thank you for caring about my career.”…And it wasn’t anything other than a realization that I was going to need to behave in a way that wasn’t really true to who I was because I was a new female secondary principal.

That’s the reason I only stayed a year. I guarantee you, the role of women and men is very different in small rural America. You don’t see a lot of women mayors there, you don’t see a lot of women elected to county commissioners or city council positions. In most churches you don’t see female ministers. You don’t see females as president of Kiwanis or Rotaries in those small, rural communities. I still think that when communities think about who they’re interested in as leaders or when female candidates think about where they want to live and raise children in many instances, there are going to be many communities that women aren’t going to be a part of the leadership role. I think that’s still real.

Ann: The most chauvinistic male I’ve ever worked with in my whole life was a principal I worked with. That was the most difficult year I’ve ever worked in my life. I only was there a year as an assistant principal, and he didn’t have a choice about me. It was terrible. All the worst things that can happen as a woman, it happened to me because he didn’t want a woman. But I was forced to go there and he was forced to take me because they felt that that was the best match.

When I met him the first time he said, “Well, I understand you’re my new assistant principal.” He said, “Come give me a big ‘ole double-breasted hug.” That was who he was, and it was my first lesson. And it was a good one to have.

Barbara: I do think women are a bigger target than men. School districts who hire women, whether it’s conscious or not, are looking for a change agent. They’re looking for someone to do something different, not that a man can’t…But when a district is just happy with things the way they are and they don’t want anything to change, they’ll rarely hire a woman, and they’ll typically hire a white man. So when you see a woman or a minority being hired, it’s usually because they are ready for a change. That in itself makes you a target.

This next participant asked me to use great discretion in telling the following story. In the recent years, the superintendent was working with a local agency on a project that involved the school
district. City officials did not like the project or the school district’s involvement in the project, and she did not involve city officials in the decision making. During the summer months, while she was out of town, the city officials called her school board president into a meeting without her knowledge and told him, “You guys need to get her in a back room and get control of her…” The school board president reported these goings-on to the superintendent. He said that he told the city officials, “We won’t be taking her any place and telling her anything. Deal with her. Not us.”

As in one of the examples above, women who have control over maintenance, transportation, or construction may run into others who have a difficult time seeing a woman in charge of those things.

Elizabeth: One of the first groups to come in the door to meet me was this guy with these drawings. He came in and said, “We’re going to put that on the ground. Your very next school needs to go here. We need your next school to go here.” And I looked at it. And I said, “Well, I tell you what. When you get about 600 houses on the ground there, you reserve us a spot and we’ll talk.” He came in all bluster. So occasionally I’ve had to deal with that, but I always do it gently. I believe that occasionally you might have to step on someone’s shoes, but I sure don’t want to mess up their shine. His whole attitude was like he came in and almost patted my little head.

Jennifer: I got here as assistant superintendent, I was in charge of the transportation and the maintenance, all those operational duties. The maintenance director at that time did not want to work with a woman. He wouldn’t come out and say that to me, but every time he had a problem he would march in here and talk to the superintendent. So one day I just said, “The superintendent is not your boss. You go through me. I need to know what you’re doing.” So he said, “Oh, you know, I’m just used to talking to [superintendent]” I said, “I don’t care who you’re used to talking to. I need to hear what’s going on. Then if you want to go talk to the superintendent then that’s fine, but you need to tell me first.” Having to talk to a woman about construction was the last straw for that man. He just couldn’t stand that.

Sandra indicated that, “If you’re building and doing those kinds of things, sometimes they might not realize what you know.” When I asked her if she had run into that kind of discrimination with the construction going on in her district, her response was, “No, but I will.”

Some women gave accounts of how people they worked with perceived them.
Jennifer: Some of my bosses and some of the people here have said, “Well, you act more like a man than you do a woman.” They said, “Well, you don’t cry like women do, and you make decisions and carry them out like men do.” I would say that they have no experience working with women. They do not think that a woman can take a job and not be a crying, hormonal mess. But that speaks to some vices that are still around.

Ann: But when I went into administration and I went into administration young, it was different. And I got an award one time - the administrative group - and I was always treated very kindly and very nicely, you know. But before [superintendent] became superintendent the climate was a little different. And I got an award that was Sexiest Administrator award. You go home and you try to explain that to your husband.

Sandra: You know, to still be the leader but not come across too strong because we’re still supposed to be more the communicators, the make everybody feel good people. If you do the same thing that men do, you will be viewed as too harsh.

Barbara: Oh, sure. That’s not a secret. You know the story that an assertive man is decisive, and an assertive woman is a bitch. You know, that’s still true.

As difficult as any of these accounts may seem, one cannot forget that all nine of these women are successful superintendents. All of these stories are told by women who have persevered through these trials and tribulations of being ambitious women in leadership. A couple of the women talked about their perception of having to work harder than their male counterparts in order to get ahead. Betty said, “…you feel like you have to work twice as hard and be a little bit better to be thought of as a little less than equal…” Barbara said she has always known that, “you better be over-prepared…have read one extra article, done a little bit more research, know a little bit more about the person you’re talking to, be a little bit more competent, come a little bit earlier, stay a little bit later.”

Elizabeth summed up the challenges of the glass ceiling as a social construct that women in the superintendency have faced with the following:

I really believe we get treated the way we allow ourselves to be treated. And I believe if you’ve got a goal and purpose in mind, you figure it out and you don’t accept someone else’s excuse for why you shouldn’t or should. You figure it out, and you make it happen. Too many times people abdicate what their futures can be and they place it in the hands of somebody else. And they say, “Well, gee. I bumped into a glass ceiling.” Or “Gee, I did this or that.” Then get a hammer. Go figure it out. Do what you need to do to fulfill what you believe is your purpose. I have never felt like I had to battle to make things happen. I have certainly bumped into some pretty narrow-minded people in my life. It’s a matter
of - Do you keep looking or do you give it up? Do you accept someone else’s perception of what you can do because of anything or do you get yourself prepared? I don’t see leadership as a gender issue.

Finding 5: The Childhood Consideration

An unexpected theme that arose from the interviews was nestled in the context of the participants’ childhoods. During the second interview, the participant delved into her childhood experiences. This was not a deliberate turn in the conversation, but I found her story interesting and probed further. After hearing what she had to say, I included questions about childhood in the subsequent interviews and went back to the first participant to ask her questions about her childhood. The kinds of hometowns of all of the participants varied greatly. Not all participants are native Texans as three of them are from different states. Five of the participants who are originally from Texas are from small towns. The education level of the participants’ parents also varied. The range was from neither parent having a high school diploma to both parents being college educated. One participant was from a divorced home and another participant was raised by a single mom for a while after her father passed away; her mother eventually remarried.

Table 4.2 gives a general summary of their childhood interests and school, expectations of parents and self, and young leadership opportunities. I chose to highlight the participants’ interests and expectations as well as their leadership opportunities because I wanted to see if there was any commonality among the participants’ interests as children. Furthermore, I wanted to see if parents or family had any bearing on whether or not the women went to college.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Interests</th>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Leadership Opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Wanted to be an actress</td>
<td>No real demands to go to college; expected to marry after high school</td>
<td>Had to take care of younger siblings; church leadership activities, Campfire Girls leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Admitted risk taker; BB guns, building engines; “girl stuff”</td>
<td>Dad was in education; Always knew what she wanted to do (superintendent);</td>
<td>Chosen to teach other students to read, drum major, sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>Music, church</td>
<td>Mom raised her to be independent; always knew she was going to college</td>
<td>Church youth activities, student government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Reading; science</td>
<td>Both parents had degrees; mom an educator; “wanted to be a value and help and feel like…(she) was contributing to a greater cause”</td>
<td>Girl Scout, drill team, stage manager in theater, choir president, Spanish club officer, student council; wanted to “take over” whatever she was doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsa</td>
<td>Playing piano, hunting, fishing, riding horses</td>
<td>Parents encouraged her to do anything she wanted to do; “pursuing life with a passion”</td>
<td>Band, 4-H, Future Teachers of America, class officer, church, student body president</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>Sports; did not want to pursue education in college</td>
<td>Both parents were educators and coaches</td>
<td>Cheerleader, chosen to read to kindergarteners, teacher’s pet, student government, sports, student council officer, camp leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Computers; loved school</td>
<td>Expected to make As in school; dad insisted she know how car engines worked</td>
<td>Drum major; National Merit Scholar; yearbook editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Loved school; reading; art</td>
<td>Knew she would go to college; expected to make 100s in school; told, “you can do anything you want”</td>
<td>Girl Scouts senior leadership council, patrol leader in school; teacher’s pet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>Enjoyed school; played school with sister</td>
<td>Dad did not want her to be a teacher, but something different; knew she was going to college</td>
<td>Brownies/Girl Scouts, library aide, student council, Captain of dance team</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These women superintendents had leadership opportunities as young girls. When I asked them if they were aware of their leadership roles or opportunities, their responses varied.
Betty: I think as much as you’re capable of being aware of that. I knew that I could do things; that I could organize things and could work with other people early on. And I liked it. There’s no doubt about it. I continued that in college; the same kind of joining and being a part thereof and getting a lot of great opportunities to be a part of that sort of thing.

Ann: I was just so naïve I didn’t even realize what a benefit I was getting.

Irene: That was a standout time for me when it changed from just being a participant to a leader and really understood what a leader was.

Elsa: I don’t know if I realized it as being a leader. I just had friends say, “If you want something done, get [participant] to do it. She will do it. She’s organized, and she’ll get things rolling.” So I generally served in different capacities in high school in that way.

Finding 6: Defining Success

As mentioned before, part of the reason these nine participants were chosen for this study was because they were, generally speaking, considered successful. Several of them earned multiple awards for their work as superintendents, this in addition to the multiple organizations, foundations, and boards on which they hold leadership positions. Naming the awards and positions would likely identify the participants, hence the generalities. Hearing why these women achieved high levels of success in their own words breathes life into the notion of hammering through the glass ceiling.

Betty: The leaders I see get in trouble are those that say, “It’s my way or the highway. This is who I am. This is the way I do it. I say it the way I want to. This is the way I operate.”

It’s situational from place to place. Remember when you come in as a superintendent, just like when you came in as a principal, the context of your district or campus is where you begin. Who’s been there, and what’s been going on, and has it been successful or not successful? If you’re going to be a successful leader, you have to pay attention to that context. What I think successful leaders do is take time to really, deeply understand the context that they’re entering and what’s worked and what hasn’t worked and then modify your own leadership behaviors to be able to reach the goals that are set that you want; you and your team and your board and community want for your children.

Ann: I love working with people. I care about kids, and I don’t mind confronting difficult issues, and I like working together to make things better. I do think women have more empathy. I think we will take time to investigate instead of jumping. Our egos don’t become bruised quite as quickly. So we can take more criticism and live with it and use it to improve ourselves than men can. I think there are a lot of positives that women bring.
Sandra: The thing that is hard for most educators is to realize how political it is. The higher up you go, the more political it is, and it’s not just black and white/right and wrong. It is political. At some point you’ve got to see if you want to win the war instead of a little battle, and you got to look at the long view. You want to do what’s right, but you’ve also got to know if you’re not there. You need to know which battles to fight and which ones not to.

Barbara: I see the big picture, and I’ve always been able to see the big picture. Just like when you have two eighth grade boys come in your office because they’ve been fighting, you see both sides. I can always see both sides of things. I have a really strong capacity for reading between the lines and knowing what the real story is, so it’s hard to blow smoke up my skirt…I’m a risk taker. I’m very decisive. I’m not afraid. I do it for the right reason. I can always figure out what’s best for kids.

I could fill multiple pages with quotes like the ones above from the nine women superintendents, but these were selected because they represent seeing the entire picture, being political-minded, and understanding others. All of them believe they have been successful in their careers and each of them explain why they believe they are successful in different ways.

Vicky: People often say, “Oh, [Participant], you do such a wonderful job.” Well, I do a wonderful job because of all these people around me. This person is working on curriculum, and this person is making sure that the water is working, and this person is monitoring all the discipline. It’s a team. I’m the one that gets to stand up and talk to everybody a lot of times. I’m the one that gets to go to the meetings and meet this person and that person, but I can’t do this job alone. I’m the one who works with the board, but my other cabinet members work with the board, too. You cannot do what you need to do without a board that’s willing to work with you. So even though I’m in the spotlight a lot, I am by no means the sole reason that we do so well with things.

Jennifer gauges her success by the trust her school board puts in her. She also is very proud of the fact that the people in the community recently approved a school bond initiative. She says that she has,

Really different experiences that sets me apart. I think my country accent and my country upbringing sets people at ease. They don’t feel like they’re having to compete with someone who feels like she’s uber-intelligent or is condescending in any way. So I have a relatability that some people don’t have.
Ann attributes her success to her ability to work with people. “I appreciate people. I value people, and I can bring out the best in people.” Irene explains her version of a successful superintendent after telling me that she thought she was successful herself.

A successful superintendent is one that can set a vision and rally the troops so that you’re all going in the same direction. You recognize when things get done, and you give credit when credit is due.

Finally, when I asked Elsa if she thought she was a successful superintendent, she responded with,

I hope so. I’ve been a superintendent now in three districts and an assistant superintendent in one. I still have very strong relationships with people in all of those districts. People who I still maintain contact with and people who still call me and say, “Hey, have you got a second? I need to bend your ear. I need some advice. I need to think something through.” Or “Let’s meet for dinner.” So it’s been lifelong friendships. I’ve always felt like it’s been a family wherever I’ve been, and I’ve left on good terms. I’m still very connected to the people with whom I’ve worked.

Role Models and Mentors

Undoubtedly many of these women have been taught and/or influenced by important individuals around them who have had some kind of positive impact on their lives. Some of the participants described education professionals who are well-known to most educators. However, most of the superintendents described people with whom they have worked and encouraged them to move forward in their careers.

Betty: I went to work for [superintendent] who was superintendent in [school district] that hired me and followed her to [school district]. She was a very good mentor. She really opened the door to me for interviewing for superintendent’s jobs, introducing me to the headhunters, and just really giving me that kind of close-up experience. I just had a lot of that kind of peer-to-peer mentoring that goes on. I just had a lot of good people along the way take good care of me, so I never found any shortage of having good mentors.

Elsa: When I in my superintendentcy program, a couple of people who served on my team were great mentors, and they had had experiences in different parts of the state than I had. They taught me a lot about their perspectives on dealing with people and how they interacted with people and what was important to them. I watched them in action on all of those tough accreditation visits and really saw them living what they professed to believe in. The superintendent who was there was by far my most influential role model.
for this position today because he pushed me, he encouraged me, and he included me, and he empowered me.

Elizabeth: All along the way, having that support base, having a network of peers to encourage. Every person who finds themselves in a position of leadership has cultivated that somehow. They’ve got a network of people who they can talk with, who they can think things through with. It is sometimes called the “good ole boy” network. Sometimes it’s called the Aggie network or the TCU network or the SMU network. Whatever it is, it’s there. It’s there for people. I certainly had that. I had people who gave me the encouragement, who saw that little bit, who didn’t necessarily become what they would say, “I am your mentor. But I am your friend and I’m going to help you. I’ll listen to you, and I’ll just help you stay encouraged.”

At some point in the nine superintendents’ careers, there was someone by their sides urging them to move up and forward. For some of them, it was the person who hired them or the person with whom they worked. Some had mentors early on in their young lives and others did not find good mentors until well into their education careers.

Summary

The nine women who participated in this study shared their perceptions of different aspects of their careers. They have had successful superintendencies in their careers. They were considered fundamentally successful by their own definitions and by the standards considered by many educators. They have never been forced out of a superintendency by a school board, and many of them have won awards and recognitions for their achievements in their districts. Each superintendent told her story of how she grew up, her career pathway to the superintendency, and her dealing with her family along the way. Several shared difficult tales of discrimination and closed doors which were coupled with the tales of how they persevered. The similarities evident in the participants’ stories will be the foundation of the next chapter, Conclusions and Recommendations.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the factors that led to the success of women superintendents in Texas. Through the interviews of nine women superintendents, I was able to look into the career trajectory of women who have successfully attained and retained superintendent positions in Texas to determine what career decisions have helped them.

Furthermore, I probed into the perceived challenges these nine women superintendents had faced in their positions. All nine participants overcame challenges when climbing to the higher levels of leadership in education. These women have achieved success in the superintendency, and several factors appear to have played into the success of these women.

The research questions stated in this study are:

1. What are the internal and external factors that lead women to be successful superintendents in Texas?
   a. What career pathways do women take?
   b. What support do these women have?

2. What challenges do women superintendents face? In what ways does gender affect these challenges?

3. What do women superintendents bring to a successful tenure as superintendent?

Perhaps through this study and those recommended later in this chapter, educators can better understand what happens in a woman’s career and how she handles situations that contribute to her success as a leader in education.
Conclusions

The Family Factor: Marriage and Children

All nine participants in this study had to make career decisions and consider their families in some capacity. Most of the research involving women in the superintendency cite some kind of family dilemma as a reason why a woman rarely goes into the superintendency or leaves the position (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Derrington & Sharratt, 2008). One important study of women superintendents across three states pinpointed too much time away from family as the primary reason that women did not pursue the superintendency (Sharp et al., 2004). While the participants in this study spoke about their children and family mobility, having children did not keep them from achieving their leadership goals. The women in this study do not follow the same trend as the Sharp research when it comes to family and career choices.

Having said that, the two participants who had no children, Betty and Elsa, pondered the question of whether or not children may have impacted their career paths. Betty made the conscious decision to not have children. While she does have stepchildren, they were already grown when she married her second husband. Two other participants, Sandy and Jennifer, put an education and a career on pause to raise children. Sandy commented in her interview that she began her superintendency late. So that, while other superintendents were retiring, she felt she had more years to give before her retirement. The other five participants’ careers either were not greatly impacted by having children, or they did not allow having children to impact their career choices. Vicky and Elizabeth had elementary and middle school aged children while the women were advancing in their careers, Vicky with one child and Elizabeth with two children. Both women described their juggling schedules with their husbands to make sure the family needs were met. Although Irene also described having to work out a meticulous schedule with her
husband to accommodate her son, this was a time when she was teaching and coaching. She said that when she was moving up in administration, her son was already older and not really an issue. Finally, the two single mothers in the group, Ann and Barbara, pieced together their stories of raising their children, being promoted, and being single. Ann, with two children, was a single mother for three years and sometimes had help from her ex-husband. She explained having her children with her while she performed her duties as a district leader. Barbara, with three children, described her 16 years of being a single mother and a superintendent. Although she and her children were met with some challenging situations, she persevered. 

There was one common theme in all of the participants’ current marriages: a supportive husband. This echoes the findings in a 2011 study where superintendents were asked about stress, and women superintendents commented on the necessity of a supportive spouse (Hawk & Martin, 2011) All nine participants were married. As in the Sharp, Malone, Watler, and Supley (2004) study, all of the husbands were employed. The participants who did not have supportive husbands did not allow those circumstances to stand in the way of their career ambitions, as they ended their marriages rather than giving up on their careers. Supportive spouses made achieving career goals much easier for the participants. Both Barbara and Ann spoke of the difficulties of having children, being a leader in education, and single mothers. While it was not impossible, it was difficult. Both women boldly made the decision that this journey was easier alone than with the dead weight of an unsupportive spouse. This kind of decision parallels the Derrington and Sharrat (2008) finding that women have to decide whether or not the spouse shares the same values.

Three of the participants, Betty, Barbara, and Ann, were in a second marriage. In their cases, their first marriages were casualties of an ambitious wife and a husband who could not
cope. All three of the participants were married soon after their high school graduations. The important decision to leave an unsupportive husband undoubtedly had tremendous impact on the women’s careers. While one cannot say for sure whether or not these women would have ended up where they did in their careers being married to these men, most would agree that it is doubtful. These three participants’ second marriages were to men who were unconditionally supportive of the women’s personal and career goals.

Staying Power: Tenure and School Boards

Short tenure in a school district is one of the hazards of a superintendent’s job. In 2010, The Council of the Great City Schools reported the tenure of superintendents in that organization to be 3.64 years, which was an increase from their 1999 study, 2.33 years. This data only includes superintendents of large school districts in the United States. In 2000, the Council of Urban Boards of Education reported a superintendency tenure of 3-5 years amongst its members. The women in this study averaged 6.9 years in a superintendent position. The length of tenure has been a point of research since the average tenure is so short. Data from several recent studies point to a superintendent’s relationship with his or her school board as a major reason why a superintendent stays or leaves a school district (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Hawk & Martin, 2011; Pascopella, 2011; Trevino et al., 2008). The seven participants in this study who are current superintendents have outlasted the averages for tenures found in earlier studies and corroborate the recent studies for the reason for longer tenures, a positive relationship with their school boards. These seven women highlighted the attribute of communications as the major reason for the positive relationship. Vicki in particular commented on creating open communication with all board members equally. Only Barbara had anything close to negative to share about the school board; however, her story concluded with a positive outcome because she
mended a questionable relationship. One additional reason surfaced in the participants of this study. Four participants, Vicky, Jennifer, Irene, and Elsa, all described “stable” boards during at least one of their tenures as superintendent, meaning there was little turnover. What the participants did not talk about but must have been present in their relationships with their school boards is the participants’ ability to manage their relationships with the boards. As each woman spoke of their past and present dealings with school boards, every superintendent was very diplomatic. The results of this study couple longer tenures with a strong relationship with school boards. The women in this study have enjoyed both longer tenures and strong working relationships with their school boards.

Gaining Access

Career Pathways

Among the nine participants in this study, I found no strong similarities in their career paths to the superintendency compared to the career paths of typical male superintendents. Only one superintendent’s pathway, Irene’s, followed what research says is this typical path to the superintendency: Teacher/coach, secondary assistant principal, secondary principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Ortiz, 2000; Tallerico, 2000). Six participants’ career pathways leaned heavily on the curriculum spectrum; Irene even served as a Curriculum Director for one year before she became a secondary principal. Vicky, Jennifer, Betty, Ann, and Elsa held positions in districts that specifically address curriculum and instruction. Barbara did not have a central office position until she was appointed superintendent, but she said she wrote curriculum for the district while she was teaching. Sandra and Elizabeth did not hold specific curriculum positions, but they were the two participants in the
study that had both elementary and secondary leadership experience. Barbara and Betty taught elementary non-academic classes.

The participants support Kim and Brunner’s (2009) research article on career mobility in the superintendency that discusses the value women put on the classroom experience and instructional knowledge of their careers. Furthermore, the career pathways of the nine participants support the research that indicates that superintendents tend to have secondary experience, as all of the participants had some kind of secondary teaching experience before they became superintendents (Kim & Brunner, 2009; Tallerico, 2000). Contrary to existing research about the typical pathway for superintendents, four of the participants in this study did not have a traditional principal position before they became superintendents.

Catalysts and Gatekeepers

Only Jennifer and Betty openly admitted to having been denied a position because of their gender at some point in their careers. However, Vicky, Sandra, and Barbara said that they have seen or heard of situations where women were not hired or interviewed for positions because of their gender. Having the opportunity to be interviewed seems to be a speed bump in women’s careers according to research of women in the superintendency (Kamler, 2009; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Ortiz, 2000; Tallerico, 2000). This study supports the fact that this kind of practice might exist, but it does not seem to be a factor in the successful acquisition of a superintendency for the nine participants.

Preparing for the Superintendency

All nine participants went through some kind of superintendent preparation program through an accredited university. Elsa’s experience was a little different in that the Texas Education Agency teamed up with the university to give the students a unique perspective of the
superintendency, allowing the students to create important network contacts and educational experiences throughout the state. Barbara’s experience was also unique in that she was a part of two different programs at different points of her preparation to become a superintendent.

The most important aspect of the preparation programs, according to the participants, was the contacts they made with their fellow students. In fact, Vicky, Jennifer, and Elsa specifically mentioned cohorts as valuable parts of their programs. Overall, the participants felt that their preparation programs taught as much as they could and the rest had to be learned when they began their first year as superintendents, or as Irene put it, “…it prepared me to take the test.”

Social Constructs

One may easily conclude that Betty Jean Newsome spoke the truth when she wrote, “This is a man’s world,” and then added, “It would be nothing without a woman or a girl” (J. Brown & Newsome, 1966). Much of the research supports that leadership in the United States is heavily considered to be a male-dominated endeavor (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Sharp et al., 2004; Skrla, 2000; Tallerico et al., 1994; Tallerico, 2000). Seven of the nine participants in this study shared at least one story where they were directly affected by this kind of mentality. The most shocking was one participant’s account of a recent situation with city officials where her school board president was told, “You guys need to get her in a back room and get control of her…” Two participants described situations with employees who did not want to communicate with a woman in matters of maintenance and transportation. Two other participants explained the male mindset of dealing with vendors and construction. While hiring a woman in these districts was welcomed, successfully navigating within the social constructs that exist can be an art form.
The mindset that men should lead school districts does exist, but it does not exist everywhere, according to several of the participants. The nine participants secured superintendencies in districts where hiring a woman was, and probably always will be, welcome. All but one participant said that, depending on what part of the state one was in and what kind of community, gender discrimination may be a significant factor in whether or not a female superintendent can be hired and/or do well.

Barbara mentioned that she believed school districts will hire a woman when they are looking for change.

I think that school districts who hire women, whether it’s conscious or not, are looking for a change agent. They’re looking for someone to do something different, not that a man can’t… But when a district is just happy with things the way they are and they don’t want anything to change, they’ll rarely hire a woman, and they’ll typically hire a white man. So when you see a woman or a minority being hired, it’s usually because they are ready for a change.

Ann made a similar comment in her interview, “…and sometimes you will still hear men say, ‘Well, they’ve had one woman, they probably need a change.’” These two comments seemed to reflect a mentality that women do or do not get hired because of credentials, but because of their gender. This mentality mirrors the attitude found in Kamler’s (2009) study of headhunter practices where a school board member of a school district with an out-going female superintendent told the consultant to “not give us another woman” (p. 134). The consultant in the study went on to explain that board members never asked him to not send them male applicants.

Four of the participants talked about being the first female superintendent in their current or past school districts. Betty talked about her concern for women who might succeed her. “…your greatest hope is that you lead in a way that doesn’t close the door for women to follow.”

I looked at the superintendent practices of four Texas school districts wondering if women may
have closed the door to other women superintendents. Dallas Independent School District has had one female superintendent in its history, Yvonne Gonzales (1996-1997), who went to prison for embezzlement (A Parade of Leaders, 2000).

Fort Worth Independent School District has had one female superintendent, Melody Johnson (2005-2011), who, according to the Ft. Worth Star Telegram and other local news sources, she resigned under pressure from an increasingly unsupportive school board (Ayala, 2011). Whether or not this is truly accurate is irrelevant; it is the perception of her tenure that matters. Houston Independent School District has had two female superintendents. The first one was Joan Raymond (1986-1991) whose managerial practices were aggressive and confusing (McAdams, 2000). The second was Kathryn Stripling (2001-2004), who was considered to be a transitional superintendent. Finally, San Antonio Independent School District has had one female superintendent, Diana Lam (1994-1999), who was mentioned in Chapter 2. She left San Antonio under much scrutiny and controversy and moved to a different state. Northside Independent School District, the fourth largest school district in Texas, has employed White men as superintendents. Austin Independent School District has had one female superintendent, Meria Carstarphen (2009-2014), who left Texas for another position in education. She was considered a productive superintendent, who constituents seemed to like.

With the exception of San Antonio, these school districts are among the top six largest in Texas. What conclusions can be drawn from this information? Did Gonzalez, Johnson, and Lam shut the door for other females to take the helm of those school districts? Will Houston and Austin likely hire another woman after having a seemingly likeable female leader in its past? And what kind of biospheric bubble is Northside living in to only have hired White men as their
superintendents? Perhaps women simply are not applying for these positions. If this is the case, why not?

The Childhood Consideration

In examining what kinds of factors or personal qualities may have led to the success of the nine women superintendents of this study, an area surfaced that I had not initially intended to investigate. After the second interview, I wondered if these women shared any childhood experiences that may have contributed to their success. In some capacity, every participant was involved in extra-curricular activities in their elementary and secondary years. Elizabeth’s and Ann’s involvement was fairly limited in their elementary years only because their families moved around quite a bit. Nevertheless, all nine participants held some kind of leadership position before they left high school.

Also, at least seven of the nine participants had parents that expected them to attend college after high school. Jennifer did not indicate whether or not her parents expected her to attend college, but she received scholarships and her parents supported her endeavors to attend. Ann indicated that the expectation was marriage when she graduated from high school. She said, “Then in the culture I was living in with my family and everything, the next step was to get married.” She and her cousin were the first two people in her family to go to college and graduate. Young leadership opportunities and the desire or push to attend college were two factors that were important to the success of these women superintendents.

I found no commonalities in the participants’ interests as young girls. Their interests varied greatly. From reading to fishing to singing in church, to shooting BB guns to computers, the women in this study had exposure to many different kinds of activities in their childhood.
Defining Success

What does a woman bring to the position of superintendent that makes her successful? Wallace’s (2014) study of women superintendents discussed “the most frequent advice given by the participants to aspiring female superintendents was to learn as much as possible before applying for a position…” (p. 51). In addition, Derrington and Sharratt (2008) indicate the specific strategy of resolve to be successful. “Cultivate resolve and an iron will. Recognize that women often have to fight harder, wait longer, and survive more scrutiny…” (p. 10). The conclusions in this research supports these studies but include more traits. All nine participants considered themselves to be successful superintendents because of several different factors. In this study, concepts such as collaboration, communication, compassion, being prepared, relationship building, passion, and balance were part of the verbiage the participants used when explaining why they were successful superintendents. A few of the respondents mentioned that some of these traits, such as compassion, passion, and collaboration were traits found in women more than men. My favorite response came from Jennifer who said,

I’ll also say that contrary to popular opinion, women are more badass than men. Because we’ve been the teachers. We’ve been the ones that discipline these kids in the classroom and didn’t ask the principal for help because they probably wouldn’t give us the help we needed anyway. Why should it surprise people then that we’re capable of going from that leadership role up into another one?

When asked what advice they would give aspiring female superintendents, Betty, Barbara, and Sandra specifically commented on a woman’s need to work harder and know more than her male counterpart. The other participants spoke about learning as much as possible about the superintendent position before one takes the role. These words of advice parallel the findings in other research that discussed these same issues for women in the superintendence (Dobie & Hummel, 2001; Sampson & Davenport, 2010; Wallace, 2014).
Recommendations and Further Research

Although there were only nine participants in this study, the experiences of the women are expansive. Whether or not these women are an accurate representation of all of the women superintendents in Texas is questionable. Can one really generalize the findings and conclusions in this study to all women superintendents in Texas? Yes and no. These women’s experiences mirror many of the experiences found in the research. But the one thing the participants in this study have in common is their perseverance to move past any barriers put in front of them. If the participant pool were expanded to 25, 50, or 100, would the study yield the same results? Also, it would be interesting to use the same interview guide used in this study to interview nine male superintendents. How similar or different would the responses be? Furthermore, would the responses have been different if the interviewer were a male?

Interviewing successful women superintendents have given a good picture of what traits one might possess to move up in educational leadership. Further research with women who never reached their goal of being superintendent would be beneficial. What were their barriers and roadblocks? Why were they not able to break through the proverbial glass ceiling? More research about women who have been forced out of their superintendent contracts would also be beneficial. Would their perceptions of success be similar or different from the women in this study?

Researching the hiring trends of the largest school district in the United States and comparing that to the hiring trends of Texas’s largest school districts would also be interesting. As I mentioned before, it appears as though Texas does not hire women for the largest school districts. And the women who have been hired may have tainted the perception of women leaders for those particular communities. How true is this notion?
There is room for more research in the area of women in the superintendency. This study has presented research of challenges women face. Further research needs to build on this by finding reasons for success and failure in reaching the superintendency.

I think participant Elizabeth said it best through this message of empowerment:

I really believe we get treated the way we allow ourselves to be treated. And I believe if you’ve got a goal and purpose in mind, you figure it out and you don’t accept someone else’s excuse for why you shouldn’t or should. You figure it out, and you make it happen…I think too many times people abdicate what their futures can be and they place it in the hands of somebody else. And they say, “Well, gee. I bumped into a glass ceiling.” Or “Gee, I did this or that.” Then get a hammer. You know, go figure it out. Do what you need to do to fulfill what you believe is your purpose…It’s a matter of – Do you keep looking or do you give it up? Do you accept someone else’s perception of what you can do because of anything or do you get yourself prepared?

In order to pull all of these conclusions together, it is important that I explicitly address the original research questions. What are the internal and external factors that lead women to be successful superintendents in Texas? Internal factors were difficult to pin point because I never asked the women directly what internal forces drove them to success. Based on the data, each participant seemed to have an internal drive or ambition. Although this study does not necessarily provide ample data to support defined internal factors leading to the participants’ success, it is evident that each woman clearly had internal factors that helped make them successful.

The participants who encountered external barriers, such as an unsupportive spouse, a difficult supervisor, or a hostile community, did not allow these things to hinder their progress. They were not afraid to move forward despite those external barriers. While the reasons may be different for each woman, none of them shied away from the possibility of advancing their careers. Several of the participants spoke about having passion for what they do on a daily basis.
Finally, when the participants were faced with a roadblock, they chose to move in a direction that was unencumbered. They never quit because of one of those roadblocks.

The external factors are much more evident in the data. All nine participants had an active childhood, which may have led to internal drive, but provided them with valuable leadership opportunities at a young age. Eight of the nine participants had parents who expected their daughters to attend college. Each of the participants described a supportive spouse. Although three of the participants did not initially begin their careers with the supportive spouse, they changed their situations by leaving the relationship. The participants spoke about having what some researchers describe as sponsored mobility (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006b; Derrington & Sharratt, 2008). Other external factors included mentors and role models.

What career paths do women take? The participants had various career paths. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, only Irene followed the typical male-defined path to the superintendency. All of the participants held some kind of curriculum position during their careers and secondary experience. Part of the reason could be because of the changing expectations of school districts as state and federal accountability put so much emphasis on academic performance. Curriculum seems to be the more frequently traveled pathway for women superintendents. Finally, four of the participants had never been a traditional principal before they were superintendents.

What support do these women have? Support seems to be the most common thread among the six findings in this chapter. In finding 1, the family factor, most of the participants with children spoke of leaning on the support of family and friends. In addition, all of the participants relied on the support of a spouse at some point in their careers. When the women
did not have that support from the spouse, they left the relationship. In finding 2, staying power, all of the participants spoke about a supportive school board relationship. In the one instance a superintendent found herself in a possibly contentious relationship with a board member; she was able to change the dynamic of the relationship by openly communicating with the board member in a way that was neither condescending nor threatening. The participants also talked about having support from cohorts in their superintendency preparation programs in finding 3, gaining access. The unexpected discovery in finding 5, the childhood consideration, revealed that all but one participant had a family who expected them to go to college. Furthermore, although it was not explicitly mentioned, during their childhood leadership experiences, the women have had family and others supporting their childhood activities. Finally, in finding 6, defining success, each participant told several accounts of colleagues who supported their career ambitions. The concept of support undoubtedly resonated throughout the data collection.

What challenges do women superintendents face? In what ways does gender affect these challenges? Most of the participants told stories of discriminatory remarks made to them by school board members, supervisors, and other people in the community. Two of the participants talked about being asked to interview for a position because they needed to have a woman in the interview pool. Several participants gave accounts of the inappropriate behavior of others because of the participants’ gender. Whether or not the participants would have faced such challenges if they were men is unknown. One can assume probably not. However, all nine of these women are successful superintendents for a reason. They rose above any challenges whether it was gender related or not.

What do women superintendents bring to a successful tenure as superintendent? Collaboration, communication, compassion, preparedness, relationships, passion, and balance
were all words the participants used to describe themselves. All of these terms required the ability to work with other people in context. These women were able to walk into a situation and adjust their demeanor accordingly in order to create an effective work environment.

Summary

As a woman leader in education with aspirations to move up in my career, I had an idea of what to expect based on my own formal preparation as an educator, but this study has pinpointed some specific criteria of what it will take to achieve my goals. According to nine successful women superintendents in Texas, there are specific characteristics one can bring to the table that would really make a difference: communication, collaboration, compassion, preparedness, hard work, and passion. This is not to say that men do not also have these traits. In fact, two of the participants said that they have worked with men who were very good communicators, collaborators, and demonstrators of compassion. Overall, the nine participants in this study did not allow any internal or external challenges, situations, or factors impede their abilities to achieve the highest level of leadership in public education.

The implications for superintendent preparation programs did not turn out as I expected. Having been through a superintendent program myself, I thought I knew what may have been lacking or needed to be changed to benefit women more in trying to be a superintendent. According to the women in this study, their superintendent preparation did exactly what most are designed to do: help students pass the superintendent test and give students a taste of what is expected in the position. No program was able to completely prepare the superintendents for every eventuality, according to the participants. Having said that, it would behoove universities to make sure that students are exposed to a diverse group of superintendents and experiences.
Having a supportive spouse makes sense for any woman in any leadership position. One could also argue that men in leadership positions also need a supportive spouse to be successful as well. However, I have seen female colleagues, more than male colleagues, struggle with the balancing act of caring for their families and taking on a leadership role in education. The women in this study seemed to railroad over any notion that children are barriers to successful leaderships. Although a few of the participants admitted feelings of guilt, it did not hold them back. Never having had children myself, I did not know what to expect from the participants’ responses when they spoke about children and marriage.

The nine women who participated in this study have all experienced success in the superintendency. They have never been forced out of a contract or asked to leave a position, and many of them hold prestigious leadership positions in different administrators’ organizations in the state and nationally. At least eight of the participants experienced some kind of perceived challenge or barrier. These women are great examples of people who, when faced with a roadblock, simply found another way. What we learn from these successful superintendents is women can either allow challenges or barriers to stop us, or we can persevere and not allow others to dictate our futures.
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