Through The Labyrinth: Lived Experiences of Women and The Superintendency

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Men continue to dominate the superintendency in the United States, even though more than half of the specialized degrees needed to be a superintendent are earned by women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Warner & Corley, 2017). Nationwide, 26.7% of the superintendents are women, while 27.75% of the superintendents in Illinois are women (Heffernan & Wasonga, 2017; Tienken, 2021). This study examined the lived experiences of five women superintendents from Illinois regarding their access to the superintendency and what they perceived to be significant factors along their trajectories. Data for this study was collected through one-on-one interviews using Seidman’s (2006) three interview approach.

Based on the data of this study, women’s access to the superintendency is restricted. Barriers that seem to restrict women’s access to leadership positions are a mobilization of bias and shaping of consciousness. Because of these barriers, women’s paths to the superintendency are not linear, but resemble what Eagly and Carli (2007) have called a “labyrinth”; a career path filled with twists and turns as they find ways to overcome the barriers specific to their gender. Significant factors the study participants believed to be imperative to their career paths are navigating their career trajectories through the “labyrinth”, managing role conflict and role commitment through balanced leadership, and their concepts of power and leadership.
The findings from this study have implications for those responsible for the recruitment and selection of superintendents, mentors of women leaders, and aspiring women leaders. For those responsible for the recruitment and selection of superintendents, they should receive professional development to help uncover implicit biases they may have and examine hiring practices that are biased, restricting women from accessing leadership roles. Mentors may not be aware of the barriers women face along their trajectories and should receive training to help them understand the barriers that are unique to women’s trajectories in order to better support aspiring women leaders. For aspiring women leaders, if they become knowledgeable of the barriers they may encounter along their trajectories, they can develop a plan to overcome potential barriers; thus, increasing their chances of accessing the superintendency. Due to the small number of participants for this study, further studies that examine the lived experiences of women superintendents should be considered.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout this journey, there were barriers and obstacles that made the dissertation process difficult, almost impossible, but there were so many positive experiences and lessons I thoroughly enjoyed that helped me grow in so many ways. Along this journey there were numerous, hard-working, amazing individuals I would like to thank that helped me get where I am today.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful husband, Marcel, and our three incredible sons, Aeden, Alexander, and Collin. For practically their entire lives, our sons have known their mother to be a doctoral student. I have tried my best to ensure doctoral work did not interfere with family time, but for those moments where I needed to solely focus on my dissertation, my husband and sons have supported me and given me the time I needed. I am forever grateful for their support and hope I have set a positive example that it is possible to be a parent, spouse, and doctoral student while working fulltime.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

Background

Females earn 60% of all master’s degrees, 48% of specialized master’s degrees, and makeup 76% of all K-12 educators (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Warner & Corley, 2017). While female teachers outnumber their male counterparts by about four to one, the same ratio is not upheld for the superintendency. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) found 26.7% of superintendents were female countrywide and 27.75% in Illinois (Heffernan & Wasonga, 2017; Tienken, 2021). Even though this is the highest percentage in most recent years, the gender gap between male and female superintendents is far and wide (Finnan & McCord, 2017). Given the rate of change, the Center for American Progress (Warner & Corley, 2017) estimates women will only likely reach equality with men in key leadership roles in 2085. Besides the current disparity in numbers, women are earning almost half of the specialized degrees in education; however these numbers are not reflected in the position of superintendency (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Warner & Corley, 2017).

Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli (2007) provide insight as to why the gender gap continues to exist in key leadership roles. They find in the United States, women have encountered barriers to executive positions. Eagly and Carli (2007) have suggested that these
barriers exist within three categories that they have labeled, (1) the concrete wall, (2) the glass ceiling, and (3) the labyrinth.

The Concrete Wall

The “concrete wall” represents various barriers that are in place to block women from entering leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). “The ‘concrete wall’ rested on a division of labor dictating that men should be breadwinners and women should be homemakers” (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 3). This division of labor was normalized through the beginning of the 20th century and was dependent on cultural and historical understandings that valued a male-dominated perception of an ideal school leader’s actions and behaviors (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). The American Suffrage Movement fought stereotypical gender roles and for the advancement of women (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). During this time, some local and state superintendents were elected rather than appointed into their position (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). This process provided opportunity for Suffrage activists and women’s groups to campaign aggressively for female superintendent candidates, because it was one of few leadership positions women could hold (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). In Figure 1, from 1910 to 1930, the number of female superintendents increased from 6.26% to 10.9% (Polka et al., 2008). After 1930, the number of female superintendents steadily declined for decades (Kowalski et al., 2011).
Various explanations have been provided for this decline including, (1) many of the suffrage groups that supported female superintendent candidates disbanded or changed their focus towards other causes; (2) more and more states implemented special requirements and more formal training to be a school administrator\(^1\); (3) small, rural districts, which had the highest number of female leaders, were absorbed by larger districts; and (4) gender discrimination and stereotyping (Kowalski et al., 2011, Tallerico & Blount 2004).

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\(^1\) It is noted that during this period of time, colleges and universities set a low quota for the number of females admitted to such programs for training, and therefore women found it extremely difficult to obtain the credentials needed to be a superintendent (Tallerico & Blount 2004).
The Glass Ceiling

The Suffrage Movement was the first wave of feminist movement, and during the 1960’s, the second wave had begun, refocused on the discrepancy of females in leadership positions (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). During this time, there was an increased interest in the status of women and activism by women’s professional organizations, women’s administrative organizations, and there were efforts to place more women in school administration positions (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). The enactment of Title IX of the 1972 Education Act forced federally funded institutions to cease practices that favored one gender over the other (Ware, 2014). As a result, colleges and universities receiving federal funds had to disband low quota numbers for enrolling females and were forced to increase the number of females earning administrative credentials (Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Ware, 2014). During the 1970’s, barriers shifted from total exclusion to all leadership positions to just exclusions at the higher level (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In 1986, two journalists of the Wall Street Journal, Carol Hymowitz and Timothy Schellhardt, took note of the fact that women were rising through the ranks, but would come to an invisible barrier blocking their obtainment of executive positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Hymowitz and Schellhardt are credited for creating the metaphor of a “glass ceiling”, another absolute barrier, in reference to top leadership positions being within a woman’s reach but being blocked by an invisible barrier (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Another implication of the “glass ceiling” was women were misled about their leadership opportunities, because from a distance, the barricade to top executive positions was not easy to see (Weyer, 2007).

Enactment of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal to question potential employees about their current and future family status, but this has not stopped
employers from creating alternative ways for obtaining such information (Eagly & Carli, 2007; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Improper means for soliciting a female applicant’s current or potential family status include asking what kind of health insurance they might require, or to have an informal conversation about the difficulties of carpool or daycare arrangements (Eagly & Carli, 2007). If it became apparent during the interview process a woman had the desire to become a mother or was already a mother to young children, she could potentially become disqualified for the position (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Acknowledging that women were facing discrimination from entering high-level positions based on their gender, Congress established the Glass Ceiling Commission (as cited in Eagly & Carli, 2007). In their 1995 report, the Commission noted the opinions Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) held about women in leadership positions created a barrier for aspiring leaders. Many of the CEOs stated they were hesitant to hire a woman as an executive leader, because a woman might leave the position to raise a family (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Another reason cited in the Commission’s report was the belief CEOs held about clients preferring to work with males in top leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Such beliefs blocked women’s entry to executive positions, even as more and more women at the time were gaining entry to management positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The same trends and biases are seen in education. The principalship is a rung on the ladder towards the superintendency (Sharp, et al., 2004). In 1987, men held 75% of the principalships and women held 25% (Hill et al., 2016). The number of principalships held by women steadily inclined, reaching parity with men in 2007, and women have been outnumbering
men ever since\(^2\) (Hill et al., 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). However, the trends of the principalship have not transpired to the top executive position of a school district, the superintendency, where men vastly outnumber women superintendents (Finnan & McCord, 2017). A possible reason for the disparity between male and female superintendents, much like the corporate sector, is gender bias. A participant from McGee’s (2010) study stated she was informed she was the number one candidate for the position, but was told the superintendency was a man’s job and ultimately passed over because of her gender. Therefore, gender bias of women leaders creates a “glass ceiling” where women can earn the credentials needed to be a superintendent, but their gender will block their access.

**The Labyrinth**

In 2004 (Hymowitz), the *Wall Street Journal* published an article, “Through the Glass Ceiling,” describing the journeys of women breaking the “glass ceiling” and reaching top executive positions. A few years prior to the article, the 2000 AASA study found the number of female superintendents, for the first time, surpassed the all-time high of 11% set in 1930 (Finnan & McCord, 2017). The numbers continued to incline with the most current data showing 26.7% of current superintendents being female (Tienken, 2021). As the “concrete wall” tumbled down and the “glass ceiling” started to shatter, Eagly and Carli (2007) recognized the “glass ceiling”

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\(^2\) From The National Center for Education Statistics website: The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is currently reevaluating weights developed for the teacher data in the National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) of 2015-16. Analyses suggest that the weights may be improperly inflated. Research needed to complete the reevaluation, produce updated weights, and rerelease the data will not be completed until early 2020. Please periodically return to the NTPS website for further updates. Please note that data on schools and principals from the 2015-16 NTPS are not affected by this process.
metaphor may be misleading for women, in their quest to executive positions. The seven reasons Eagly and Carli (2007, p.7) cite include the following,

(1) it erroneously implies that women have equal access to entry-level positions; (2) it erroneously assumes the presence of an absolute barrier at a specific high level in organizations; (3) it erroneously suggests that all barriers to women are difficult to detect and therefore unforeseen; (4) it erroneously assumes that there exists a single, homogeneous barrier and thereby ignores the complexity and variety of obstacles that women leaders can face; (5) it fails to recognize the diverse strategies that women devise to become leaders; (6) it precludes the possibility that women can overcome barriers and become leaders; and (7) it fails to suggest that thoughtful problem solving can facilitate women’s paths to leadership.

According to Eagly and Carli (2007), the journey to the executive suite for women has evolved into another metaphor, the “labyrinth”.

With continuing change, the obstacles that women face have become more surmountable, at least by some women some of the time. Paths to the top do exist, and some women find them. The successful routes can be difficult to discover, however, and therefore we label these circuitous paths a “labyrinth”. If women are aware of the barriers to executive positions, they can negotiate their way through the “labyrinth,” but finding their pathway demands considerable skill and luck. (Eagly & Carli, 2007, pp. 6-7)

Theoretical Framework

In the field of research on school administration, scholarly works identifying as gender research are almost entirely about women in administration, however within the field of administration research as a whole, women are vastly underrepresented (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Dissertations provide the majority of empirical research about women in educational administration (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Brown and Irby (as cited in Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) note the study of women make up only 9% of all leadership dissertations between 1985 and 2005. At the time of the current study, a current search in Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) via Elton B. Stephens Co. (EBSCO) for superintendent leadership, not including
female leadership, procured 536 scholarly works published between 1915 and 2019, with 237 works having been published between 2009 and 2019. When searching for superintendent leadership, including female leadership, 24 scholarly works have been published between 1984 and 2019 are listed, with 15 works having been published between 2009 and 2019.

Early research on gender and administration focused on the number of women and men in administrative positions, which prompted further investigation of the disparity between men and women administrators (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). While examining the gap between men and women administrators, barriers for women were uncovered, prompting the need to view a woman’s approach to leadership through a female lens (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). For this study, social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) provided the framework to give a deeper understanding for why the gender gap exists and justified the need to explore women’s voices as they overcome the barriers through the “labyrinth” to the superintendency.

Social Role Theory

All societies attribute specific behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes as being gender norms for males or gender norms for females, and in turn, these gender norms create gender roles (Doyle & Paludi, 1991). The origins of such beliefs lie primarily in human’s evolved physical sex differences—men’s size and strength and women’s reproductive activities of gestating and nursing children (Eagly & Wood, 2012). In foraging, horticultural and agricultural societies, men hunt for large animals, participate in warfare, or plowing, while women are tasked with duties related to childbearing and childrearing, keeping them close to the home (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Such a dynamic produces a patriarchy, where the attributes of men and women interact with
economic and technological developments and tend to give men the advantages of achieving the decision-making and leadership roles (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This sexual division of labor, as Tallerico and Blount (2004) point out, is one of the most enduring and universal characteristics of work both in the home and in paid employment.

Role theories suggest people have expectations of social roles, such as leadership roles, that can influence their own personal identity and opinions of what it means to hold a certain social role (Hoyt et al., 2013). Superintendents, according to Bredeson and Kose (2007), develop a sense for their roles as educational leaders through a social learning process of role making, understanding their role, and role taking, the prescribed definition of their role based on the influences and expectations of school board members, principals, teachers, community members, and policy makers. The inception of the superintendent in the mid-19th century was shaped by local and state agents who wanted to have an administrator oversee the day-to-day business of a school, evaluate teachers, handle disciplinary issues with students, much like the father figure role of a household (Blount, 1998). During this time, men were viewed as the ideal candidate for the superintendency, because the popular belief was only men could hold positions of authority (Blount, 1998). Social role theory also views gender roles as a dynamic aspect of culture that changes in response to transformations of typical work and family roles (Eagly et al., 2000). Since the inception of the superintendency, social and economic dynamics have changed, such as it being the social norm for women to work outside the home, if she chooses to, and women having access to the education needed to be a superintendent (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Within the current role of the superintendency, educational reform policy initiatives have created a paradigm shift, and various stake holders have the expectation of the superintendent to focus on areas of curriculum development, instructional leadership, and assessment of student learning.
outcomes (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). The expected role of today’s superintendents is to create a communal environment with the achievement of all students being the focal point (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). These recent characteristics of today’s superintendents mirror the leadership styles women are more likely to display—communal, value relationships, leadership for learning, beliefs and spiritual leadership, and focus on social justice (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). However, even with the transformations seen within the superintendency, one thing that has remained a constant is that men overwhelmingly hold this leadership role (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Kowalski et al., 2011).

An important aspect of social behavior that concerns role theories is that human beings exhibit behaviors that are different and predictable depending on their social identities and situations (Biddle, 1986). Our social roles, Biddle (1986) suggests, are much like the parts actors play on stage, being confined to scripts and the roles they portray, social behaviors may be linked to roles and scripts prescribed by social actors (Biddle, 1986). Within their role, women have the unique capability to gestate. Childbearing and childrearing years coincide with the critical years for establishing a career, making it difficult for women planning a family to regain career momentum upon their return to the workplace (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Social role theory brings to the surface the stereotypical behaviors society expects of men and women and explains some of the barriers women leaders face as they aspire to top positions of their fields. One of the principles of this theory suggests behaviors of women and men are influenced by society’s stereotypical expectations of each sex (Eagly & Wood, 2012). In the realm of leadership, gender stereotypes influence the expectations for men leaders (stronger and more assertive), and for women leaders (collaborative and flexible) (Eagly & Wood, 2012).
Some leadership roles are viewed culturally as being masculine, putting women at a disadvantage for such jobs, even if they are characteristically equal to their male counterpart in all aspects, except for sex (Eagly & Carli, 2007). These social role expectations have been found to influence hiring practices and evaluations of leaders, even more so since men have historically set and developed the standard for leadership—the standard that is frequently used to evaluate effective leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Tully, 1989).

While social role theory does help explain some of the barriers some women face within the superintendency, it does not address the barriers of all women. It has been argued that role theories perpetuate the notion of what the majority view as normative behaviors associated with normative gender roles (Jackson, 1998). As such, Jackson (1998) questions whose experiences serve as the basis for normative behaviors for women—mothers of nuclear families, single mothers, lesbian mothers, adoptive mothers, mothers from different cultures and so forth? Or are gender norms for women based on religion, political views, medical and educational institutions, as well as the social constructs of some women that benefit certain populations in society over others? Another dilemma amongst theorists is their definition of role. Some authors refer to “role” as characteristic behaviors, while others use “role” in reference to social parts to be played (Biddle, 1986). Then there are some who define role with a focus on scripts for social conduct (Biddle, 1986). Even though varying views on the definition of role exist, a common agreement amongst role theorists is that the root of role theory is within characteristic behaviors (roles), parts to be played (social position), and scripts for behavior (expectations) (Biddle, 1986).
Statement of the Problem

“With continuing change, the obstacles that women face have become more surmountable, at least by some women some of the time. Paths to the top do exist, and some women find them” (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 6). The superintendency is the top executive position of public school districts (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2000). The superintendency, much like other leadership roles noted by Eagly and Carli (2007), has changed since its conception of having a male figure manage teachers with a command-and-control style of leadership (Blount, 1998; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Mandates of No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act have created a paradigm shift, making it necessary for today’s superintendents to be communal, value relationships, focus on learning for all students, build beliefs in stakeholders, and focus on social justice (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). Women leaders are more likely to exhibit these characteristics, earn more than half of the degrees needed for the superintendency, and yet men still dominate the superintendency by a ratio of almost four to one (Tienken, 2021). The statement of the problem is women have the credentials and leadership style that is needed to successfully lead school districts; however they are not being hired at the same rate as men, thus denying districts the leadership style needed for schools to succeed (Glass & Björk, 2003; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). As Eagly and Carli (2007) noted, the obstacles some women face along their trajectories are ever-changing and have become numerous, but what is not clear in the literature are how women understand and negotiate (successfully and unsuccessfully) their path to the superintendency, which so far has a large pool of candidates and few successes (Glass & Björk, 2003). Therefore, research is needed to determine the barriers women superintendents
face ascending to leadership positions and how they overcome the obstacles. By understanding the obstacles some women superintendents have contended with along their trajectories, future aspiring women leaders could make plans for anticipated barriers and how to overcome them, thus increasing the number of women leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Significance of the Study

A woman’s path toward the superintendency is not simple or straightforward (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Grogan, 1996). For this reason, it can be assumed that women that are aware of the barriers may navigate their path through the “labyrinth” (Eagly & Carli, 2007). As the roles of the superintendent have changed and more women have entered the job, their perspectives can further our understanding about the barriers they face on the path towards the superintendency as well as how they overcame them. This understanding will supplement existing leadership research. Sharing insights from those women who have made their way through the “labyrinth” will help future aspiring female superintendents better prepare for their career path (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Purpose of the Investigation

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain the essence of lived experiences of female superintendents from Illinois as they transitioned to the superintendency, as well as within the role itself. Through one-on-one interviews following Seidman’s (2006) three interview approach, the researcher discussed with each study participant their life history, present
lived experiences, and reflection on the meaning of their experiences. The researcher documented common themes amongst the participants, highlighting the barriers study participants recognized as limiting their access to the superintendency, challenges within their roles, and factors they perceived as being significant along their trajectories.

Research Questions

The following questions helped guide the case study.

What are the participants’ experiences regarding their access to the superintendency?

What factors do participants perceive as being critical in their career trajectory?

Delimitations

The study was limited to female superintendents in Illinois, with the exception of regional superintendents and elected positions. Criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007) was utilized to help narrow the scope to those who have attained the superintendency and have held the position for a minimum of five years.

Limitations

Due to scheduling conflicts and time commitment issues, the pool of study participants was small: a total of five participants. As such, the results of this study are not conclusive, but are meant to supplement existing research. Another limitation to the study was the statewide
shutdown in Illinois due to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). As such, in-person interviews were not permissible, so all interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Assumptions

As with any qualitative study, the researcher assumed reality is subjective and multifaceted as it is constructed through each participant’s interaction within her social worlds (Merriam, 2009). For this study, pseudonyms were used for each study participant to preserve anonymity and confidentiality (Simon, 2011). With the promise of anonymity, the researcher assumed the study participants answered each question honestly. It is assumed the study will help aspiring female superintendents become knowledgeable of potential barriers to the superintendency and how to prepare for them.

Acronyms

AASA – The American Association of School Administrators
CEO – Chief Executive Officer
COVID-19 – Coronavirus Disease 2019
EBSCO – Elton B. Stephens Company
ERIC – Education Resources Information Center
ESSA – Every Student Succeeds Act
IRB – Institutional Review Board
NCLB – No Child Left Behind
OCR – Office for Civil Rights

WEEA – Women’s Educational Equity Act

Definitions of Terms

**Barrier:** Obstacles or factors that impede career advancement to the next level of administration (Shakeshaft, 1989).

**“Concrete Wall”:** A metaphor used to describe the absolute barriers that completely blocked a woman’s advancement to leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

**Gatekeepers:** Individuals who control who is considered desirable for a position and determine who is allowed to pass through the next gate of the interview process (Davis & Bowers, 2019).

**Gender Bias:** The differential treatment of men and women based on their gender (Ruiz-Cantero et al., 2007).

**“Glass Ceiling”:** A metaphor used to describe the less obvious manner in which women were excluded from high-level leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

**“good old boys” Network:** A term referring to older, male professionals grooming younger versions of themselves for leadership positions (Gardiner et al., 2000).

**“Labyrinth”:** A metaphor used to symbolize the surmountable barriers, detours, and dead ends women must overcome along their way towards leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007).
Social Role: The stereotypical behaviors and roles society expects of men and women (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Superintendent/superintendency: “The executive officer of the school system…responsible for the day-to-day operation of the schools within the district and serving as the major public spokesperson for the schools” (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2000, pp. 344-345).

Organization of the Study

There are five chapters in this dissertation. Chapter one includes the background of the study, theoretical framework for the study, statement of the problem, and significance and purpose of the study. Also contained in Chapter one are the delimitations, limitations, and assumptions of the study, as well as definitions of the terms used throughout the dissertation.

Chapter two contains a review of the literature relevant to the study. The chapter begins with a brief summary of the current state of the superintendency, followed by a review of the historical investigations of women in education. Chapter two also covers a review of gender and the woman superintendent, leadership styles of the female superintendent, the barriers women face through the “labyrinth” towards the superintendency and how women have overcome such barriers.

Research design and methodology for the study is the content of chapter three. The third chapter begins by restating the problem and purpose of the study, as well as the research questions. Next, the chapter describes the research design, selection of population, and means for data collection. Chapter three concludes with a description of the data analysis tool that was utilized for this study.
Chapter four reports the results of the study and provides an interpretation of the data. Clarification of the data collected during the study is provided within this chapter.

The last chapter of this dissertation, chapter five, provides a brief summary of the entire study, conclusions about the findings, as well as recommendations for future research consideration.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter contains a review of literature relevant to the barriers women face through the “labyrinth” towards the superintendency. Chapter two is divided into five sections: (1) the current state of the superintendency; (2) historical investigations of women in education; (3) social role theory and the evolving woman superintendent; (4) gender and the woman superintendent, including leadership styles; and (5) current barriers to the superintendency and how women overcome them.

Current State of the Superintendency

Since 1923, the prominent character found in the superintendent’s seat is a married, middle-aged, white male (Kowalski et al., 2011). Females have always been underrepresented in the superintendent’s seat, and the number of women superintendents is disproportionate to the number of female teachers (Kowalski et al., 2011). Women comprise 76% of all K-12 educators, however only 26.7% are superintendents nationwide, and 27.75% in Illinois (Heffernan & Wasonga, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Tienken, 2021). One cannot cite
the lack of credentials needed to be a superintendent as a reason for the sexual division of labor, because women are earning 60% of all master’s degrees and 48% of specialized master’s degrees (Warner & Corley, 2017).

In a study by the AASA (Ellerson et al., 2015) women superintendents, more so than men, are divorced and the number of divorced female superintendents has increased since the AASA’s 2010 study, suggesting the price a woman pays/makes in choosing to become a superintendent. The mean and median age of female superintendents is higher than male superintendents and women tend to begin their superintendency later than men. The younger male superintendents, more than their older female counterparts, report more school-aged children within the home, and Ellerson et al. (2015) note the challenges of family obligations and career choice for women that have not been fully examined in the AASA’s 2010 and 2015 reports and suggest a need for further study.

Until recently, women spent more time in the classroom before becoming a superintendent, but in the AASA’s 2015 report, both men and women are spending an average of 11 years in the classroom. However, Ellerson et al. (2015) note the number of participants in the 2015 study dropped by nearly 1,000 participants, thus the 2015 report should be viewed as informative as it does not provide a thorough representation of the superintendent population. The unofficial direct career path to the superintendency is the high school principal as they are more often selected compared to elementary principals to become superintendents (Sharp et al., 2004). More men than women are high school principals and the career path for women to the superintendency is assistant principal, principal, central office, and then superintendent (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014).
The media has reported a crisis within the American superintendency, citing anecdotal reports and opinions of superintendents making claims of inadequate pools of candidates, high turnover rates, and a growing number of retirees (Björk et al., 2003; Glass & Björk, 2003; & Kowalski, 2003). Some researchers have argued the superintendent crisis is a myth, but go on to say there are problems that perpetuate the myth and must be addressed (Björk et al., 2003; Glass & Björk, 2003; & Kowalski, 2003). One of the problems is gender disparity within the superintendency, as women have historically been underrepresented (Glass & Björk, 2003). Glass and Björk (2003) examined the applicant pool of 352 districts and 84% reported having women applicants, however only 18% of the women were hired as superintendents. Gender bias is one of six barriers to the superintendency researchers have established. The other five barriers are (1) career planning; (2) mentors and networking; (3) mobility; (4) family responsibilities and support; and (5) recruitment and selection process (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Glass, 2000; McGee, 2010; Robinson et al., 2017; Tallerico & Blount, 2004).

Historical Investigations of Women in Education

To fully understand a woman’s path to the superintendency, an overview of the history of women in education is reviewed. Eagly and Carli (2007) analyzed women’s advancement to key leadership positions and determined three metaphorical categories of barriers that exist in the progress of women leaders. The first category is the “concrete wall”, where women’s paths to leadership roles were completely blocked by overt, absolute barriers. The “glass ceiling” is the second category and describes how barriers shifted so women were no longer totally excluded
from administration positions, just those at the very top. The third category, the “labyrinth”, describes how the path for women to achieve executive positions is riddled with obstacles at every turn, but with skill and luck, successful paths to the top can be found. In the subsections to follow, women’s history in education will be framed within Eagly and Carli’s (2007) three categories.

The Concrete Wall to the Superintendency

Prior to the 19th century, women were viewed as less intelligent than men, and since women, at the time, were not employed in positions requiring formal training, the education of girls was the bare minimum or completely neglected (Willard et al., 1985). To formally educate a woman was considered a waste, thus, without a way for women to obtain teaching credentials, only men were considered for schoolmaster positions (Blount, 1998). Catherine Beecher, a pioneer advocate for women teachers, believed teaching was a “woman’s ‘true’ profession” (Hoffman, 1981, p. 36) and a physician named Benjamin Rush argued mothers could serve their country well if they were able to provide a modest education in the principles of liberty and government to their sons (Blount, 1998). Rush’s ideology of a republican motherhood failed to challenge existing gender roles; however, it did provide the rhetoric needed for women to receive some formal education (Blount, 1998). After the Revolutionary War there was a great interest to educate girls and women, and by 1782 academies for girls, called female seminaries, “sprang up like mushroom growths” (Willard et al., 1985, p. 9) around the United States. Women who received formal studies used their education to teach their own children as well as neighboring children (Blount, 1998). During the first half of the 19th century, the rapid spread of common
schooling throughout the states and territories dramatically increased the need for teachers and the Civil War created many vacant positions as men went off to fight (Perlmann & Margo, 2001). Communities struggled to find qualified men who would work for the meager teacher’s salary, and as a result, were forced to turn to educated women to fill vacant positions (Blount, 1998). By 1840, the ratio of new female teachers to male teachers in Massachusetts was four to one, and by 1873, there were more women teachers than men in the northern region of the United States, except for Indiana and Missouri (Goldstein, 2014). Reasons men cited for leaving were: (1) the profession was becoming feminized; and (2) to search for better wages (Blount, 1998). In the mid-1800s, many states passed legislation pushing for consolidation of schools, creating the need for leaders to oversee the operations of these districts (Mondale & Patton, 2001). Supervisory duties varied by school type and perceived community needs, but the common tasks of administrators were to oversee and evaluate the work of teachers, handle student disciplinary issues, and administer promotional exams to students (Blount, 1998). During this time, men held most, if not all, administrative positions as the popular belief was only men could hold positions of authority (Blount, 1998).

The first wave of feminism, the Suffrage Movement, brought attention to the superintendency for women (Shakeshaft, 1987). For some county and state positions, the superintendent was elected, not appointed (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). As a result, from 1910 to 1930, the Suffrage Movement and activists helped to promote a record number of women, 11%, to the superintendency in 1930 (Shakeshaft, 1987; Stine, 2004). After 1930, the number of women superintendents declined in subsequent years for the next forty years (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Reasons for the decline are (1) legislation and policies were enacted to eliminate elected superintendent positions as a way to depoliticize the position; (2) many of the suffrage
activists and women’s groups either disbanded or turned their attention to other issues; (3) by 1930, many states initiated special requirements for being a certified superintendent; and (4) institutions offering the credentials needed to be a superintendent had low enrollment quotas for women (Blount, 1998). The end of World War II and its introduction of the GI Bill are two more reasons for the decline of female superintendents (Rousmaniere, 2013). The GI Bill helped veterans with monetary assistance for higher education in numerous fields (Nagowski, 2005). At the time of its introduction, a 2% quota was in place for women serving in the military, thus the GI Bill benefitted males more so than females (Blount, 1998). This discrepancy was highlighted in a survey by the AASA (Knezevich, 1971) where 70% of the superintendents stated they had received support from the GI Bill to obtain higher education and administration. Therefore, socialized conception of women’s roles, policies, legislation, and enrollment quotas in place at the time created absolute barriers, denying women access to the superintendency.

The Glass Ceiling

During the 1960’s, the second wave of feminism had begun, refocused on the discrepancy of females in leadership positions (Baxandall & Gordon, 2002). The second wave had set their sights on the legal and political systems to build upon the advances made during the American Civil Rights Movement (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). There was an increased interest in the status of women and activism by women’s professional organizations, women’s administrative organizations, and there were efforts to place more women in school administration positions (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). During the 1970’s, barriers shifted from total exclusion to all leadership positions to just exclusions at the higher level (Eagly & Carli,
2007). The enactment of Title IX of the 1972 Education Act forced federally funded institutions to cease practices favoring one gender over the other (Ware, 2014). As a result, colleges and universities receiving federal funds had to disband low quota numbers for enrolling females and had to increase the number of females earning administrative credentials (Rosen, 2012). With the threat of losing federal funds, many institutions moved quickly to be in compliance with Title IX and eliminated enrollment quotas for women (Rosen, 2012). As a result, there was a dramatic increase of enrollment for women in undergraduate and graduate programs, and by 1997, the number of women graduates surpassed the number of men graduates (Valentin, 1997). While Title IX opened the doors for women to receive the credentials needed to become a superintendent, the Act’s application in cases of sex-discrimination in school employment had been very weak (Blount, 1998). During Reagan’s presidential term, administration pushed for a limited interpretation of the law, thus weakening the enforcement of the Act (Blount, 1998).

Another proponent meant to rectify gender inequities in education was the Women’s Educational Equity Act (WEEA) of 1974. Under WEEA, federal funds were provided for researching employment opportunities for women in education (Valentin, 1997). Up until this time, very little research investigated discrimination practices against women seeking school leadership positions (Blount, 1998). Suzanne Taylor (as noted in Blount, 1998) noted in her research that districts were reluctant to hire women as administrators and did not encourage or try to train women for administrative positions. Furthermore, school districts did not have any published policies excluding women from administrative positions nor did they acknowledge such unwritten policies, yet women were still denied roles as superintendents (Blount, 1998). Based on her analysis of the data, Taylor (as noted in Blount, 1998) concluded the only factor having significance in the hiring process was gender. Therefore, even with legislation in place to
promote equality between the genders within leadership roles, implicit biases held by gatekeepers restricted women’s access to top leadership roles.

The Labyrinth

The aforementioned research shows explicitly that the historical path to the superintendency for women has been riddled with both political and legislative barriers, as well as the perceptions of women’s social roles and how some believe women cannot be leaders. Even though there are barriers that restrict women’s access to the superintendency, women are finding ways around the obstacles. Grogan (1996) interviewed women aspiring to the superintendency and noted the path women take is not simple or straightforward. Eagly and Carli (2007) noted in their research if women are aware of the barriers to executive positions, they can negotiate their way through the “labyrinth”, but finding their pathway demands considerable skill and luck. Therefore, by examining the potential barriers that could exist for aspiring women superintendents, they can create a plan to help them overcome the barriers, thus potentially increasing their chances to access the superintendency.

Social Role Theory and the Evolving Woman Superintendent

All societies attribute specific behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes as being gender norms for males or gender norms for females, and in turn, these gender norms create gender roles (Doyle & Paludi, 1991). Social role theory brings to the surface the stereotypical behaviors society associates with men and women, which helps to explain some of the barriers women leaders face
as they aspire to top positions of their fields. Figure 2 (Eagly & Wood, 2012) illustrates how gender roles influence the differences and similarities of sex through biological and social factors.

![Diagram of gender roles and biosocial processes]

Figure 2. Gender roles guide to sex differences and similarities through biosocial processes.


Eagly and Wood’s (2012) social role theory consists of a series of interconnected causes of sex differences and similarities, ranging from more proximal or immediate causes to more distal or ultimate causes. In Figure 2, the more distal causes are placed above the division of labor, an outcome of interaction between the sexes and local conditions, which then yields gender role beliefs. Through socialization processes, gender role beliefs facilitate the division of
labor. How one behaves within the confines of their gender role is through a trio of processes involving regulation of hormonal changes, other’s expectations, and self-standards.

Gender stereotypes and gender role beliefs are formed through observations of male and female behavior and inferences are made that the sexes possess corresponding dispositions. Men and women are believed to possess attributes that suit them for sex-typical roles and these attributes are evident in consensually shared gender stereotypes of women being communal, meaning friendly, unselfish, concerned with others, and emotionally expressive, while men are viewed as being agentic, meaning masterful, assertive, competitive, and dominant. The origins of such beliefs lie primarily in human’s evolved physical sex differences—men’s size and strength and women’s reproductive activities of gestating, and nursing children. Men’s strength and stature make them ideal hunters, able to plow to the land, and engage in warfare. Women’s abilities to gestate and lactate act as powerful constraints because of the time and energy needed to gestate, nurse, and care for infants. Because of these differences, certain tasks are more efficiently accomplished by one sex or the other, depending on a society’s circumstances and culture. Task specialization creates an alliance between women and men as they engage in a division of labor. Therefore, in foraging, horticulture and agricultural societies, women hardly hunt large animals, participate in warfare, or plowing, but tend to duties and activities related to childcare. Furthermore, such a dynamic produces a patriarchy, where the attributes of men and women interact with economic and technological developments to give men more of the decision-making roles and resources. Warfare and intensive agriculture and trade provide men with the opportunities to make decisions and access resources and trade, whereas tending children does not provide the same opportunity (Eagly & Wood, 2012).
In the homemaker-provider division of labor, people disproportionately observe women and girls engaging in domestic behaviors such as childcare, cooking, and sewing, and men and boys engaging in activities that are marketable in paid employment (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Parsons and Bales (1955) described the division of labor between husbands and wives as a specialization of men as being task-orientated and women being expressive or concerned with socioemotional behavior. Allied researchers observed in mix-groups, men more than women specialized in instrumental behaviors related to task accomplishment, and women, more than men, in socioemotional behaviors related to group maintenance and other social concerns (Eagly & Wood, 2012). The sexual division of labor, as Tallerico and Blount (2004) point out, is one of the most enduring and universal characteristics of work both in the home and in paid employment. There are two distinct divisions of work—men’s work and women’s work—and both are visible in three forms (Tallerico & Blount, 2004).

The first form Tallerico and Blount (2004) describe are the public and private spheres, with women’s work being inside the home or paid domestic work and men working outside of the home. During the 18th and 19th centuries, a married woman’s primary responsibility was to her husband, children, and management of the household (Blount, 1998). Any work done outside of the home was viewed as a negative contradiction to her social roles as wife and mother. Therefore, men were eligible for teaching positions and were the predominant gender in education instruction. Through the social role of motherhood, it was argued women should receive some form of formal education in order to enhance her motherly duty of teaching her children, especially her sons, the principles of liberty and government. The first half of the 19th century saw common schooling spread rapidly through the states and territories, increasing the demand for educated teachers for the classroom. To help fill vacant positions, it was argued
women who received a formal education should be eligible to teach. A pioneer for women in education, Catherin Beecher fought for women to be in the classroom stating it was natural for women to be teachers as they were better suited to work with children than men. Pointing out the social role of motherhood, Beecher argued childrearing was part of a woman’s domestic sphere, thus caring for and teaching children should be a woman’s duty. During the last half of the 19th century, women outnumbered men as teachers. A teaching salary provided women with a newfound financial independence, shifting women’s perceptions of their social roles (Blount, 1998). Based on her biological capability to become a mother, a woman faced two socially prescribed mandates to become a mother and be married (Doyle & Paludi, 1991), and prior to the option of teaching, a woman faced three choices: (1) marry a man for financially stability, even if they did not find the man appealing; (2) depend on family; or (3) live in poverty with no one to support them (Blount, 1998). Being self-sufficient, women teachers did not feel compelled to marry right away and chose to teach until a suitable marriage offer presented itself, however, many schools stipulated a female teacher had to vacate a position upon marriage, so some women teachers chose to remain single and teach (Blount, 1998).

The second form of sexual division of labor is when one gender is the predominant population of an industry or profession (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). As stated in the preceding section, men were the prominent figure in classroom during the first half of the 18th century, but as common schooling spread throughout the country; schools struggled to fill vacancies (Blount 1998). Horace Mann agreed with Beecher’s reasoning for women to be teachers and argued hiring women teachers would help resolve the teacher shortage. As a result of this economical change, teaching then became the chance for women to pursue work outside of the home without causing conflict with her expected social roles (Blount, 1998). Eagly and Wood (2012) note
influential change from the economy will alter the work and family roles of men and women. As more and more women began to fill schoolhouses, men at the time began to view teaching as becoming a “feminized” profession (Blount, 1998). Some wondered what it meant by having women hold the same position once held primarily for men, and as a result, men left the teaching profession in disgust or to search for better wages (Blount, 1998). By the end of the Civil War, women comprised the majority of the teaching population, and the numbers continued to increase well into the 20th century (Blount, 1998; Fowler, 2013).

A third form of division of labor is stratification by sex within the same work setting (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Currently in education, stratification by sex is seen with women making 76% of the teaching population and men 77% of superintendents (Finnan & McCord, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The stratification of the sexes in education goes back to when women began to infiltrate the profession. When women began to venture into education, it broadened their acceptable sphere of work; however some saw this action as setting a dangerous precedent for autonomy and independence from a man’s controlling influence (Blount, 1998). As more and more women teachers entered the profession during the mid-1800s, local and state officials saw the need to create a position where a man could oversee female teachers and make sure they did not get out of line. These new administrative positions for men strikingly resembled male social roles of family man, husband, and father. At the time, it was believed being an effective disciplinarian was not in a woman’s nature, so an argument was made that a male administrator was needed to handle the discipline of students, much like the social role of a father figure (Blount, 1998). As more and more communities sought out a male administrator to run and control schools, male teachers became uncomfortable with remaining in the classroom, thus, “Teaching had become a woman's profession— controlled by men” (Blount,
Therefore, with the socialized idea that only men could be leaders, women would not be considered for such masculine roles.

Gender and the Woman Superintendent

During the second wave of feminism and its focus on women and leadership, articles, conferences, and workshops stressed for women to act and talk like men by hiding emotions, acting tough, playing hardball and donning the male version of a suit and tie—a dark pantsuit and scarf (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). It was suggested to act in any other manner would be career suicide, thus many women took this advice; however, studies revealed women taking on male leadership styles did not last long in their positions. For those women who disregarded the advice of leading like a man found it difficult to develop and sustain a leadership style that did not fit into preexisting thoughts of leadership, but many found success if they gave a narrative, an explanation for why their leadership style was different from previous male superintendents. Women superintendents explained the patriarchal leadership style of command-and-control demeaned the professional role of teachers, reducing them to children. By informing her teachers they would be treated as the professionals they were, the woman superintendent expressed she expected more and was able to receive more from her staff. It has been recommended through research that the leadership styles of women administrators are effective ways to bring about much needed change in education (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Based on the research of others and their own, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) identified five themes women leaders value in education: (1) relational leadership, (2) leadership for social justice, (3) leadership for learning, (4) spiritual leadership, and (5) balanced leadership.
Relational Leadership

Historically, woman administrators have been ambivalent about their own power (Grogan and Shakeshaft, 2011). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) cite earlier studies by Fromisano, Carnevale, and Smith who noted women administrators were uneasy with being described as powerful or as having power and showed discomfort to questions related to stereotypical male notions of power. Blackmore (as cited in Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) also noted women being uncomfortable with the masculine ideas of power and leadership which emphasized control, individualism, and hierarchy. Eagly and Wood (2012) noted the social behaviors and perception of women as being communal, placing emphasis in interpersonal relationships. Based on these observations, researchers began to redefine a woman’s concept of power as something that is shared and something that is not held over someone (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). This concept of sharing power is closely tied to the importance women place on relationships; thus power is used to help others and strengthen relationships and when power is used to control others, it damages relationships (Brunner, 2000).

Leadership for Social Justice

Women are more likely than men to report they went into teaching and administration to change the status quo. In studies, women teachers, more so than men, identify educational careers as social justice work, and having entered the profession to change the lives of students, make the world a fairer place, and to change the learning environment so all children have a chance to succeed. Many women, regardless of race, are motivated by a strong desire to change
the school setting and improve opportunities for those who have been least well served by current educational policies and practices. In order to bring about equity in their schools, many women administrators state they work shoulder-to-shoulder with other teachers, leaders, community members and stakeholder groups (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

**Spiritual Leadership**

Spirituality as being a framework for leadership is a strong theme amongst women, particularly women of color (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). For some women leaders, Curry, Dillard, and Ngunjiri (as cited in Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) found spirituality parallels consciousness-raising, while for others, spirituality means a search for ongoing peace and self-understanding. Women administrators see a relationship between spirituality and the ways they model behavior and inspire others (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Furthermore, women see a connection between their spirituality and their success and ability to push forward during conflicts and difficult situations. Simmons and Johnson (2008) reported in their study of African-American women superintendents, that a sense of hope guided a woman’s approach to their jobs and increased their resiliency as they directed change within the social context how children grow and learn. Being a representation of change, along with the struggle it takes for African-American women to become a superintendent, represent a dual achievement built upon a strong sense to lead through with a strong spiritual source and a strong sense of self-identity (Simmons & Johnson, 2008). As one superintendent put it, “I can’t stop because too many have suffered for me to get here. This door would be shut forever…I have tried to make race and gender somebody else’s problem because race and gender is my reality” (Simmons & Johnson, 2008, p. 234).
Another aspect of a woman’s spiritual leadership is the use of what Simmons and Johnson (2008) call “passionate language”, in which women speak from their deep passion for justice with an articulated emotional imagery. The purpose of such language is to serve as an, “anti-oppressive gesture,” and to motivate change against the constraining white patriarchy (Simmons & Johnson, 2008, p. 239). When women discuss race or gender, they risk being viewed negatively, so some have reduced this risk by modeling a “different” professional language using emotional appeal as they skillfully articulated their vision in order to gain supports for their hopes (Simmons & Johnson, 2008).

**Leadership for Learning**

“Expertise in instruction and pedagogy appears to have served women well since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002” (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, p. 20). A participant of Brunner & Grogan’s (2007) study stated, “The increased focus on academics and accountability should make the job more attractive to more women who tend to have more focus on curriculum, teaching, and learning” (p. 88). Numerous studies have highlighted instruction as being the important change women introduce in their organizations (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Instructional leadership or learning-centered leadership has been associated with women’s leadership styles, because they have spent more time in the classroom than men before taking leadership positions (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Many women gain their first leadership experiences from serving as curriculum coaches or in curriculum and learning positions, positions that draw upon their knowledge and years of teaching (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). “They acknowledge that the school must be managed well, but their hearts
are moved by watching students grow and learn” (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, p. 19). A study by Brunner and Grogan (2007) further supports the notion that women are likely to embrace leadership for learning, thus more attention is being paid to its value. Women who served as district leaders for curriculum and instruction prior to the superintendency were twice as likely to as men to participate in professional development conducted by the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Balanced Leadership

A common theme in literature is women think they have to do it all and be it all (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). After spending their day with the all-time consuming duties of being a superintendent, women, unlike many men, go home to what is referenced as a second shift of unpaid domestic work of taking care of the family and home (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Tingey et al., 1996). Studies have been conducted to examine how women leaders in education balance the many facets of their lives and reveal the struggles of women as they try to strike a balance (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Women spend considerably more time than men tending to domestic tasks of housework and childrearing, even if both spouses work outside of the home (Eagly & Carli, 2007). As voiced by a respondent in Brunner’s (2000) study, “I am not married to someone who sees his role as taking over the household piece or the childcare piece just because I have a job as a superintendent” (p. 125). The same sentiment is echoed in Gupton’s and Slick’s (as cited by Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) study where a respondent stated, “My husband and I have been married for 20 years and have one 13-year-old son. I have stayed up late to do chores and study or gotten up early to avoid letting my career requirements encroach
on family time” (p. 21). Women leaders in the 21st century are free to choose to concentrate on work in the same manner as men do, but many women choose to strive for a balance between work and family lives (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). A notion of balanced leadership is women are better able to perform their leadership duties if they are able to manage their home duties, thus being able to channel their energies effectively in both realms (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

During its conception, the role of a superintendent was to manage teachers with a command-and-control style of leadership and be the disciplinarian for students (Blount, 1998; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). This type of leadership paralleled men’s social roles of family man, husband, and father (Blount, 1998). The role of today’s superintendent is to create a culture for success with student achievement being the top priority (Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). NCLB created a paradigm shift forcing superintendents to transform schools from meeting the needs of some students to a new responsibility of ensuring the success of all students (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). In order to change an organization’s culture from maintaining the status quo to a culture where everyone accepts the responsibility for all students’ success, today’s superintendents will need to change their roles and responsibilities, as well as their relationships with school boards, teachers, school leaders, parents, members of the community, and local and state government officials. Superintendents will need to engage themselves and members of their organization in continuous conversations about their beliefs and actions. When the beliefs of the superintendent and organization align, the superintendent will have a significant impact on the organization (Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018).

The characteristics of today’s superintendent mirror the leadership styles and characteristics of female superintendents—communal, value relationships, leadership for learning, beliefs and spiritual leadership, and focus on social justice (Eagly & Wood, 2012;
Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). In the AASA’s 2010 study of American school superintendents (Kowalski et al., 2011), superintendents were asked what they believed was the primary reason for being employed by the school board. The number one reason, garnishing 33.5% of the responses, was personal characteristics, followed by 24.9% believing they were hired for their potential to be a change agent and 20% stating it was their ability to be an instructional leader. Interestingly, more men than women believe they were hired for personal characteristics, while more women than men were hired for their potential to be change agents and the ability to be an instructional leader—both being leadership characteristics for today’s superintendent (Kowalski et al., 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). Women have the leadership style and characteristics that parallel the leadership style and characteristics for today’s superintendent; however they are less likely to be hired as the superintendent (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Kowalski et al., 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Women have proven to be effective leaders and outnumber men in the pool of candidates, but the gender gap remains due in part to barriers related to their gender (Glass & Björk, 2003; Northouse, 2012).

Current Barriers to the Superintendency and How Women Have Overcome Them

The media has reported a crisis in the American superintendency of an inadequate pool of qualified candidates, but Glass and Björk (2003) state this is a myth. However, Glass and Björk (2003) agree there is a crisis, but the real problem is gender inequalities when it comes to access to the superintendency. While examining the gender gap in the superintendency, researchers have uncovered barriers women, more so than men, face through the “labyrinth” towards the
superintendence. The six barriers researchers have consistently identified are: (1) career planning; (2) gender bias; (3) recruitment and selection process; (4) mentors and networking; (5) family responsibilities and support; and (6) mobility (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Glass, 2000; McGee, 2010; Robinson et al., 2017; Tallerico & Blount, 2004).

**Career Planning**

Lack of career planning and career paths affects women more negatively than men (Glass, 2000; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). Glass (2000) has noted several components of career planning that restrict women’s access to the superintendency: (1) women are not in career positions that normally lead to advancement; (2) women are not preparing for the superintendency; (3) women are not as experienced nor as interested in fiscal management as men; (4) women enter the field of education for different reasons; and (5) women enter administrative positions at an older age.

**Women Are Not in Career Positions That Normally Lead to Advancement**

The majority of male superintendents come directly from high school principal positions, and females as high school principals are a minority (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; McGee, 2010). High school principals are more often selected than elementary principals for a superintendent position (Sharp et al., 2004). Many female elementary teachers become elementary principals, thus lack the career path needed to the superintendent’s seat (Connell et
al., 2015). While men can go from high school principal to the superintendent’s seat, women traditionally begin their path as assistant principal, then principal, then central office, and then superintendent (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). Another career path to the superintendent’s seat is being a head coach. Coaching is another way to demonstrate leadership skills, but most coaching opportunities are available at the high school level or junior high level. For elementary teachers, there are very few coaching positions, thus limiting their opportunities to demonstrate leadership capacity outside of an administrative position (Glass, 2000).

**Women Are Not Preparing for the Superintendency**

Far more men than women planned to go into school administration after graduation. In studies by Young and McLeod (2001) and Connell et al. (2015), not a single participant foresaw themselves being a superintendent during their undergraduate or graduate program. Glass (2000) noted women were achieving their doctoral degrees at comparable rates as men, but only ten percent of women in doctoral programs opted to earn their superintendency credential. Connell et al. (2015) noted participants did not readily recognize the superintendency as a career option, even as they moved up the ranks.

McGee (2010) noted a theme in her research—women pursued a superintendent position only when they felt prepared and confident to take on the position. Women often delayed their entry to administration in order to be super-prepared before they considered applying for a position. As a result, women administrators had a greater amount of professional preparation than males. Respondents stated they were encouraged to apply for administrative positions, however, turned them down because they felt they needed more time in their current position.
One respondent of McGee’s (2010) study stated she waited to get enough experience before applying, but in hindsight, realized she could have done her current job or applied for other administrative jobs much earlier in her career.

**Women Are Not as Experienced nor as Interested in Fiscal Management as Men**

Another steppingstone to the superintendent’s seat is a position in central office. A criterion school boards look for is experience in finance or human resource positions (Sharp et al., 2004). Most females hold a position in curriculum and not the male-dominated roles of finance or human resources (Connell et al., 2015). Glass (2000) noted the number of female chief school business officers has increased significantly, but a good portion were not former teachers or administrators and consequently ineligible for the superintendency in all of two states.

**Women Enter the Field of Education for Different Reasons**

Glass (2000) noted teaching and nursing were traditionally the most accessible careers for women and the few options available for aspiring female leaders. Today, women have more options for career paths, such as engineering, accounting, medicine and law. Women who wish to become managers or leaders have more lucrative options than teaching, so those entering education may want to be teachers and have no desire to become administrators.
Women Enter Administrative Positions at an Older Age

Women spend more years in the classroom than men before embarking on the path toward the superintendency (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Men begin their administrative careers before the age of thirty, whereas women begin after the age of thirty (Sharp et al., 2004). As stated before, women delay their administrative careers until they feel confident and have all the necessary credentials. Another reason for the delay is women tend to pursue administrative careers once their children are mature (McGee, 2010). Delaying their administrative careers puts females at a disadvantage. Men typically begin their administrative careers ten years prior to women, gaining more leadership experience and an edge in the selection process (Connell et al., 2015; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Tallerico, 2000). On average, men enter the superintendency in their early to mid-forties, while women enter the superintendency around age fifty (Sharp et al., 2004; Kowalski et al., 2011). Glass (2000) noted potential female candidates who enter the central office in their early fifties may not want to pursue a move into a new career with retirement in four to five years.

For those women who overcome this barrier by planning their career path to the superintendency and earn the credentials needed to be a superintendent, they will more than likely have to overcome the barrier of their gender and other’s perceptions of what a leader should look like.
Gender Bias

Perceived gender stereotypes and gender roles create a disadvantage for women aspiring to become superintendent (Bernal et al., 2017). An extension of Eagly’s social role theory, role congruity theory exposes the incongruity many people perceive between the characteristics of women and the requirements of leadership roles. Because of this perceived incongruity, women leaders encounter two forms of prejudice: (1) they are perceived as less favorable than men for leadership roles; and (2) when the attributes of a male leader are demonstrated by a female, females are looked upon less favorably. Two consequences arise from such prejudice: (1) attitudes towards female leaders are less positive than towards male leaders; and (2) it is more difficult for women to become leaders and obtain top leadership positions in their fields, thus creating barriers for aspiring female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

The 2010 AASA study of superintendents acknowledged there may be gender barriers restricting women’s access to the superintendency. In its survey of 1,788 superintendents, 1,356 male respondents and 432 female respondents, the AASA examined two components of gender bias: (1) gender and encountered discrimination; and (2) gender and perceived factors that limited access to the superintendency for women. When asked if they had encountered gender discrimination, 13.2% of males responded yes, and 45.4% of females responded yes. The study posed seven factors restricting access for women to the superintendent’s seat: (1) absence of mentors who are district or school administrators; (2) absence of mentors who are professors of school administration; (3) family concerns, restrictions, and obligations; (4) gender discrimination; (5) limited number of female superintendents as role models; (6) there were no factors perceived as being restrictive; and (7) other reasons not mentioned limited access to the
superintendency. The number one barrier women perceived as limiting their access to the superintendency was gender discrimination with 47.7% of the female respondents agreeing with this statement. Of the male responses, the number one statement they agreed with the most had 58.7%, believing there were no factors perceived as being restrictive for women. Of the remaining five factors, women more than men believed each factor applied as a reason females have restricted access to the role of a superintendent (Kowalski et al. 2011).

Historically and currently, leadership positions have been held by white males who have been trained throughout their life to fulfill the social role of leader, and the tendency to display characteristics of being controlling, confident, and aggressive (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Ellerson et al., 2015; Osler & Webb, 2014). One respondent from McGee’s interviews (2010) stated she was told the superintendency was a man’s job and was informed she was the number one pick, but ultimately passed over because of her gender. In leadership positions, the social roles of women are viewed negatively as being a nurturer who will leave work to care for sick children, or arrive late in order to take care of household emergencies or other family affairs (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Eagly & Wood, 2012). Further, the caring individual, usually a positive stereotype, comes with negative connotations of not being able to control (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). In a survey by Hoff and Mitchell (as cited in Connell et al., 2015), 404 superintendents were asked about their perceptions of gender bias and leadership style. Both genders, 57% males and 43% females, recognized gender bias existed and negatively impacted women. To compensate for this bias, females reported they changed their leadership traits to mimic those of a masculine leader, such as decisiveness, appearing tougher, talking less, and putting relational distance between themselves and the staff. However, being aggressive or appearing tough is viewed as a negative trait for women (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Osler & Webb, 2014). If a woman tries to mimic a
man’s leadership style, her assertiveness is viewed as harsh and derogatory names are used to describe her leadership style (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Grogan, 2010). On the opposite end of the spectrum, a woman is viewed as a weak leader if she demonstrates too many soft characteristics (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Researchers have suggested women need to be aware of viewpoints resulting from role incongruity, as it can serve as a barrier to obtaining top leadership positions, however, women are finding ways to overcome this obstacle (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eagly & Karau, 2002). Connell et al. (2015) reported gender bias did influence their respondents’ leadership style, but none of them took on masculine leadership traits. Instead, they capitalized on perceived feminine traits. One respondent reported being assertive in a softer way, while another was less aggressive on certain projects in order to avoid negative female leadership perception. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) found women superintendents did not have much success trying to fit the leadership styles of their male predecessors, however, many found success by providing a narrative, an explanation for why their leadership style was different from previous male superintendents.

Another way women are overcoming gender bias is in part due to NCLB and ESSA, with their focus on instruction and learning (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). This paradigm shift has forced superintendents today to update their leadership style to include instructional leadership (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). The AASA study of American superintendents (Kowalski et al., 2011) showed school boards continue to hire superintendents to be managers more so than instructional leaders. However, when boards hire women to be instructional leaders rather than managers, the female traits of being supportive, encouraging, open communicators, and solicitors of input, are deemed positive, because they help create a
more positive work environment (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

Legislation and increased opportunities are in place to prevent and/or correct gender bias in the workplace, and Sharp et al. (2004) noted legislative response to gender equality has had a bigger impact on women’s aspirations to leadership positions than employment practices in school systems. The study by Connell et al. (2015) of active and retired superintendents of a single southern state reported respondents were equally divided over the effectiveness of anti-discrimination legislation and increased opportunities for females seeking to be superintendents.

Another area where gender bias can limit women’s access to the superintendency is within the recruitment and selection process. The beliefs of school board members and professional search firms act as gatekeepers to the superintendent’s seat, and their values and beliefs influence “who” moves on in the selection process (Bernal et al., 2017).

**Recruitment and Selection Process**

Researchers identified the superintendent search and selection process as a potential barrier to females’ access to the superintendency (Connell et al., 2015; Glass, 2000; Sharp et al., 2004). School boards are responsible for recruiting and selecting superintendents. Some school boards contract a professional search firm to recruit and select a slate of candidates for the board to choose from for their next superintendent. In either case, school boards and professional search firms act as gatekeepers to the position, controlling who proceeds at each level of the hiring process (Bernal et al., 2017). At each level of the hiring process, the values and cultures of gatekeepers act as barriers to women striving for the superintendent’s seat (Connell et al., 2015).
If gatekeepers’ beliefs about leadership mirror the ideas of social role theory, (i.e., men as leaders and women as communal nurturers), then men are viewed as the ideal candidate and women are viewed as incapable of performing the superintendent’s role (Bernal et al., 2017; Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Another potential barrier for women during the recruitment and selection process is the gender of the school board. The prominent gender of a school board impacts hiring practices; male majority school boards tend to hire males for the superintendency, and female majority boards tending to hire female superintendents (Sharp et al., 2004).

A way for women to overcome this barrier is to seek assistance with securing their first superintendent position (Connell et al., 2015). All of the participants in a study by Connell et al. (2015) stated a male, rather than a female, assisted them with obtaining their first superintendent position, and that an insider from the searching district referred their name for the position. Therefore, a mentor can help aspiring superintendents with networking and making connections that will help them through the “labyrinth” to the superintendency.

**Mentors and Networking**

Networking often refers to the “good old boys” network, where older, male professionals groom younger versions of themselves for leadership positions (Gardiner et al., 2000). Members of the “good old boys” network act as gatekeepers, determining who is allowed within their network and who is not allowed (Bernal et al., 2017). With the presence of the “good old boys” network acting as gatekeepers to the superintendency, a woman’s access to the role of superintendent is restricted. In a survey by Hoff and Mitchell (as cited in Connell et al., 2015),
404 superintendents were asked about their perceptions of gender bias. Both genders (57% males and 43% females) recognized gender biased existed and negatively impacted women. The bias itself acknowledged the existence of the “good old boys” network and male dominated image of leadership. McGee (2010) surveyed administrators in Florida and women perceived the “good old boys” network was the number one barrier they encountered within the past ten years of their climb to an administrative position, and it was ranked as number two within their current position. In a similar study of Illinois, Indiana, and Texas superintendents, 67.5% perceived the exclusion from the “good old boys” network to be a barrier to the superintendency (Sharp et al., 2004).

Mentoring provides an avenue for networking and guidance through the political minefield (McGee, 2010). The majority of superintendents are male, mentoring future superintendents of their own gender, creating the challenge for women to establish a mentoring relationship (Gardiner et al., 2000). In years past, research showed there was a lack of mentoring opportunities for women, but recently the number of mentors for aspiring female superintendents has increased (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Marina & Forteneau, 2012). Having a mentor is regarded as the most influential factor for women overcoming the barriers to the superintendency and creating job success as a newly hired superintendent (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). The availability of mentors and coaches relates closely to the ability of females to network (Connell, et al., 2015). In studies, women have overwhelmingly accredited their mentor’s guidance and assistance from professional networks to their success as a superintendent (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; McGee, 2010; Sharp et al., 2004). For those who did not have a mentor, they believed the mentoring process would have been beneficial as they climbed the ranks (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014).
The gender of the mentor is important to those women with administration aspirations (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). Some women seek out a female mentor from the start or after being assigned a male mentor. The reasons women cite for wanting a female mentor are: (1) the female perspective of being a superintendent in a man’s world; (2) how they navigated the barriers of the political minefield; (3) work/family life balance; (4) strategies and mistakes to avoid; and (5) time management skills (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; McGee, 2010).

Unfortunately, there are far too few women in higher-level positions in relation to those aspiring for similar positions. Also, female superintendents may be struggling with the very same issues protégés seek advice for and may not have ability or time to mentor a protégé (McGee, 2010).

Within the barrier of networking lies two more obstacles—time and knowledge. In a study by Connell et al. (2015), all the respondents stated they lacked the knowledge and skills to navigate the political culture. McGee (2010) noted women lacked time for networking as they were busy completing degrees and raising families, the latter of which will be discussed in the next section.

Family Responsibility and Support

As stated earlier, women begin their administrative careers later than men, and one of the reasons is women are choosing to raise their children first before applying for an administrative position (McGee, 2010). In her study, McGee (2010) looked at the respondents’ administrative position and the number and age of children living at home and found the positions with the largest number of no school-aged children in the home were district administrators (60%) and high school principals (57%). Also, district administrators and high school principals were the
only administrators who did not have a child under five living in the home. Coincidentally, as stated earlier, men, far more than women, hold district administrative positions and high school principalships (Connell, et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; McGee, 2010). Assistant principals and elementary principals, positions where a female is the prominent figure, more than any other administrator had children living at home (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; McGee, 2010). In a similar study by Connell et al. (2015), a large portion of superintendents had no school aged children in the home or had teenagers. Along the same line, Sharp et al. (2004) found 65.5% of the superintendents in their study had no children at home. McGee (2010) noted the more responsibility a position has; the less likely you are to find children at home. According to McGee (2010), this could mean two things: (1) the women never had children; or (2) the women had grown children no longer living at home.

Women tend to carry the brunt of household duties and child rearing, thus creating a potential barrier to the superintendency (Clark & Hill, 2010). Time study diaries confirm an increase of childrearing involvement from fathers, with Generation Y being the most involved, but despite these social changes, married women still perform 2.1 hours of childcare for every hour of childcare performed by a man. As for household duties, for every hour of housework performed by a man, a woman performs 1.7 hours (Eagly & Carli, 2007). In a study by McGee (2010), trying to create a balanced leadership style, where there is a balance between career and household duties with childrearing, was the number one concern female administrators reported. One respondent stated you sacrifice your family in so many ways when pursuing an administrative position, especially if you are a high school principal. Another stated it is difficult to put in the hours necessary for an administrative position when you have small children at home. A large portion of the respondents stated they completed their credentials and consciously
chose to stay in the classroom while their children were young. When the women felt prepared for an administrative position and confident they could balance work and family, they had no difficulty pursuing an administrative position.

Some women have overcome the obstacle of childrearing through their support systems. The majority of the women in McGee’s (2010) study stated they had supportive immediate family and extended family. The percentage of respondents stating they lacked family support was 3%, which was down from 6% ten years prior to her study. McGee interpreted this decline to mean women were learning to ask family for help with the responsibility of raising children. As for the obstacle of household duties, Eagly and Carli (2007) noted women who earn more than half of the family income or work longer hours for more income, reduce their personal contribution to housework by hiring someone else to do these duties.

**Mobility**

Women, more so than men, are reluctant to relocate for a superintendent position, thus limiting their opportunities for leadership positions (McGee, 2010; Sharp et al., 2004). The reasons women cite for not relocating are: (1) they do not want to leave the comfort zone of their current position; or (2) a new prospective position may be considered too far from the family’s home (McGee, 2010). A participant in McGee’s study purposely chose future districts of employment by location and did not apply to districts that were too far from her children’s schools. Another participant of the same study was asked to consider a transfer to a much larger middle school. The participant declined the transfer citing the upcoming retirement of key stakeholders and leadership team members and felt leaving during such changes would not be in
the best interest of her school. Plus, as the respondent put it, she loved her faculty and staff and thought of themselves as one big, happy family.

Recognition of the Barriers to Overcome Obstacles in the Labyrinth

When women recognize the barriers to the superintendency, and that some of the barriers may be self-imposed, they can quickly navigate their way through the labyrinth to the superintendency (Eagly & Carli, 2007; McGee, 2010). Additionally, once women feel prepared for an administrative position and confident they can balance work and family, they have no difficulty pursuing an administrative position (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; McGee, 2010). Recognizing the barriers, demands of the job, and sacrifices, women are able to choose, face, accept, and/or overcome the barriers within their own time frame. McGee (2010) noted respondents in her study recognized they had a choice to pursue a leadership position—it just depended on how much and how fast they wanted to achieve an administrative position.

How women overcome the barriers as they aspire to leadership positions is not fully understood, as the barriers are ever-changing and numerous (Eagly & Carli, 2007). By examining the lived experiences of women superintendents, the intent of this study was to uncover the barriers women face as they ascend to the superintendency and what experiences they deemed to be significant along their trajectories. It was also the intent of this study to help fill the gaps in the literature and supplement existing studies of women in school leadership positions, which has been vastly underrepresented in the field of administration research, and to help aspiring women superintendents recognize the potential barriers that may exist along their career paths (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter includes an overview of the problem and purpose of the study, restatement of the research questions, and followed by a discussion of the research design and methodology of the study. Also included in this chapter is information about population, data collection and data analysis.

Problem and Purpose Overview

In light of NCLB mandates, the role of the superintendent has changed from a command-and-control leadership style to creating a communal culture of success with student achievement being the top priority (Blount, 1998; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). The problems this study intended to uncover and explore are the barriers women experience and how they negotiate their path to the superintendency considering that the role of the superintendent has changed over time to reflect characteristics associated with women leadership. Historically and currently, women have been vastly underrepresented in the superintendency in Illinois, as well as throughout the country, even though the role of today’s superintendents mirrors the characteristics and leadership styles of women superintendents (Finnan & McCord, 2017;
Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Heffernan & Wasonga, 2017; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). Women not only bring the distinct needs for the superintendency, but also a unique perspective that should be incorporated in all levels of leadership (Tully, 1989).

The purpose of this study was to gain the essence of lived experiences of female superintendents in Illinois as they navigated their way through the “labyrinth” toward the superintendency, as well as within the role itself. Through one-on-one interviews via Zoom, a cloud-based, video conferencing software program, the researcher discussed with each study participant their life history, present lived experiences, and reflection on the meaning of their experiences. The researcher took note of common themes amongst the participants, highlighting the barriers study participants recognized as limiting their access to the superintendency, how they overcame such barriers, and the experiences they deemed to be significant along their trajectories.

Research Questions

The following questions helped guide the case study.

What are the participants’ experiences regarding their access to the superintendency?

What factors do participants perceive as being critical in their career trajectory?

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3 Due to Illinois mandates related to the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person interviews were not permissible
Research Design

The goal of this study was to obtain a detailed account about the lived experiences of female superintendents from Illinois and their perspectives as they made their way to the superintendency, therefore a qualitative, case study approach was used for this study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). A case study approach is appropriate when the investigator wishes to study a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting. The researcher in a case study is the key data instrument (Creswell, 2007). For this study, the researcher collected data through in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews that followed Irving Seidman’s (2006) three interview method.

Population and Sample

A case study is bound within certain parameters, and certain people can be a defining parameter (Creswell, 2007). Criterion sampling was utilized to ensure all participants met the case study parameters, female superintendents, providing quality assurance (Creswell, 2007). For this study, participants had to: (1) be female, (2) be currently serving or previously served as superintendent of a public-school district in Illinois, (3) have served as a superintendent for a minimum of five years, and (4) be willing to freely discuss their life history, personal experiences of becoming a superintendent, and daily routines. The researcher emailed all female superintendents in Illinois an invitation to participate in this study. Email addresses for the study participants were obtained from the Illinois State Board of Education website. The recruitment letter (see Appendix A) introduced the purpose to study, time commitments from the study
participants, as well as the researcher’s contact information. Due to time commitments and scheduling conflicts, five study participants who met the criterion sampling were selected for the case study.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

The key instrument for case study data collection is the researcher (Creswell, 2007). Primarily, data collection for this study was conducted through three in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured, ninety-minute interviews that followed Seidman’s (2006) three interview method. The goal of data collection for a case study utilizing Seidman’s (2006) interview method was for each research participant to reconstruct her experiences within the topic of study. The purpose of the first interview was for the participants to focus on their life history within the context of the study (Seidman, 2006). During the first interview, the study participants were asked to reconstruct their pre-superintendency life experiences in their families, in school, with friends, and at work that lead them to leadership roles (see Appendix B). The purpose of the second interview was for participants to provide concrete details of their present lived experience within the topic of study (Seidman, 2006). For the second interview, participants were asked to recount each waking moment of a typical workday, as well as a non-workday (see Appendix C). The third interview required participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience (Seidman, 2006). During the third interview, the participants looked at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their current superintendent position (see Appendix D). Following each session, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for coding and data analysis.
NVivo transcription and data analysis software were used to transcribe the interviews and assist with coding.

The questioning route for each interview followed Krueger and Casey’s (2015) protocol for qualitative study interviews. Each interview began with an opening question to get the participant talking and feeling comfortable. The opening questions were simple in nature, soliciting a fact-based response. Following the opening question was an introductory question that had the participant thinking and focusing on the topic of the interview. Next, a transition question was asked, providing a link between the introductory question and key questions. After the transition question, three to five key questions were asked. The key questions were the main area of interest and the majority of the time of each interview was devoted to the discussion of these questions. To conclude each interview session, three ending questions were asked. During the first ending question, the researcher summarized the major topics covered and asked the participants their opinion of how well the summary captured what was said during the interview. The second ending question is called an, “all things considered” (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 2) question, and asked the participant to pinpoint the most important issue discussed during the interview. The third and final ending question asked the participant if there was anything that should have been discussed during the interview but was not (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Before interviewing individuals, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) assessed the study for risk and potential harmful impact on participants (Creswell, 2007). A consent letter (see Appendix E) was sent to each participant, and once the letter was electronically signed and emailed to the researcher, the researcher was then able to record the interviews on a laptop using Zoom. Even though the interviews were electronically recorded, handwritten notes were used to record nonverbal communication and observations (Creswell, 2007). As suggested by Johnson
and Christensen (2014) for qualitative studies, an agenda was set for each interview with specific topics to explore with each research participant. The topics and questions were provided to the participants prior to the interviews, with the understanding that the interviewer may change the wording and order of questions during the interview, depending on the flow and dialogue of the interview (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Even though the wording and order of the questions may have changed, the same general topics and questions were covered with all research participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Seidman (2006) suggests interviewers should talk less and listen more during an interview, but there were times when prompting or clarification were warranted in order to gain greater details of the respondent’s experience.

Reliability

Because the researcher is the key instrument for case study data collection, reliability was established by having the researcher pilot the interview questions and refine them based on feedback (Creswell, 2007; Klenke, 2016). Mock interviews were conducted with females in leadership positions, such as principals, assistant principals, or assistant superintendents. The purpose of the mock interviews was for the researcher to practice the skills of interviewing, notetaking, and reflection, as well as to gauge the timing and pacing of each interview (Klenke, 2016).
Validity

The participants’ perspectives of a case study are the heart of qualitative data and the voices of the participants must be authentically represented (Klenke, 2016). Seidman (2006, p. 24) believes his three-part structure helps achieve authenticity.

The three-part interview structure incorporates features to enhance the accomplishment of validity. It places participants’ comments in context. It encourages interview participants over the course of one to three weeks to account for idiosyncratic days and to check for internal consistency of what they say. If the interview structure works to allow [participants] to make sense of themselves, as well as to the interviewer, then it has gone a long way toward validity. (Seidman, 2006, p. 24)

For this study, validity was established through member checking; ensuring the researcher authentically recorded the experiences of the participants within their intentions (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). After the participants provided their feedback, any necessary additions, deletions, or corrections were made to the transcripts (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Analysis

Clark Moustakas (1994) modified the Van Kaam method of analysis of data and it is Moustakas’ method that assisted with data analysis for this study. The first action the researcher needed to take was horizontalization. Horizontalization was achieved by going through the transcripts of each interview and listing every statement or phrase having relevance to the case being studied—the barriers that obstruct a woman’s path to the superintendency, and how the participants have overcome these obstacles. The researcher then determined the invariant constituents through reduction and elimination by omitting overlapping, repetitive, and vague
expressions and asking two questions: (1) did the statement contain a moment that was sufficient and necessary for understanding the barriers that obstruct a women’s paths to the superintendency and how women overcome them; and (2) was it possible to abstract and label the statement? Answering yes to both questions placed the significant statement on the horizon of the experience under study. Next, the researcher clustered related invariant constituents into thematic labels. After validating the invariant constituents and themes, an individual textual description was constructed for each study participant and provided details of “what” the participants experienced. Based on the individual textual descriptions, an individual structural description was constructed for each research participant and provided details of “how” the participants experienced it. After creating individual textual and structural descriptions, the two constructs were intertwined to create an individual textural-structural description for each research participant that incorporated the invariant constituents and themes, thus creating the meanings and essences of the experience. During the final stage of data analysis, the researcher examined each individual textural-structural description and developed a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the participants as one whole group (Moustakas, 1994).

The composite description of the meanings and essences of study participants as whole will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4: Results.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In the state of Illinois, there are 868 school districts (Heffernan & Wasonga, 2017). For this study, invitations to participate were emailed to 144 female superintendents, and within one week, 15 female superintendents responded with an interest to be a part of the study. After talking with each potential study participant, explaining the methodology, and answering their questions, the number of participants was reduced. During the period of the study, many school districts were managing issues related to COVID-19. As such, some potential study participants offered to participate later, if needed. From the remaining pool of participants, the researcher looked at the availability, longevity in the job, and district size of each volunteer and selected five participants, Maya, Ruth, Sonia, Alice, and Gail. It was assumed that the potential participants would be contacted if needed later.

Using the framework of social role theory, the research questions guiding the interviews were, “What are the participants’ experiences regarding their access to the superintendency?” and, “What factors do participants perceive as being critical in their career trajectory?” The findings and results from the interviews of the five research participants are presented in this chapter, as well as a description and clarification of the data collected during the study.

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4 Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to conceal their identity.
Demographics

Personal Demographics and Career Trajectory

According to the 2020 AASA decennial study of American superintendents (Tienken, 2021), 82% of the female respondents were married, and 8.3% were divorced. In the 2015 mid-decade survey conducted by the AASA (Robinson et al., 2017), 37.3% were childless. On average, women spend 10.8 years in the classroom before accepting a leadership role (Ellerson et al., 2015). Copeland and Calhoun (2014) noted the traditional trajectory for women leaders begins with an assistant principalship, and before becoming superintendents, they are principals, and then have leadership roles in the central office, and then superintendent. However, in this study, review of the professional demographic data for each participant indicates different trajectories. For example, the first leadership positions Maya, Alice, and Ruth held were at the district level. Ruth and Alice were never principals, and Gail, Maya, and Alice took a step back on their trajectories to become building level leaders before ascending to their current superintendencies. Table 1 presents the personal and professional demographic data for each participant.
Table 1. continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Participants</th>
<th>Maya</th>
<th>Ruth</th>
<th>Sonia</th>
<th>Alice</th>
<th>Gail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Remarried</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Offspring</td>
<td>1 Child</td>
<td>1 Child</td>
<td>2 Children</td>
<td>2 Children</td>
<td>2 Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of School Aged Children (K-12) at Home During Superintendency</td>
<td>1 Child</td>
<td>1 Child</td>
<td>2 Children</td>
<td>2 Children</td>
<td>2 Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position(s) Prior to First Leadership Position, District# on Trajectory (Years in Each Position)</td>
<td>Training coordinator outside the field of education (7 years)</td>
<td>School Psychologist, first district (4 years)</td>
<td>Third grade and fifth grade teacher, first and second district (5 years)</td>
<td>Middle school science teacher, first district (5 years)</td>
<td>Computers and business education high school teacher, first district (4 years)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued on following page)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Positions Prior to Superintendency, District# on Trajectory (Years in Each Position)</th>
<th>District Curriculum Director, second district (4 years)</th>
<th>Assistant Director for Special Education, first district (5 years)</th>
<th>Administrative Intern, second district (3 years)</th>
<th>Teacher on Assignment, first district (2 years)</th>
<th>Assistant Principal, first district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personnel Director, second district (2 years)</td>
<td>Director for Special Education, first district (4 years)</td>
<td>Elementary Assistant Principal, second district (3 years)</td>
<td>Assistant Principal, second district (1 year)</td>
<td>Director of Research, first district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dean, third district (1 year)</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent for Student Services and Special Development, first district (4 years)</td>
<td>Principal, third district, two schools (10 years)</td>
<td>Learning Coordinator, second district (1 year)</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent, first district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant Principal, third district (1 year)</td>
<td>Principal, third district (7 years)</td>
<td>Central Office Internship, third district (1 year)</td>
<td>Executive Director of Curriculum (2 years)</td>
<td>Deputy Superintendent, first district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Principal, third district (7 years)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Director of Teaching and Learning, fourth district (2 years)</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, third district (2 years)</td>
<td>(7 years total for all positions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Human Resource third district (1 year)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Number of Superintendencies, District# on Trajectory | 1, fourth district | 1, first district | 1, second district, current district | 1, third district | 2, first and second districts |

(continued on following page)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years as Superintendent at Time of Study</th>
<th>5 years</th>
<th>7 years</th>
<th>7 years</th>
<th>7 years</th>
<th>3 years for first district</th>
<th>5 years for second district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest Degree Earned</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Education Specialist Degree</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Entryway to the Superintendency and District Demographics

Research shows that women tend to be hired for the superintendency from within the currently employing district. The same applied to Ruth’s, Alice’s, and both of Gail’s superintendencies in this study. According to the AASA, women superintendents are more likely to be employed in smaller districts of 3,000 students or less (Robinson et al., 2017). Alice, Maya and Gail currently are employed by districts that have less than 3,000 students, however, Ruth’s and Sonia’s districts, and Gail’s previous district have well over 3,000 students.

Table 2 highlights each candidate’s demographic data related to their entryways to the superintendency and district demographics of their superintendencies. District demographic data was obtained from the Illinois State Report Card (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020). Student population numbers are expressed in a range to secure the study participants’ anonymity.

The data presented in the tables only provide a glimpse into the lives and career paths of the study participants. Details about the study participants’ access to the superintendency, as well as their trajectories, are explored in the remainder of this chapter, and a summary of the salient results concludes the chapter.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Maya</th>
<th>Ruth</th>
<th>Sonia</th>
<th>Alice</th>
<th>Gail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entryway to the Superintendency</td>
<td>Applied for position outside of district</td>
<td>Applied for position within district</td>
<td>Applied for position for former employing district</td>
<td>Promoted from within district</td>
<td>Promoted from within district for both superintendencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Type</td>
<td>Medium Elementary District</td>
<td>Large Elementary District</td>
<td>Large Unit District</td>
<td>Large Elementary District</td>
<td>District 1: Large Unit District District 2: Medium Unit District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Buildings in the District</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>District 1: 19 District 2: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Population</td>
<td>450-500</td>
<td>7,000-7,500</td>
<td>13,000-14,000</td>
<td>1,500-2,000</td>
<td>District 1: 8,500-9,000 District 2: 950-1,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 1: What are the Participants' Experiences Regarding Their Access to the Superintendency?

The Moustakas (1994) method of data analysis was used to analyze the data. From the analysis of each individual textural-structural description, a composite description was generated, representing the study participants’ descriptions of their experiences as one whole group. In this section, data were analyzed to discover participants’ experiences regarding their access to the superintendency. Two broad themes emerged from the textural-structural descriptions: mobilization of bias and shaping of consciousness. Each theme, along with their sub-themes, is presented below.

Mobilization of Bias

Frances Fowler (2013) describes mobilization of bias as implicit power, that when exercised by others or in the community, limits the participation of certain groups of people or individuals. The uniqueness and power of mobilization of bias is that few or none of the participants against which this power is mobilized and agents realize that this power is being enacted. Specifically, women are blind-sighted with mobilization of bias, not only because it is rarely observed while they are in the classroom, but their role as a teacher has been classified as feminine since the Civil War (Fowler, 2013). Conversely, the role of a school administrator was designed by men for men and men have traditionally held these administrative roles, creating and shaping the definition and image of a school administrator as masculine for several generations.
(Blount, 1998; Fowler, 2013). Therefore, women find themselves edged out when they begin to seek administrative roles and when they become administrators (Fowler, 2013).

Participants in this study were no different. While Maya acknowledged the fact that the superintendency is a male dominated field claiming it “is mainly and has been primarily a man's field and to be ready”; Sonia found herself in awe when she was elected president of the Chamber of Commerce, a position normally held by men. She intimated, “I served on the board and then was elected chair. And that was just a prideful moment. There's not been very many women chairs and there had never been an education chair before. It was always business.” These statements are testament to an implicit culture that keeps women out of leadership positions. Mobilization of bias is an umbrella theme with sub-themes that show women’s experiences that marginalize them implicitly as they ascend to the superintendency. The sub-themes emerging from data in this study include gender bias, gatekeepers, and lack of work experiences.

**Gender Bias**

Gender Bias, whether it is expressed consciously or unconsciously, is the differential treatment of men and women based on their gender (Ruiz-Cantero et al., 2007). An extension of Eagly’s social role theory, role congruity theory, exposes the incongruity many people perceive between the characteristics of women and the requirements of leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Because of this incongruity, women leaders are perceived less favorable than men for leadership. Two consequences arise from such gender bias: (1) attitudes towards female leaders are less positive than towards male leaders; and (2) it is more difficult for women to become
leaders and obtain top leadership positions in their fields, thus creating barriers for aspiring female leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The significance associated with differential treatment is that it may influence work evaluations on matters that do not correspond with an employee’s ability or accomplishments, potentially denying one gender access to raises, advancements, and opportunities, thus creating inequity between the genders (Shields et al., 2011).

The experiences of the participants in this study were not immune to gender bias. The word “bias” was used unsparingly. Four of the five candidates mentioned experiences of gender bias regarding their access to the superintendency. For Gail, gender bias happened when interviewing for an assistant principalship. The assistant principalship is significant as it is, for most women, the first step towards leadership positions on their trajectory to the superintendency (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014).

And I interviewed at one of our junior highs, like job after job, and there were four jobs that they hired men over me. There were questions asked during the interview from teachers I knew that were very biased, like, how are you as a woman going to break up a fight?...That's illegal to ask that. But I'm just going to be cool and calm and respond the way I should.

In responding to the question on why she thinks she was not getting the jobs, Gail responded,

I was known as a very structured, no classroom management problem, so I know it wasn't based on data at all…I think it was truly just gender bias, and there would usually be one or two men on the interview team, that would bring that up. And honestly, all the principals were not male. Two of the junior high principals were female and they had no discipline problems in their building. And for whatever reason, they felt like men would be better at handling that…The assistant superintendent used to always call it the big ugly…he would talk about every building needs a big ugly, a big, ugly man to handle kids who are bad. And I think looking back, that probably contributed to some of the bias even for the women. Like if I'm a female leader, I better get a big ugly, because my boss thinks we need a big man in here.
Entry into the superintendency is generally through school boards. The major function of any school board is recruiting and selecting the superintendent (Björk et al., 2014). This function, as indicated by data in this study, may be influenced by the board members’ assumptions about women and the job of superintendent. If board members assume that a woman cannot be a superintendent, they are also likely to mobilize bias against them by creating a picture that puts women at a disadvantage without being explicit about it or finding justifications for not selecting them.

According to Gail, board members had, “never seen a woman be a superintendent,” and as such, “didn’t believe a woman could lead the district.” Ruth and Gail explained that there were board members who made it known they did not believe a woman could do the job of a superintendent because of the requirements of the job. After being denied the superintendency the first time in her district, a board member pulled Ruth aside and told her, “You know, Ruth, I like you a lot. There's nothing against you. I just don't think women have what it takes to run the whole thing.” In Gail’s current district, she had previously applied for a superintendency position, but the district hired a male candidate. Later, when Gail was hired as a principal for the district, and then promoted to superintendent, a colleague shared with Gail why she was not hired as a superintendent the first time she interviewed. While pointing at a board member, Gail’s colleague stated, “She is the reason you didn't get it…she flat out said…she didn't think a woman could do the job.”

Although each school board may find tactics to eliminate women from ascending to the superintendency, collectively they are creating a “glass ceiling” where women can gain the credentials needed to be a superintendent, but cannot become a superintendent (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This experience is pervasive enough that Gail has figured out how women can overcome
it during the interview process for the superintendency. In other words, the burden is on women to prove that they are capable. According to Gail,

I say, there are going to be people in the room that have never worked with a female superintendent, and they've never seen one. And so, you have to help them see you in that position....So you may have to give more details. And it sounds childish, but you may have to really talk about it, they have to be able to picture it. So, you have to be very descriptive.

To paraphrase Gail, if there is a way to help board members see that women are qualified to be leaders of a school district, then they may be more open to hiring a woman as a superintendent. Having to prove beyond their degrees that they belong in the superintendency, places an undue burden on the shoulders of women.

Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers are individuals who control who is considered desirable for a position and determine who is allowed to pass through the next gate of the interview process (Davis & Bowers, 2019). As mentioned in the Gender Bias as well as the Recruitment and Selection Process sections of the Literature Review, school boards and lately, professional search firms are responsible for recruiting and selecting superintendents for districts, thus acting as gatekeepers to the superintendency. Social role theory suggests some leadership roles are viewed culturally as being masculine, putting women at a disadvantage for such jobs, even if they are characteristically equal to their male counterpart in all aspects, except for sex (Eagly & Carli, 2007). If the gatekeepers believe that women, based on their gender alone, are undesirable for the superintendency, the women are likely to be disadvantaged.
As mentioned earlier, Ruth and Gail believe they were denied leadership positions due to their gender, because they were informed by colleagues that gatekeepers could not see a woman leading in those positions. What is interesting to note is Gail’s district had protocols in place to prevent such bias. The human resource director pointed out to Gail a discrepancy between interview scores and who was hired. “I'm going through these sheets, and you have the highest interview scores every time and you have not been selected. I don't understand what's going on, so I want you to talk to me about your experience.” When another assistant principal position opened in the district, the human resource director called Gail and said, “We have another assistant principal job open, and I want you to interview today.” At first Gail declined, but the human resource director convinced her to interview. “That job [interview] was for the same job, same building, same principal, same team, of the one that was really biased, just calling things out, and I was offered that job the same day.” The reason Gail believes she was hired for the position was, “…because a female colleague reached out to somebody who then looked closely at interview records.”

Alice also believes her “steep trajectory” was the result, in part, of a gatekeeper who was the former superintendent in which she replaced.

So, it was March that he took this other position. And so, the board was trying to consider what to do. And it was [name of previous superintendent] who also said, “You really need to look at Alice. She's now been here for,” at that point three to four years, “and she's ready. There needs to be some stability.”

For Alice and Gail, these positive gatekeepers impacted their career trajectories. If Gail’s colleague had not reviewed the interview records, discovered the discrepancy, and removed the mobilization of biases, and if Alice’s former superintendent had not campaigned on her behalf,
then Gail’s and Alice’s trajectories would have probably looked different than the ones they have today.

As mentioned in the Gender Bias as well as the Recruitment and Selection Process sections of the Literature Review, some school boards have preferred to contact professional search firms to find a slate of candidates for the position of superintendent. In turn, professional search firms act as gatekeepers determining who will be selected for interviews and pass onto the next stage of the process. Ruth, Gail, and Sonia talked of their experiences in recruitment, selection, and interview processes through a professional search firm. When the superintendency became available in Gail’s first district, she was not interested in applying. The district hired a professional search firm to recruit potential candidates, and during their search, Gail’s, “name kept coming up in their meetings.” After interviewing potential candidates, the consultants came back to Gail and said, “…we interviewed candidates. We didn't really like them, and we want you to apply or we're going to appoint you.” If it had not been for the professional search firm approaching her directly, Gail would not have ascended to the superintendency at that point in her trajectory. “My goal was always to start at much later, closer to retirement, because the average tenure [of a superintendent] isn't great.”

Ruth interviewed for the superintendency four times and each time the interviewing district utilized a professional search firm. Ruth was the only candidate to share an observation of professional search firms.

I think just one of the interesting things about what I perceived to be as the path is that most districts go with the headhunters… I think some people know the headhunters really, really well and others do not. And so, I just wonder how well the pool really is. Ruth’s concern echoes the findings of Glass and Björk (2003). The researchers examined the applicant pool of 352 districts and 84% reported having women applicants, however only 18% of
the women applicants were hired as superintendents. With the candidate pool saturated with female candidates, then there should be a larger percentage of female superintendents that surpasses the current national data of 26.7% (Tienken, 2021). However, if professional search firms are excluding women from their slate of candidates and going with the male candidates, they may be mobilizing bias against women knowingly or unknowingly from the superintendency.

Another arena meant to offer assistance to leaders is professional networks; however, a mobilization of bias has been observed by Sonia and Gail. Professional organizations exist to help members in the profession, offering opportunities to network. In educational leadership, these organizations are dominated by gatekeepers referred to as the “good old boys” network. The “good old boys” network refers to an official or unofficial network of older, male professionals grooming younger versions of themselves for leadership positions (Gardiner et al., 2000). Based on their gender, women are unlikely to belong and be considered part of the groups. Gail believes professional organizations are organized around the “good old boys” network, acting as another form of gatekeeping to the superintendency.

My biggest concern as a female superintendent is... this “good old boys” network that is so strong and that this is the only formal support network that we have... I know too many men now that... things are going awry in their district, and so and so from the association reaches out and gets him a job over here. They do the searches and they're using retired male superintendents, their buddies, to lead the searches for districts who are reaching out to friends of theirs who they know are in trouble. They are establishing these networking activities that are predominantly male. They have some practices that I would say are very questionable, sexist even, in their own hiring.

When a “good old boys” network exists in professional organizations, men are the members that benefit from the network, and women are denied opportunities for networking and career
advancement, consequentially restricting their access to the superintendency (Gardiner et al., 2000).

Based on the data, gatekeepers influence access to the superintendency as they determine who enters the arena and who does not. Gatekeepers who monitor for a mobilization of bias can help eliminate this obstacle for women. Both Sonia and Gail recognize gatekeepers within organizations can also promote women for leadership positions in order to diminish the gap between male and female leaders. Gail, along with a few female colleagues, decided enough was enough with the biased gatekeepers within the professional organization and created a group exclusively for women leaders. “So many of us are like, screw you and your weird networking activity… and it (the women leaders group) started in some generic conversations and then it just kind of evolved.”

Sonia describes her work with other CEOs within her community to help promote women in leadership roles.

I'm a part of a CEO group with other CEOs from companies around town and myself and another woman are the only two women in that group. And we're working to bring on some other women in our community to kind of make sure that they're thinking about it. They see us in a way that it's OK to be a CEO.

By organizing and placing focus on the disparity between male and female leaders, Sonia and Gail have found ways for women to pay attention to the functions of gatekeepers and to diminish their negative effects on access to the superintendency.
Work Experience

Without a female friendly network working to connect qualified women to the superintendency, women’s options are limited to their resumes and abilities to sell themselves. On a resume, a candidate’s work experience is the biggest influential factor in determining potential employment (Cole et al., 2007). However, leadership experience for women is limited because of limited opportunities and biases that have been discussed earlier.

Alice and Ruth made comments about lack of work experience being a factor that influenced their access to leadership positions. Alice was initially turned down for an assistant principal position and was told, “You know what, you're really—we’re trying to look for a little more experience.” A few months later, the superintendent contacted Alice and said, "Listen, we've gone out again and people are still kind of coming back to you, even though you're inexperienced…we’ll support you, because the principal at that time is also only a year or two more experienced than [you].”

Ruth was not as fortunate as Alice to have a district overlook her lack of experience. Ruth recalled interviewing for a superintendency position in a district that was smaller than the one she was currently employed as an assistant superintendent of student services and professional development.

I had another interview process at a smaller district where you're more the jack of all trades. I'm very fortunate. Where I am, we’re a big district, so I have people that are curriculum experts. I have financial experts, HR experts. In smaller districts, you're that expert…At the end of the day, they decided to go with the other candidate, because they determined that even though they're a small district, they wanted somebody who has been a superintendent first. They didn't want to train a superintendent.
A lack of experience prevented entry to the superintendency for Ruth on more than one occasion. For her current superintendency, Ruth had interviewed years prior for the position, but was passed over for another candidate. When that superintendent left suddenly, Ruth became the interim superintendent and later applied to be the permanent superintendent. This occurrence created the opportunity Ruth needed to prove herself. During the second interview process, Ruth stated that the board president asked her, “How do you feel you’re interviewing differently now than you did before?” Ruth’s response was,

    Well, you guys did a good thing and a bad thing for you and me before when I was interviewing. I’d never held the seat, so I didn’t exactly know what I was interviewing for. I had an expectation of it…now that I’ve held the seat for three months, I can talk about doing the job. And that makes me a stronger interviewee.

While fulfilling the duties of the interim superintendent, Ruth was able to gain work experience and demonstrate that a woman could lead the district, thus gaining entry to the superintendency.

    The data unequivocally reveals a mobilization of bias exits that unjustly, based on gender, limit women’s access to the superintendency. When gatekeepers, such as school boards, professional networks, professional search firms, and school administrators view women leaders as women first and leaders second, they believe women cannot be successful leaders. From the data, gatekeepers who are sensitive to gender show promise for women’s access to the superintendency as they recognize the gap between men and women leaders and focus their attention on promoting women to leadership positions.
Shaping of Consciousness

The shaping of consciousness is, “The systemic inculcation of a set of ideas about the general worth and proper role of another person or a group of people” (Fowler, 2013, p. 330). Through conversations, experiences, and perceptions, we mold our ideas of who we are and what we are worth, as well as the worth of others and their roles (Fowler, 2013, Hoyt et al., 2013). For the study participants, their experiences with the world around them, both positive and negative, not only shaped their consciousness about their worth to access the role of superintendent; it also shaped the consciousness of the community. Within the theme of shaping of consciousness there are three sub-themes. The three sub-themes are mentoring, women must do more to be acceptable, and resilience.

Mentoring

Studies have shown the best asset women can have when trying to overcome the barriers to the superintendency is a positive mentor (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). For the purpose of this study, a mentor is defined as someone who coaches and guides an aspiring superintendent along their career trajectory by providing career advice, training, protection, and sponsorship (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Grogan, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989). Gail’s comments explain the significance of a mentor in the journey to the superintendency.

Boards are predominately male. Men are in more leadership [positions], but they're just trusted. They just have this immediate trust that they’re given and respect and credibility that I think it takes us (women) longer to earn. Having a female confidant or mentor that can help you, guide you, and coach you through that is critical to be successful.
In this study, all of the study participants mentioned having mentors, shaping their thought processes about their accession to the superintendency. Maya, Gail, and Alice mentioned their mentors provided positive feedback, encouragement, and ideas of what is needed to be a successful leader, thus instilling in them the thought that they could be superintendents and what is needed to be successful leaders. For Alice, the confidence came in when a mentor told her, “You’re not a great number two. You're number one. That's really where you need to go.” Other mentors echoed this sentiment to Alice. “And so, they believed in me, said they believed in me…they believed that I was going to be a superintendent, that I was going to be able to do these things.” These comments gave Alice the boost that she needed to believe she could be a superintendent, specifically considering, as mentioned earlier, a former superintendent in a previous district did not believe she could ascend to the superintendency.

I would tell myself, you have had a pretty steep trajectory. You've been able to do that. You probably are stronger than you thought you could be. At the same time, you're going to continue to have a hard time kind of shaking the idea of perfection and wanting to be accepted all the time. So, kind of keep practicing that growth mindset and build the confidence where you need to.

Although aspiring female superintendents may receive mixed messages, Alice had more people than not tell her she could access the superintendency. The preponderance of such messages helped shape her consciousness and her aspiration of becoming a superintendent did not waiver even when she was told she was, “not going to be able to do this.”

According to a study by Copeland and Calhoun (2014), the gender of the mentor is important to those women with administration aspirations. Some women seek out a female mentor from the start or after being assigned a male mentor (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). The reasons women cite for wanting a female mentor are women bring a unique perspective for performing the role of a superintendent in a male dominated field and can share their experiences
of navigating through the barriers to and within the superintendency (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; McGee, 2010). Maya was fortunate to work for a female superintendent and know another female superintendent, both acting as mentors for her and shaping her understanding of the superintendency. It was while working for her mentor that Maya realized she could become a superintendent. She explained,

The superintendent that I began there with was [name of superintendent]. And she was amazing. Very kind. Very humble. Very smart. Very articulate. Very efficient. But the compassion is what really connected her to people. She was going to allow you to do your job and open it up for others, you know, for opportunities that you might have. Very, very flexible. And I wanted to do something like that. I said, OK, I can make connections with people and impact student achievement. And that's when I said, well, I wouldn't mind doing this.

By having two female superintendents as mentors and role models, Maya observed how women superintendents survived in a male dominated profession. Through these observations, Maya realized she possessed some of the same qualities as her mentors, thus helping her realize what it means to be a superintendent and believing she held the characteristics to be a superintendent. Along her trajectory, Maya was given advice by her mentor that would alter her path to the superintendency. Traditionally, the leadership position women hold prior to the superintendency is at the district level (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). When Maya was the director of personnel, her mentor gave her advice that put the path to the superintendency and community expectations into perspective. She had not had leadership experience at the building level as the community would expect. Her mentor advised,

Maya, you really need some experience at the building level. People will respect you more and they will be able to understand your plight, or you will be able to understand their plight. You will know from where they are speaking.

At this point in her career, Maya had served as the director of curriculum for four years and was currently serving as the district’s director of personnel. According to Copeland and
Calhoun (2014), both of these district positions placed the superintendency as the next leadership position on Maya’s career path; however, this was unlikely, because as Maya’s mentor explained, she would not gain the respect deserving of a superintendent without building leadership experience. As a result, Maya decided to leave her position at the district level to gain experience as a building leader, to fit with community expectations that would put her on the path to the superintendency.

Other institutions, that influence and shape consciousness are schools (Fowler, 2013). Professors of leadership programs act as mentors by providing knowledge of the superintendency and students continue to form opinions and ideas of what it means to be a superintendent. During her doctoral program, one of Alice’s professors was very blunt about the success rate of scholars in the program and the setbacks they may encounter. From that conversation, Alice’s understanding of the difficulties on the path to the superintendency for women began to take shape, and she said, “…people who are women who are trying to commit to the superintendency, they’re going to have a horrible path. It’s just the reason the professor told us was to just be aware…” Awareness of difficulties in the path to the superintendency, especially for women, helped Alice to be prepared for the pitfalls she may encounter trying to ascend to the superintendency (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The mentors that were mentioned did provide the participants with advice and feedback that helped them chart their way, specifically understanding the likely challenges that they could face as they ascended to the superintendency. Ruth’s father was her high school principal and became a superintendent while she was in college. According to Ruth, “I’m not sure it (father’s roles as principal and superintendent) shaped my decision towards the superintendency,” however, Fowler (2013) states family is the first and most influential institution that shapes our
consciousness. Ruth’s recollection about growing up while her father was a principal and superintendent:

I would consider my dad to just be a constant mile marker along my path as I grew up, watching him to be a principal and then be a superintendent and have conversations with him. I got to see strong leadership in an educational setting. All through growing up, I got to hear the conversations in the house about organizing a huge event or board meetings or my dad used to sit on the negotiations team for the district. So, I got to hear all that kind of conversation.

When Ruth showed interest in pursuing the superintendency, her father tried to present real-world experiences and advice that would help her prepare for the superintendency.

And so, he would run me through his day to kind of get me to understand this is what's going to happen. You can't control what other people are going to do. You're going to be on the spot to answer, to come up with things, and so he would constantly call me and run me through things, and he asks, “Is this what you want? Because if this isn't what you want, you need to stop. You need to go a different route.”

By having a father who was a superintendent, Ruth was afforded the opportunity to view the superintendency up close and personal and become aware of how it impacts the family and marriage.

Having role models and mentors helped the study participants gain an understanding of what it means to be a superintendent. With this understanding, the study participants built capacity, believed in themselves, and developed the confidence to do the job as they transitioned to the role of a superintendent.

**Women Must do More to be Acceptable**

Women tend to pursue the superintendency only when they feel prepared and confident to take on the position. Thus, women tend to delay their entry to the superintendency until after
they have built their consciousness and confidence to do the job (McGee, 2010). Alice, Maya, Gail, and Sonia echoed the same sentiment. Maya referenced that feeling of being prepared and ready for the superintendency in describing herself, “You've had all this training. You've talked to people, you've gone through your bachelor’s, your master’s, your doctorate, and you're like, I am ready.” By earning her degrees, working at district level, and as mentioned earlier, changing her career trajectory to include building level leadership experience, Maya had done much more, not just to feel ready for the job, but to meet societal expectations for a woman to take the job.

The theme of proving oneself by doing more was exemplified in Gail’s experience. To build her resume and confidence, Gail worked in various leadership roles that were in addition to her job.

So, there was a time when we didn't have a H.R. director, so, I filled in there. There was a time when we didn't have a business official and I filled in in that. And I think, as that role expanded, that's when I kind of started building the confidence and thinking, OK, I can do this.

This worked to her advantage. As a superintendent, an individual gains a multifaceted view of a district. The experiences Gail gained with each additional district level position, offered opportunities to view the multiple aspects of the district and the superintendency.

Alice’s career trajectory was almost delayed due to lack of confidence to perform a cabinet level leadership position, “I was a tad overwhelmed, I wasn't ready, this was at a cabinet level position.” However, the superintendent had confidence in Alice’s potential and was persistent in convincing Alice to accept the position, “Listen, even if you don't, we think you’re the right person. We don't want to go back out again. Please consider taking it. If you don't want it after the first year, we'll let you have your old job back.” Alice accepted the position and never
looked back to her old position. Then, when Alice was approached about the superintendency, her confidence level was much different than prior positions.

So, when the board president came to me, which is something I can't believe I did, he said, “What do you think? Do you think you're ready?” I said to him, “Well, if you don't think I'm ready, then I guess you have your answer.”

In her first cabinet position, Alice was supported by a superintendent that believed in her and supported her, and as mentioned in the previous section, she was surrounded by mentors who believed she was destined to be a superintendent. As a result, Alice gained confidence and believed she could ascend to the superintendency.

In contrast to Maya’s and Alice’s experiences, and McGee’s (2010) research, Sonia has a different view about being confident before the superintendency, “I don't feel like you have to learn everything before you apply, because you learn on the fly all the time.” Sonia further stated, “Any person who takes on a superintendency, whether it's a small town or big town, needs to feel OK with having not knowing everything. There is no way you can go to school and learn everything that you have to learn.” Not knowing everything did not stop Sonia from accessing the superintendency, however, Sonia’s confidence does come from a different source, “I think women sometimes think we have to learn everything before we do something, and we don't. Just jump up in and you'll have a lot of people to help you along the way.” By being comfortable with not knowing everything and believing there would be people to assist her with the superintendency, Sonia built her confidence to believe she could access the superintendency without being what McGee (2010, p. 12) called, “super-prepared.”

Having confidence in themselves that they could be effective superintendents boosted study participants belief they could access the superintendency, however, as seen in the earlier theme of mobilization of bias, access to the superintendency for women is also shaped by the
opinions of other’s who believe women cannot be effective superintendents. Evans (2011, p. 62) noted, “Men are still viewed as ‘default leaders’ and women as ‘atypical leaders,’ with the perception that they violate accepted norms of leadership, no matter what the leadership behavior.” Even though women are more prepared for the superintendency, if the hiring board and community have it in their minds that women cannot be effective leaders, then women are faced with the additional task of reshaping the consciousness of the board and community.

As an interim superintendent, Ruth was able to change the opinions of the board that refused to hire her based on her gender. The board and community were able to see Ruth be an effective leader as the interim superintendent, thus be more open to accepting a woman as a superintendent. Gail experienced a similar situation to Ruth. As previously mentioned, Gail’s current district did not hire her the first time she interviewed for the superintendency as a board member believed women could not be effective leaders. Eventually, Gail was promoted to the superintendency, becoming the first female superintendent for the district. Even though the board member with the bias against women superintendents resigned after Gail was hired, some members of the community have formed a different opinion and appreciate having a woman as their superintendent. The evidence of altered opinions is seen in the emails Gail receives from the community stating, “We are so happy you are here. We never thought a female could be a superintendent.”

Adler (1999, p. 259) noted, “…a woman leader is not viewed as androgynous or undifferentiated from her male counterparts. She is viewed as a woman who is a leader.” Sonia is aware of the notion that she is not just a superintendent, but a woman superintendent, and that, “…it is different to be a female leader than it is to be a male leader…you have to be a little bit
more careful as a female." Sonia stated the extra steps she takes as a woman superintendent to avoid, “gossip.”

[Assistant’s name] and I have a list of guys that I don't have lunch alone with… It's just constantly talk about your husband, and you constantly talk about your family and just make sure you’re putting that out there. But you kind of feel like you have to a little bit, still, even in this world.

The reason Sonia feels the need to take these extra steps are comments she has read about herself on social media.

I had some Facebook posts not too long ago from a guy who disagreed with everything I did. But his second quote was, “but she's so darn good looking.” I don't think of myself as that way, but I thought that was weird. You wouldn't ever say that about a man, you know? And I don't think a woman would post that about a male supervisor. I don't know, but those are the kind of things that we (women) do have to deal with, and we do have to think about ourselves.

From Sonia’s experiences, being a woman adds a layer to the superintendency, where she feels the need to protect herself from gossip that could discredit her as a superintendent. Sonia also believes it is in her best interest to ward off unwanted advances from men by making sure she mentions her husband and children in conversation. Being a woman superintendent means Sonia must take extra steps to address the fact that she is a woman who is a superintendent.

Although the study participants have achieved their current role as superintendent, they feel the need to do more to be accepted in their leadership roles. Social role theory notes women as being communal, valuing interpersonal relationships (Eagly & Wood, 2012), and the study participants feel it is important, as a superintendent, to step away from their desks to be visible in the schools and community and foster relationships. All of the study participants place a heavy emphasis on relationships, mentioning this word numerous times during the interviews.

According to Maya, “…without relationships, you're unable to move. You can have those that are going to change the world, but if you don't have the relationship, you cannot do it.” In Gail’s
opinion, “I think the most in demand or the most regarded qualities will be the way you build relationships with people,” because she believes the position is no longer confined as, “an office and a managerial job.” The key to building relationships, according to the study participants, is being visible and having a presence in the schools and community. For Maya, a superintendent must be “…visible, so they can see you what you're doing. And that also builds relationships and rapport with them as well, because they see you.” All of the study participants feel it is important to set aside time each day to be visible in the schools. Gail and Alice stated they like to visit their schools in the morning. For Alice, she feels, “It's the easiest time to really not have something go awry… it's a nice time to say hi to the staff, check in with the principal.” For Maya, she feels it is important to visit the schools, check on her staff to see if, “everything is okay,” and be present for the dismissal of her students to observe the relationships of students and staff.

I have to be out for dismissal, because I want to see what's going on. I want to see the interactions of the children with their peers. I want to see how the staff is connecting with them at the end of the day.

Sonia and Ruth do not have set schedules for visiting their schools. Sonia works for a large unit district with more than thirty schools.

School visits are a regular piece on my calendar. And that takes a lot of time because we have [more than thirty] schools. So, to get around to [more than thirty] schools in a year with scheduling, and in a way that seems meaningful, and then just to get to schools when there is an episodic issue that you have to deal with. You're kind of always on the run. I use a lot of miles on my car, driving it around, getting to places. I really try to be as visible as possible and not just in my office.

Besides the staff and students, all of the study participants believe having a strong presence in the community and creating relationships with all stakeholders is a significant role of the superintendent. When Alice was first hired as the superintendent for her current district, she

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5 Exact number of schools withheld to preserve anonymity.
created an entry plan to help her form a relationship with her district’s community. “When I first started where I listened. I did 200 plus hours of meetings with students and parents and staff and community members, and we came up with seven key drivers from what was most important.”

Sonia believes her community wants to see an involved superintendent. To make her presence known, Sonia sits on the boards of various community organizations.

…it was so important for me to be on those boards to get my feet into the community and get to know everybody. But it absolutely killed me, especially those first two years as I tried to do everything in the district and do everything out in the community. People would say to me, “You're everywhere.” And that's okay that they said that, because that's what they wanted to see in their superintendent.

Taking the time to build relationships and be visible in the schools and community, on top of the daily meetings superintendents must attend, takes away from the time needed to complete paperwork, state reports, and respond to emails and phone calls. To ensure they meet deadlines and answer every correspondence in a timely manner, the study participants compensate by taking time from their personal lives. During the work week, Ruth, Gail, and Alice stated they check their emails before going into work. According to Gail, she feels this behavior is a typical act of superintendents. “I think I'm probably like most superintendents, and that when I wake up in the morning, the first thing I do is check my e-mail.”

Another strategy all of the study participants do to get caught up or get ahead in their day’s schedule is to go into the office before the arrival time of students and staff and/or stay in the office past the dismissal time of students and staff. As Ruth put it, “…I get there about 6:00. That gives me a good hour before other people start showing up. It is my time, which is really nice. You can get a lot done when it's just, you.” On occasion, the time Ruth carves out in the morning is interrupted by others who know she goes into the office early.
What is warming, but sometimes frustrating, is that everyone knows I go in at 6:00 in the morning. Sometimes the head of the grounds crew, who I just I love dearly, he'll come in and chat with me…So, sometimes that turns into chatting with people, which is lovely, but sometimes it happens on the days that you don't need it to happen. And then you're like, “Oh, I wanted this hour.” But I go and then I try to get my day prepped to the best that I can between 6:00 and 7:00 or 6:00 and 7:30.

Because Ruth, like the other study participants, places a great emphasis on relationships, she is willing to sacrifice some of her personal time in order to have that much needed time to foster relationships with members of her district. The weekend is another place the study participants believe offers them more time to do superintendent orientated tasks. As Alice put it “…it makes sense. Some of it's just getting caught up or make you feel like you can have a little bit more breathing room during the week to do some other check-ins or site visits to the schools.” The amount of time each participant devoted to work on the weekends or other non-workdays varied amongst the study participants. Maya stated she gets, “…maybe about a half day,” to herself on the weekends to do things unrelated to work, whereas Alice prefers,

…to make one weekend day and non-workdays…to breeze through my email or texts. I usually try to have it happen on Saturday, but then usually the other weekend day, I'll spend, unfortunately, anywhere from two to four hours, depending on what I need to do.

In her previous district, Gail believes the percentage of time spent between personal time and work, “…was probably like 80/20, and 80 was work.” In her current district, Gail believes the division between work and personal time is, “…probably 40/60, maybe 30/70 on a good weekend. The lower number is work.”

Sonia finds the amount of work she needs to complete during the weekend to be, “episodic,” depending on what needs attention, so some weekends she may spend more than two to three hours on work related tasks.

Last weekend, it was extraordinarily more than that. We're doing our plan. So, it's episodic. And the weekend before a board meeting, I'm usually prepping for the board
packet. So, every other weekend I would say I do more than that. This weekend isn’t a board meeting weekend, so I will probably minimize that amount of computer content this weekend as opposed to last weekend.

Ruth stated she may not have superintendent related tasks to complete every weekend, but she does believe, “Seventy percent of my weekends, I may have something to do for work.” Ruth was also quick to reiterate, “That's also a large degree, my choice, because it's when I feel like I'm not pressed for time. I'm not emotional. And I can think through and draft a response.”

To access the superintendency, all but Sonia felt they needed to consciously feel ready and prepared for the position. For Maya and Gail, this meant gaining experience in various leadership positions. But even when they felt ready and prepared, Ruth and Gail were burdened with the task of having to change the opinions of stakeholders in order to be accepted as a woman superintendent. Because the women have done more to prove they are effective leaders and have taken the extra time needed to build relationships with all stakeholders, Maya’s and Gail’s tenure in their current superintendency parallels the average tenure of a superintendent of five to six years (Kowalski et al., 2011). Ruth’s, Sonia’s, and Alice’s tenure in their current superintendent roles surpass the national average with each serving seven years.

Resiliency

Resiliency has proven to be a positive characteristic to help oneself overcome obstacles in life (Howard & Irving, 2014). Resiliency as defined by Baldwin et al. (2004), is, “the capacity to advance after adversity” (p.3). Christman and McClellan (2008) in their study of women administrators further describe resiliency as, “an adaptive and coping trait that forms and hones positive character skills, such as patience, tolerance, responsibility, compassion, determination,
and risk taking” (p. 7). All of the study participants exhibited positive character skills of resiliency when discussing the barriers they encountered within the superintendency. Alice recalled a particular moment with a former superintendent.

I had a superintendent sit me down, a male superintendent in his 60's, and tell me, “You know, you can't have it all. You really--you're getting your doctorate, you're starting your family, you're trying to take on all these big,” you know, he put me in charge of strategic planning, he's like, “I'm just I'm ready to see you break. Like, you're not going to be able to do this.” And so I said, OK, watch me.

When asked if her gender was the reason for the superintendent’s opinion of her, Alice stated, “For him, I definitely think it was a gender issue.” Alice, much like Ruth and Gail who also encountered gender bias, showed the positive resiliency trait of determination by not letting her gender deny her access to leadership positions and decided to seek employment elsewhere. Ruth attempted to take the same risk as Alice and sought the superintendency in another district. In every interview Ruth had for the superintendency, she was a finalist, but ultimately denied access to the position. Ruth’s father had some advice about how to a handle the disappointment.

And it's very funny because my dad always says to me, “Watch the districts that you don't end up with and see what happens.” And in the seven years I've been here, they've had two different superintendents. And my dad has always said to me when I was seeking the superintendency, “When your district comes open, it comes open. But when it's not open, you're just going to keep going through the process in different places.”

Ruth’s father was like a mentor. She followed his advice and kept going, enacting patience while waiting for the right time for her access to the superintendency.

Not all barriers to the superintendency are external. For Maya, she had to contend with internal barriers. Upon receiving a phone call to apply for the superintendency in her current district, “My thought at first was like, no, I don't think you need to apply for a superintendency until you're ready to retire, because I've just seen some boards that have not worked out well.” To complicate matters, there were external barriers happening within the district she was
encouraged to apply. “From what I had seen, the superintendents [current district] did not make it through their three-year contracts… do I want to step in here knowing that I may not make it through the three years?” What gave Maya the courage to persevere through her internal barriers is an internal resilience sustainer—spirituality.

I do make sure that on Sundays that I get that spiritual nourishment. That is something that's key for me, and that is what gives me hope, because in the superintendency you're providing hope to people, right? You're saying you can do it. Yes, you can. We believe in you. You can, even if you don't know how, we're going to do it.

Women tend to see a connection between their spirituality and their success and ability to push forward during conflicts and difficult situations (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). In a study of African-American women superintendents, a sense of hope guided a woman’s approach to their jobs and increased their resiliency (Simmons & Johnson, 2008). Relying on her beliefs, Maya was able to view her internal and external barriers as obstacles she could overcome.

Reed (2015) studied leaders when faced with turbulent situations and found women are far more resilient than men. Zenger and Folkman (2019) found in their three-year study of 3,876 men and 4,779 women, women lack confidence early in their careers, which motivates them to take more initiative, be more resilient, and be more open to feedback, thus making them better leaders. Maya and Sonia both mentioned applying for the superintendency in dysfunctional districts. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the superintendents in Maya’s district were let go before the end of their contracts. Before applying for her current superintendency, Sonia noticed the district, “…had a lot of negative vibes to it,” which, “…you could read about in the papers if you Googled it.” Although the women stepped into turbulent situations, their confidence has made them resilient leaders, thus creating lengthy tenures for both study participants. As stated earlier, Maya has worked five years in her district, with her tenure lasting
longer than the previous superintendents, and Sonia’s tenure of seven years surpasses the mean tenure of superintendents. As stated earlier, all of the study participants have worked as superintendents for five or more years. The resiliency the women have demonstrated while overcoming obstacles to the superintendency could be, as Zenger and Folkman (2019) noted in their research, a factor to the length of their tenures.

In their recollection of their access to the superintendency, the study participants encountered internal and external barriers such as gender bias, lack of work experience, and self-doubt, thus restricting their access to the superintendency. With each obstacle, the study participants had to find a way around it, making their career paths resemble a labyrinth filled with twists, turns, and back steps. To help themselves navigate their personal labyrinths and gain access to the superintendency, the study participants cited help from mentors, positive gatekeepers, and positive resiliency traits. Even though they have accessed the superintendency, the women superintendents of this study feel they must go above and beyond to be fully accepted in the position.

The next section will examine the factors the study participants perceive as being critical in their career trajectory.

Research Question 2: What factors do participants perceive as being critical in their career trajectory?

Just like research question one, the Moustakas (1994) method of data analysis was used to analyze the data for research question two. From the analysis of each individual textural-structural description, a composite description was generated, representing the study participants’
descriptions of their experiences as one whole group. In this section, data were analyzed to
discover participants’ experiences that were critical in their career trajectory. From the textural-
structural descriptions three themes emerged: (1) navigating their career trajectories through the
labyrinth; (2) managing role conflict and role commitment through balanced leadership; and (3)
women’s concept of power and leadership. Each theme, along with their sub-themes, is presented
below.

Navigating their Career Trajectories through the Labyrinth

The career trajectory for women is filled with barriers and dead ends that create twists
and turns along the way to the superintendency, making their career paths resemble a “labyrinth”
(Eagly & Carli, 2007). The participants of this study were not immune to this metaphor,
encountering barriers unique to women’s career trajectories, however some of the barriers posed
little to no threat to some of the study participants’ paths to the superintendency. Because women
face barriers that the traditional male superintendent does not, their path to the superintendency
will not be traditional and will vary (Eagly & Carli, 2007). As noted earlier in the demographics
section, the only participant to have what Copeland and Calhoun (2014) call a traditional career
trajectory (teacher, assistant principal, principal, district office, then superintendent) for women
is Sonia, which will be discussed in the next section.

The sections below will explore the experiences of the study participants in relation to the
common barriers women encounter on their career trajectory. Gender bias and the recruitment
and selection process have already been extensively explored in the discussion of research
question one, so the foci of this section will be the sub-themes of career planning, mentors and networking, family responsibilities and support, and mobility.

**Career Planning**

Women, more so than men, experience the negative effects from a lack of career planning and career paths (Glass, 2000, Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). While men can go from high school principal to the superintendent’s seat, women traditionally have more leadership rungs on their career paths before they become superintendents (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). However, when examining the study participant data from Table 1, Sonia’s career path is the only one to parallel previous research. The first leadership roles for Maya, Ruth, and Alice were at the district office. While Ruth remained at the district office until the superintendency, Maya, Gail, and Alice took a step back on their trajectories to pursue building level leadership positions. Gail began her career trajectory at the building level as an assistant principal; however she was never a principal before her first superintendency. The same is seen in the career trajectories for Alice and Ruth; the principalship is missing from their career paths. Although the number of participants in the study is small, what is significant is each participant’s career trajectory is unique, thus demonstrating women may not fit the pattern established mostly by men and may need to seek alternative routes to the superintendency.

Another theme researchers have noted with career planning is women delay their leadership track, thus enter the superintendency at an older age than men (Sharp et al., 2004).
Delaying their administrative careers puts females at a disadvantage. For example, because men typically begin their administrative careers ten years prior to women, they gain more leadership experience and an edge in the selection process (Connell et al., 2015; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Tallerico, 2000). However, when examining the career trajectories of the study participants, all of the participants have spent less time in the class than the average woman (10.8 years) or the average man (9.2 years) (Ellerson et al., 2015). Before their first leadership position, Gail spent four years in the classroom and Ruth spent four years as a school psychologist. Both Alice and Sonia were classroom teachers for five years, and Maya was a teacher for seven years. By beginning their leadership trajectory early in their careers, the study participants were able to offset delays that were out of their control, such as gender bias and the recruitment and selection process, thus increasing their chances to become superintendents.

Mentors & Networking

As noted in the discussion of research question one, mentoring is regarded as the most influential factor for current and aspiring women superintendents when overcoming the barriers along their trajectories (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). Again, all of the study participants mentioned having a mentor or mentors that helped them along their career paths by offering positive feedback, support, or helping promote them to the superintendency. These positive mentors were chosen by the study participants themselves from pre-existing relationships. Alice believes the relationship with the mentors she selected helped her achieve leadership positions along her trajectory. “A lot of my opportunities have come, because I've been fortunate to have mentors.” A positive mentor-mentee relationship creates, “…an intense
personal relationship,” (Eby et al., 2000, p.2) that is supportive and empowering for a mentee; however, some mentors can be toxic, even damaging to a mentee’s career trajectory (Baugh & Sullivan, 2005; Tolar, 2012). Gail did recall two mentors that were assigned to her, one for each superintendency, that did not seem to support her as much as the mentor she had selected. In fact, for both instances, Gail was unaware that the two, male mentors were assigned to her.

So, I didn't know that they (state organization) assigned mentors… I don't even know if he really said he was my mentor, but he said, “I'm going to reach out to you, we'll meet quarterly,” …Most of [the meetings] centered around board relations and kind of the politics of the job, and kind of his advice in that. It was also oftentimes lobbying for us to support initiatives they were pushing or contractors or vendors. It just always felt a little sketchy like, oh, if you guys are looking for blah, blah, blah, …but big districts have big money and trying to connect those dots to sponsors of (state organization) …And since then, I was assigned a mentor here [second superintendency] …and it was like, “Do you want to talk about bonds?” I don't know. I had no idea he was my mentor until the end of the first year, and I got an evaluation survey on how he did as a mentor …All the women that I interviewed, a lot of them had the same mentors and never knew they were their mentors either.

At one point during her first superintendency, Gail sought the advice from her assigned mentor when the school board was asking her to do things that conflicted with her moral compass.

And he said, “You know, you can just do what they want you to do and keep your job. You know, even if it's wrong, they can give you directives, if you can just do it and play it safe.” And I decided at some point, you know, I can't do that, because I'm not going to be able to sleep at night.

Gail realized that the assigned mentor was toxic, and thought he, “should be advising me not to stay,” in her first superintendency. Subsequently, Gail decided to seek the advice from another female that was, “like a mentor,” who, “gets it,” when it comes to being a female superintendent.

Gail’s decision to seek out a female mentor mirrors the research of Copeland and Calhoun (2014) in that women seek out other women as their mentor at the start of their trajectory or after being assigned a male mentor. The reasons women seek out other women as mentors is, as Gail mentioned, women leaders get what it means to be a woman superintendent in
a man’s world, navigating the barriers of the political minefield, balancing work/family life, strategies and mistakes to avoid, and time management skills (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; McGee, 2010). Gail felt her female mentor, “…gave a lot of great advice,” and ultimately, she decided to change her trajectory and seek employment elsewhere.

From the study participants experiences, as well as research, mentors can either support or hinder women superintendents’ trajectories. When mentors are knowledgeable of how to support female mentees, they are then better suited to assist female leaders on their trajectory. However, when mentors do not possess skills to support female mentees, examples of Gail’s experience will continue to happen, consequently putting female leaders’ trajectories in jeopardy.

Networking is another support system superintendents utilize during their trajectory. Networking, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.), is, “The exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions; specifically, the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business.” In a three-year study by Blickle et al. (2009), having the ability to network is a great predictor of career success. Unfortunately, women may lack the knowledge, skills, and/or time to network (Connell et al., 2015; McGee, 2010). Gail recognizes she does not make networking a priority, and speculates other women share her opinion.

I personally feel men value networking and network better than we do. We, being stereotyping all women, tend to be very laser focused. We're going to get our job done, we're going to do all this well and we're going to go home, but we're going to be overachieving wife and mom and all these other things, too. A lot of us are trying to excel at everything, and the thing that has fallen to the backburner for me, and I think many women that I work with closely, is networking.
Recognizing how networking can be a trajectory barrier to the superintendency for women, Gail, along with a few female colleagues, decided to form a group geared towards women to help eliminate this barrier.

There's value in creating our own network, if there's not a pre-existing one, that we feel comfortable in. And not to separate ourselves, because we have really tried to be inclusive and invite men into ours, too, but there's just a lot of value in networking…if I have a question, once you have that networking established, you're much more comfortable asking questions that might seem like a dumb question…I think we just don't prioritize it like we should. I think the association kind of ruined it for us.

By creating a group for women leaders in Illinois, Gail and her colleagues provide a safe place for women to seek advice and the opportunity gain or improve their network skills and connect with other female leaders from around the state, therefore increasing trajectory opportunities.

The ability to network is not an issue for Sonia. As mentioned earlier, Sonia sits on the board of many organizations. Nonetheless, Sonia cannot escape the expectations of her gender that influence how others perceive and interact with her (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Gender roles work alongside social roles to structure behavior, interactions, and exchanges of dialogue (Eagly et al., 2004; Ridgeway, 2001). Sonia recounted an out-of-town business trip with other community leaders, where she was the only female in the group.

I traveled to [name of city] with a contingent of community leaders…And everybody took care of me really well…buying me drinks and doing all that. So, it was just kind of—it’s a little weird. You always wanted to say, “I got it, I got it, I'm good,” and be independent, but then you don't want to be rude. And there is a weirdness out there about that. And sometimes that happens to women that are in leadership roles, you know, just kind of that uncomfortable, weird feeling.

Sonia, being a superintendent and a board member to many community organizations, is on the same plane of leadership as her traveling companions, however, the men view Sonia as a woman first, a leader second, thus the men follow the social expectations of how men interact with women by offering to buy her drinks. As a superintendent, Sonia is fully capable of
affording and getting her own drinks, but as a woman, the men followed the archaic social roles of being hunters and gathers by buying her drinks. Moreover, gender roles work alongside social roles creating the belief that men are the more valued gender due to their greater access to societal resources and power, thus when interacting with female leaders, men believe they are superior to women leaders, even though the genders may be equally credentialed (Eagly et al., 2000).

Another predicament Sonia faced in this situation was the “weirdness,” of the situation. If Sonia declined the drink offers, she feared she would appear, “rude,” by not conforming to norms associated with her gender. When women do not conform to social norms related to their gender, they run the risk of being penalized. However, when women conform to their gender role, they create the chance to access rewards and opportunities reserved for men (Eagly et al., 2000). Either decision Sonia makes creates a separate path in the labyrinth with its own rewards and pitfalls. As a woman leader, if Sonia declined the drink offers, she risked the benefits that could come from the relationships and connections she was making with the leaders in her community. By accepting the drink offers, she risked being viewed as subordinate to the other male leaders and not having equal status. If not handled correctly, the situation could have negatively impacted Sonia’s trajectory.

Being viewed as a woman first, leader second, hinders a woman’s chances of being accepted within a network. For example, often times within a network a “good old boys” network exists, where older, male professionals groom younger, male versions of themselves for leadership positions (Gardiner et al., 2000). When the “good old boys” network is present within an organization, women become second class citizens who are alienated and denied access to job opportunities, networking opportunities, or career building skills (Cullen & Perez-Truglia, 2019;
Whalen, 2017). Gail observed practices and activities that led her to believe the “good old boys” network is present in professional organizations within Illinois.

I'm really talking broadly about a “good old boys network” that is helping men more than it's helping women. Whether it's getting a job, whether it's a networking activity, whether it's awards. The awards and the leadership positions, it's a complete joke to me. We nominate the guy who's retiring whose friends with the guy who's leaving. The next president is prearranged before you come into your meeting… I remember last year when they were announcing all their new hires…all these positions and every single one that got announced was another 55-year-old white male…It's a joke and the association knows it. I know many women who've reported it and said this is not okay. This is not how elections work. This is not how any of these things should work. And I feel like they have ignored it for too long.

Social role theory suggests that when an organization continues to follow an outdated hierarchy structure that reinforces antiquated ideas about leadership, then the visible concept of leadership tends to give preferential treatment to men (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hannum et al., 2015). The “good old boys” network is present in Illinois’ organizations; therefore men are given preferential treatment to networking opportunities, awards, and promotions. By their gender alone, women are not viewed as younger versions of the male-dominated organization, thus the men of the organization are not invested in women’s success, hence the organization ignoring complaints from women about unfair practices within the organization, promoting men and not women to positions within the organization. If the organization is not invested in the success of their female members, then additional barriers are erected in the “labyrinth”.

Family responsibilities and Support

Women perform more hours than men when it comes to child rearing, consequently they often delay the start of their leadership trajectories, choosing to raise their children first (Clark & Hill, 2010; McGee, 2010). It is less likely to find children in the homes of individuals that hold
leadership positions with a high level of responsibility (McGee, 2010). The superintendency is the most powerful position in public school districts; thus, it is unlikely to find school aged children in the home of individuals that hold this position (Connell et al., 2015). Contrary to the research, all of the study participants had school-age children in the home at the start of their superintendency. Before stepping into the roles of superintendents, the study participants took into consideration how the position would impact their families. For Maya,

The personal thing would have been family, as far as time allocated, because what I did know from seeing both superintendents…they spent a lot of time at work…my daughter was in her senior year high school, and so it all worked out fine.

Because Maya’s daughter was a senior in high school, an age where she was able to be less dependent on a parent for meal preparation and being driven to and from school and activities, Maya did not believe family responsibilities would impede her responsibilities as a superintendent.

Viewing Alice’s data for family responsibilities alongside her career trajectory, the analysis is unique compared to the study participants’ data. When Alice accepted her first leadership position at the district level, teacher on assignment, Alice did not have any children. During her second leadership position as assistant principal, Alice became pregnant, and during her third leadership role, the district math and science coordinator, she gave birth to her first child. At this point in her career trajectory, Alice had a conversation with her husband.

My husband, after our first was born, I was still an assistant principal, we knew one of us was going to stay home. He had a corporate job and we ultimately said, well, because my trajectory here and leadership was starting to come along a little bit…that's when he started becoming a stay-at-home dad.
According to recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), 25% of children of married couples\(^6\) have a stay-at-home mother, while 1% have a stay-at-home father, further demonstrating the uniqueness of Alice’s social roles of mother, wife, and leader. Alice acknowledged the rarity of her situation and said, “You know, I never thought my husband would replace his career path with a stay-at-home role, which is great, but I never thought that would happen.” Having Alice’s husband be the stay-at-home parent, he was able to take over as primary care giver and household duties. Subsequently, Alice was then able to devote more time to focus on her career trajectory and go back to school to obtain her doctorate for the superintendency.

So that's sort of how I've been able to stay in this, too. When I consider this (superintendency), I was also starting my doctorate. So it was, "[Husband's name], are you still willing and able to? I mean, this is going to put more pressure on us. I'm doing my doctorate. The kids are very young." So, a lot of my consternation around should I do this or not was really around my family.

As Ruth and Sonia found themselves on the brink of the superintendency, they thought about how the role of superintendent would alter their roles of mother and/or wife and how the changes would impact their families. Ruth’s opinion of pursuing the superintendency was, “… it wasn't my pursuit. It was our [family’s] pursuit,” and the family would need to grow and adapt to the changes.

I had always been the in-town parent. And so, we had talks about what would that mean if I wasn't in town anymore…What would that mean for me as a mom? What was that going to mean to our daughter...so we had those kinds of conversations about what it would mean to our family and were we willing as a family to do that? Take those risks, make those sacrifices?

Sonia had similar concerns about how her roles of mother and wife would be affected by the superintendency and had conversations with her family.

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\(^6\) The data did not state the number of heterosexual married couples or same-sex married couples.
I had to think about how it's going to affect my family...the kids were doing sports and all of that...I had to talk to them about how I wouldn't be able to be at everything...So, I had to make sure my husband was capable of helping and doing all those things. And so, we had to kind of realize that my schedule was going to get more hectic than not.

As stated earlier, Gail did not apply for the superintendency when the position became available in her district. However, when the search consultants approached her and stated,”...we want you to apply or we're going to appoint you, so you can negotiate or not,” Gail felt as though she had no choice but to apply and could not have the conversations like Ruth and Sonia had with their families. Gail did think about how the superintendency would have an impact on her as a mother as well as her children’s health.

I wanted to be at my kids’ activities...and the impact on your kids' mental health, you know, moving and change is hard on everyone. It was a very short timeline that I needed to move...but really, time away from your kids. I was probably already a workaholic and in a high demand position, so you're adding to that. And how do you balance work and family? Those were the biggest considerations for me.

While reflecting on her experience of her first superintendency and its impact on her family, Gail stated, “Looking back now, I probably should have declined it just because of some of the impact of that (on her family).” Research has shown that family responsibilities are contributing factors as to why women do not pursue the superintendency, delay their trajectory for the superintendency, or why they leave the superintendency (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Grogan, 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Robinson, 2016; Tallerico & Tingley, 2001). Much like the research, Gail believed it was in the best interest of her family to leave the superintendency and wait to pursue her second superintendency when her children were older. “I was thinking to myself, let my kids get through high school and then return to the superintendency.” Putting her family first, Gail applied for and accepted a principalship in a new district.
When Alice first approached her husband about the superintendency, she stated that her husband’s reaction was, “he told me no the first night.” Before making a final decision, Alice and her husband decided to weigh the opinions of friends and family.

I went and talked to people we both knew, some professional contacts, friends, my sister, that sort of thing, and we kind of talked more about it…if I don't do this, like, how silly is this? We're not always going to get this opportunity. And so ultimately, I accepted that. And I know [Alice’s husband] was nervous. I was nervous, but we really just got more pieces of information in people's perspective that we cared about and talked more about it.

Although Alice’s husband did agree to be a stay-at-home dad for an indefinite period of time and supported her decision to accept the superintendency, Alice stated, “I would hope that I wouldn't have taken this on as an identity unless he supported me.” The same sentiment was shared by Ruth and Sonia when asked if they would have accepted the superintendency without the support of their families. For Ruth,

…it's (the superintendency) really a team effort. If I had pursued something that I didn't have the support of my family on, when times got tough, I would have no support network to help me at all. And then it would strain and stress out the marriage.

When asked if she would have accepted the superintendency without the support of her family, Sonia stated,

I don't think I would have if they wouldn't have been supportive…I've been very fortunate. I think if either of [her children] had had struggles in school or had just been way against it, I would've had to weigh what they needed from me first, as well. But that just wasn't my reality. I will tell you, my husband had to come around to it in terms of him being worried that it would be too much on me. And he still feels that way. He still feels like sometimes it's too much, that they ask too much and that it's too much, but he never said no to where I could apply.

Taking on the role of superintendent impacts the other roles the study participants enact as mother and/or wife. By having conversations with their families, Ruth, Alice and Sonia were able to prepare their families as to how the superintendency would impact each family member’s
life. With this understanding in mind, the families then weighed the pros and cons and spouses agreed to step-in and take over some of the household duties and child rearing. Therefore, the decision to pursue the superintendency was not an individual decision, but the family’s decision for Ruth, Alice, and Sonia, thereby diminishing family responsibilities as a barrier on their trajectories.

**Mobility**

Another barrier in the labyrinth researchers have recognized is women’s unwillingness to relocate for the position, thus limiting their opportunities for leadership positions (McGee, 2010; Sharp et al., 2004). The reasons women cite for not relocating are: (1) they do not want to leave the comfort zone of their current position; or (2) a new prospective position may be considered too far from the family’s home (McGee, 2010).

In her previous district prior to the superintendency, Sonia had a great connection with the people she worked with.

I talked to people in Bloomington at the time to see what they thought about it. And obviously, the ones that I worked with side by side didn't want to see me go. And that made me feel good, that I had done a good job there…if I wouldn't have felt like I was excelling there, then I probably would have been a little bit shyer to come back and apply for [current superintendency].

Contrary to the research, having a great connection with staff and feeling like she was excelling in her position did not prevent Sonia from applying for the superintendency outside of the district. Being comfortable in her position boosted Sonia’s confidence to apply for the superintendency in another district. However, it is worth noting that the district Sonia applied to
for the superintendency was the same school district she attended as a child. “Just came back to my district where I was raised up…I think the fact that it was my hometown and I felt such an allegiance here and wanting to do a better job, I really never looked back.” Going back to her hometown for the superintendency created a sense of familiarity, a comfort zone for Sonia, which she was able to use to her advantage during the interview process.

I made it to the final cut and there was another gentleman that made it to the final cut. We got interviewed in public in a school gymnasium…It was the middle school gym where I went to middle school, too. I could remember learning how to square dance in that gym. However, I got to be honest, I used that to my advantage, because I was able to draw on some of those things…it made people just feel a little like, OK, she's one of us.

The idea of going back to her hometown, a place very familiar to Sonia, diminished mobility as a barrier for her, as she was trading one comfort zone for another.

Gail, also, had a great rapport with her staff and community within her first superintendency. “I knew the leadership team. I knew the staff. I had a good relationship with the unions…I was within the district, so I knew it really well and felt comfortable.” When the board announced they were going to wait a year before deciding to renew Gail’s contract, there was outcry from the stakeholders to immediately renew her contract.

I've never seen such overwhelming positive support. That was not anticipated. But I had been there a long time and I had credibility with staff and the community…all of our board meetings had to be moved to auditoriums…And just, I would say like 99.99 % positive.

Even though Gail had a great relationship with staff and the community, the toxic relationship with the board, and what was best her kids, were the deciding factors to leave the superintendency.

I didn't want to move multiple times. And I thought, I'll just go here (current district) and [be a principal] while my kids are in school, so there's no more change on them having to move. It's close enough that they can still see their dad. We have a great relationship with their dad, and they can still see all of our family. Everybody's within 40 minutes.
In this instance, moving to her current district meant stability for her and her children and kept her children in close proximity to their father and extended family. In order to do this, as stated earlier, Gail took a step back on her trajectory and accepted a principalship for her current district.

The first time Ruth applied for the superintendency, it was for her current employing district. When the board decided to choose the other candidate over her, she thought, “…they hired the gentleman who is about my age…I clearly have to go interview at other places.” The barrier of leaving her comfort zone was not an issue for Ruth. “I've always been okay with change… I knew with the superintendency that was going to be another change.” As far as being too far from the family being a barrier, Ruth took into consideration her husband’s commute to work, as sometimes the superintendency has a residency requirement for superintendents to live within the district.

We didn't want to have him (Ruth’s husband) have a longer commute than he currently had. So, we kind of drew a circle in Illinois of like, here's your job, here's a one-hour radius around it. So that was really my search vicinity of where I was looking.

With a plan in place, Ruth applied for superintendencies outside the district. In two districts, Ruth was a finalist for the superintendency, but ultimately passed over for the other candidate. In time, the superintendent in Ruth’s current district left abruptly and she was promoted to acting superintendent, and eventually, superintendent. Ruth’s trajectory falls in accordance with the findings of Robinson et al. (2017) that women are more likely than men to be hired for the superintendency from within a currently employing district, which suggests school boards are more likely to take a chance on an unknown male candidate than an unknown female candidate. Ruth and her family were willing to relocate for the superintendency, but as stated earlier,
barriers that were out of her control, gender bias and lack of experience, did create obstacles for Ruth. While acting as interim superintendent, Ruth reshaped the thinking of board members by showing that women can be successful at leading school districts, and moreover, the board grew comfortable with her leadership style. So, even if women extinguish mobility as a barrier to the superintendency, they will still have to contend with gender bias, a barrier that is out of their control.

The trajectories and personal experiences of the study participants align with Eagly and Carli’s (2007) metaphor, the “labyrinth”. The study participants were able to take precautionary steps to prevent barriers, such as family responsibilities, thus reducing the number of twists and turns on their career paths. As stated earlier, research has shown women tend to be less mobile in their job hunts, however, data from the study participants show this is not the case, but in fact, the refusal of school boards to hire an unknown female superintendent is the cause for women seeking leadership positions in their current districts. By finding solutions for their obstacles, creating alternate paths, and/or taking a few steps back, the study participants are able to navigate their trajectories through the “labyrinth”.

Managing Role Conflict and Role Commitment through Balanced Leadership

Eckman (2004) noted that school districts would continue to struggle to find effective, highly qualified applicants for leadership positions if issues related to role conflict, role commitment, and job satisfaction are not addressed. Role conflict occurs when attempting to balance roles related to family, the home, and work. Role commitment is how one prioritizes
between work roles and roles related to relationships (Eckman, 2004). According to Maya and Sonia, the role of the superintendent entails being, “accessible 24/7,” and a concern amongst most leaders interviewed in qualitative studies is balancing work and family life (Forrest, 2017).

In a study of female superintendents by Reecks-Rodgers (2013), many of the participants recognized the potential strain the superintendency would create on their relationships with their families, and therefore, had conversations with their families prior to pursuing or accepting a superintendent position. As stated in a previous section about family support and responsibilities, the participants of this study were aware of the strain the superintendency could place on the relationships with their families, and Ruth, Alice, Gail, and Sonia discussed the potential changes and conflicts the superintendency could create within their family units. However, just like the superintendents in Reecks-Rodgers’ (2013) study, the participants of this study could not fully recognize the demand of the superintendent’s role until it was realized. Alice stated her opinion of the superintendency that mirrored the same sentiment of the other study participants. “I don't think I had any idea of the complexity of the role and the amount of pressure the role would have.”

A response women tend to have to the pressure related to leadership roles is to aim for balanced leadership. An idea of balanced leadership is when home duties are managed; women are better able to perform their leadership duties, thus bringing balance to both realms (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). When analyzing the data of the study participants, a theme of balanced leadership emerged, as each study participant discussed how they manage role conflict and role commitment. The three sub-themes of balanced leadership are: (1) compartmentalizing time to organize social roles; (2) having a support network to maintain balance; and (3) practicing self-care in order to function and provide balance amongst their social roles will be discussed below.
Compartmentalizing Time to Manage Social Roles

When Alice first began her superintendency, she found it difficult to balance her new roles of mother and superintendent.

I struggled early out of my superintendency, just becoming so identified with that identity. I didn't even know what to do when I went to my own children's school. I'm not a superintendent here, I'm just a mom. And how do I, especially as a parent, how do I navigate that effectively?

The reason for such confusion is Alice’s social roles were conflicting with each other and she had to commit to one of those roles. When faced with a question of role commitment, Kahn et al. (as cited in Greenhaus & Powell, 2000) noted individuals will commit to the role they feel is expressing the most pressure to comply. When faced with the dilemma to participate in a work related activity that coincides with a family related activity, those who chose work roles over family roles often face more conflict than those choosing to fulfill family roles (Greenhaus & Powell, 2000).

Alice recalled a time in her superintendency where she devoted more time to work than her other social roles.

I had this epiphany last year. Last spring, we had a referendum and ended up failing. And I turned and I looked around the day after that vote and said, "OK, it's a miserable feeling." I had just worked like crazy. I had realized I had disconnected so much from my social network of my friends and a lot of my family…and I said, "I can't do this…No, I can't, I cannot live in this mindset that I become so addicted more or less to work. That's not healthy.

A healthier habit that Alice, as well as the other study participants, practices is to compartmentalize her time to help organize and balance the time spent as her varying social roles. During the work week, after Alice has left work, she transitions from the role of superintendent to the roles of wife and mother.
Once I'm home, I really try to just be home…trying to tune out the noise (of work) as best as I can. A part of that is being better about not checking my phone. Once I put it down at like 8:00, I'll say that I really am not going to look at it before bed and I leave it downstairs…I don't look at it again until after I've showered and had breakfast. If someone really wants to get a hold of me they could. So that has helped.

Board meetings and school related events occasionally keep Alice from her family in the evenings, so she will trade that evening time from her family for extra time in the morning.

If I'm really late night, I may come in a little bit later the next day. I won't come in right at 8:00. I may come in at 8:30 or 9:00, which is really not that different, but just so I can see the kids a little bit.

On the weekends, Alice finds she is, "far more able to be a reliable," to attend the away games for her daughter’s travel basketball team.

On the weekends, I am far more 50/50 with [husband’s name] as far as who's taking the kids and where they are going. My oldest was on a travel basketball team and he said, “You know what? I don't want to drive an hour to sit and stay there for three games every time.” So, I actually did more of that. I used to play basketball, coach basketball games, things like that. So, he said, “This is your thing at this point.”

As a stay-at-home father, Alice’s husband is the primary caregiver to their children during the workweek while Alice is at work. By taking their oldest to her away games, Alice is able to reclaim time to connect and bond with her daughter and offer assistance to her husband in his role as a primary care giver, therefore, helping alleviate tension between Alice’s work role and her roles as mother and wife. Alice also compartmentalizes time with her husband to help bring about balance within her marriage.

I heard this on the radio once…two, two, and two rule…every two weeks you should have a date. Every two months you should have a weekend away. Every two years you should have a week vacation with each other. So, we actually do try to do that except for a weekend every two months is really hard, but we explicitly talked about that and tried to make that happen.
By consciously choosing to tend to family affairs over work and scheduling time with her husband, Alice sends a message to her family that her roles of mother and wife are extremely important.

Just making sure that I do turn off the work at certain times and things are going to be OK if I don't work that hard…I am going to leave early to go see the kids in their choral concert or things like that. And [husband’s name] needed to see that, too, that I was going to do more of that for my family.

When reflecting on her work-life balancing skills, Alice stated, “I haven't gotten good at this until last year…it was 19 years I had to go through this before I really got it.”

Maya believes, “striking a balance is very difficult…because you can be consumed by the job.” When it comes to conflicting roles vying for attention, Maya stated, “Some recitals you're going to miss, some holiday programs you're not going to be able to attend, because there may be a conflict in schedule.” As mentioned earlier, there are more negative repercussions for choosing to enact a work role than a family role (Greenhaus & Powell, 2000). To help offset any negative reaction, Maya utilizes her free time to the best of her ability. “When you have free time, set that aside for your healing, emotional healing, and to make sure that you are putting in that family time.” Another tactic Maya finds beneficial is having family present at some of the board meetings.

What I have done is allowed them (family) to be present in some of the board meetings…If it is something that is difficult or hard, I want them to see it. Then they can sort of feel it and put themselves in your shoes…And then the conversations become, “Oh, my gosh, you worked so hard. You do this all the time and how can we help?”

Having her family see the work that is entailed with the superintendency, they are able to understand why Maya cannot be at every function, thus alleviating some of the tension related to role conflict.
As stated earlier, if school districts do not address issues related to role conflict and role commitment, they will be hard pressed to retain superintendents or struggle to find highly qualified applicants (Eckman, 2004). Problems stemming from role conflict and role commitment are some of the reasons why Gail stepped away from her first superintendency and took a step back on her trajectory to become a principal. Within the first few months of her new job, the board approached Gail, asking if she would be willing to take on the superintendency in addition to her principalship. Gail’s response was, “I'm not going to do both jobs.” The board members asked if Gail thought she could handle doing both jobs.

Yeah, I could, but I'm not going to because it's not good for the district. It's not good for me personally. The reason I came here is I want to take some steps back and balance work. And this is not going to help that.

Gail recognized enacting two high attention leadership roles would create a lot of role conflict between the roles, as well impede on personal roles, thus potentially creating the same dissatisfaction she felt in her previous district. The board agreed with Gail and promoted her to the superintendency without having her fulfill the duties of the principalship as well. By setting boundaries, Gail is able to protect her goal of trying to achieve a healthier work-life balance.

Another added measure Gail utilizes to keep her work roles separate from her personal roles is going out of town to do grocery shopping. “In a small town, they're very comfortable, you know, you just run into them at the grocery store. So, we usually go out of town to get groceries.”

Grocery shopping in town means Gail would likely run into someone who primarily sees her in her role as superintendent and strike up a conversation with Gail about something work related. When grocery shopping, Gail is not enacting her role as a superintendent, hence why she would go out of town to avoid performing her role as superintendent during her personal time.
Ruth believes the key to balanced leadership is to know and set your boundaries. “I would say having a good understanding of your personal space. And your definition of what is personal, what is professional and knowing where that boundary is and staying with it.” To help reduce the amount of work issues that spill over into family time, Ruth follows advice given to her from her another superintendent.

Try to keep family private as much as you can from your job, because there will be enough times when they intertwine…You need to figure out a way to process your day so that your family doesn't become the place that you process it. I used to have a little mini tape recorder and they said only have one tape, but have it in your car. And when you get in your car, you can turn it on. Name it a friend and talk to it like it's a friend. Never get a new tape, because you're always taping over what you've done before so there's no record of your thoughts.

By talking to her tape recorder, Ruth is able to process her day as a superintendent, allowing her focus on her roles as mother and wife when she is at home. Another strategy Ruth utilizes to ensure the role of the superintendent does not encroach on family time is,

Never answer your phone at five to four. Nothing good comes into your office at five to four in the afternoon. If you need to, let it go to voicemail so you can digest what you're hearing. You're usually set to walk out the door. You're usually headed to one of your kid's things or something with your husband and you're just going to get frustrated with what's going on.

Ruth shares this advice with others to help them, “try to balance,” work and personal roles, but stated, “I don't always listen to my own advice.” Not answering the phone so close the end of the workday, Ruth ensures she is not extending the time she spends as the superintendent that would take away from her personal roles, thus diminishing role commitment conflict. However, Ruth is cognizant of the demands of the superintendency and how that role can, at times, interfere with her family time, but she does her best to make sure family time is protected for her family, even if she cannot be there due to an emergency.
And the minute the first phone call came in at seven thirty this morning, I said to him (her husband), I'm just going to grab my keys. And I drove a half a mile down the road. I live very close to one of my buildings… I was trying to preserve my family's Sunday by going to one of my buildings and letting them do their morning breakfast, do laundry, do whatever it is they were going to do…and not be worried about having to be quiet or the dogs can't bark because mom's on the phone.

Another thing Ruth does to protect her family time is to carefully plan family outings and vacations in such a way as to avoid role conflict.

Sometimes going into a weekend, they know it's going to happen…We wouldn't plan to go anywhere, that if I got a call and I had to walk out, I would miss what we were doing, or he'd be frustrated, or I'd be stuck in public somewhere trying to figure out how to have a conversation I can't have in public… We would have stayed home…so that if I had to deal with something and we were home, I wouldn't have to be frustrated, because I planned something, and it got interrupted. So, we just kind of pick what we do and when we do it based on the probability that something's going to happen.

Ruth believes it is vital to, “keep your personal and your professional at a balance—that's healthy for you to keep running healthy.” Ruth sets parameters for her work and personal roles, thus lessening the chances of role conflict and optimizing her time as each role.

Like Ruth, Sonia tries to maximize her time with her family by scheduling vacations when there will be little to no demands from work.

If I am going to schedule a vacation time or try to get away, I always try to do it on the weekend right after a board meeting, so it's not the weekend that I'm prepping for a board meeting, because that's often the time that the board members will reach out to me more.

Another thing Sonia did to keep her work-related roles separate from her personal related roles was to purchase a separate phone specifically for work.

I did purchase two phones when I got this job. And that has helped a little bit. One of my phones is just for my work numbers. The district doesn't provide a cell phone, so I have to provide that.

Only personal relations are allowed to have Sonia’s personal number, and anyone related to work is given her work cell phone number. “That way I just know that no board of education member
is going to pop up on my personal phone. No reporter is going to pop up on my personal phone.” Sonia always has her personal cell phone on her, but when she is enacting personal roles outside of work hours, Sonia will leave her phone at home.

I have aging parents that live here in the area, so I always have my phone with me for them and to make sure my kids don't need me. But if we go to dinner, or we do anything else, I leave my work phone at home, and it can wait. My executive assistant has my personal phone, so if something tragic happens, like if I'm on a trip and there's a tornado here or something, she's going get a hold of me.

By having two phones and leaving the work phone at home during non-work hours, Sonia is able to separate her work roles from her personal roles when she is out spending time with her friends and family, thus showing full commitment to those roles. If Sonia feels a work-related call that happens outside of work hours is one that she cannot, “leave it to the next morning,” she will return the call. “It helps them...People feel important when you call them at night. There's something about that. I have two board members that always say, ‘Can you take a call?’ or ‘Please call me?’ and it can be anytime a day.” By having two phones, Sonia is able to have two separate lines of communication open to individuals related to her personal roles and work-related goals. Sonia is able to focus more on family and friends outside of work hours by not having her work phone on her, thus making them feel like they are a priority. When Sonia returns a work-related call outside of normal business hours, those individuals feel as though Sonia is making her role as superintendent a priority. The individuals linked to both phones feel like they are a priority, thus reducing the instances of role commitment conflict between her personal and work-related roles.

To help manage her various social roles Sonia relies on an electronic calendar to organize her time amongst her roles.
What we do is we actually code my time. I try to code them by who I'm having the meeting with and what the topic is and whether the topic is more community based, outreach, instructional…management…We coded if it's a student issue and I'm working with a particular family or a particular student.

Personal time is also coded on the calendar, and to help protect that time, as well as help maintain the calendar, Sonia relies on her administrative assistant.

We started calendaring what we call all my family's activities. My secretary would actually help me protect that time and that really helped me…and I have a small group that we have dinner once a month…I put that on my calendar and she knows to try to not, if at all possible, schedule anybody or schedule an event. She'll try to say, “Hey, she's not free Wednesday night, but she can do Tuesday or Thursday night.” And things like that.

Calendarizing and coding her time help Sonia organize her social roles and allows her to see how much time she is spending as each role. “I also code by people, so that helps me make sure that I am not leaving out any groups, any individuals…it helps me not forget.” As a result, Sonia lessens role commitment conflict by seeing the time spent in each role and making sure time is spent in each role. Role conflict is also lessened as Sonia’s assistant protects important time with family, friends, and all stakeholders. Sonia believes using the electronic calendar is, “…one of the things that helps,” her balance her social roles. Furtherly, Sonia stated, “And if I hadn't done it as a principal, I don't know if I would have been able to do it as a superintendent as much.” By developing her calendar skills before the superintendency, Sonia was able to continue to maintain a balance amongst her roles, thus reducing the consequences of role conflict and role commitment conflict.

Although the study participants try to maintain a separation between their personal and work roles, Gail, Ruth and Sonia benefit from opportunities where they can combine multiple roles without consequences. Gail has, “worked hard to establish a balance,” but she, “…wouldn't say it's a balance. It's really more of just a blended model.” For instance, Gail has found a way to
blend her social roles of superintendent and wife. “During baseball and softball season, there's always Saturday tournaments and we'll usually try to stop by each at least for a few innings. We do enjoy that a couple hours or more every week and stuff like that.” By finding ways to harmoniously enact multiple social roles at once, Gail reduces the number of times of being faced with the dilemma of having to choose between family and work, thus diminishing the negative outcomes of such choices.

Ruth tries her best to keep her roles related to work separated from roles related to her personal life, but admitted, “It is a struggle. Some days and some weeks are better than others.” Like Gail, sometimes Ruth has to blend her work roles and personal roles and invites her husband to go with her to district functions. “So, if we haven't seen each other in a while for different things, my husband has been known, as he calls it, ‘A weird date night,’ to come along with me so we can spend some time together.”

Because the work of a superintendent goes beyond the school hours of a workweek, Sonia has found a way, much like Ruth and Gail, to enact her roles of wife and superintendent at the same time.

There are very few weekends where I just don't have anything that would be school based because, as you know, cross country meets run on Saturdays, football games on Saturday nights, basketball games run on Friday night and Saturday night. So, the good thing is my husband really likes sports. We both grew up in [town where Sonia is superintendent], so we have our loyalties, of course, to [name of town] athletics and we love to go. And it's nice. We try to go to dinner before or after and go see a game and kind of make it a date night. And it's easy.

The study participants are cognizant of the many roles they play each day and the importance of each role. By defining each role, setting parameters, and successfully enacting multiple roles at once, the superintendents are able to visualize what a work-personal life balance
would look like for them and what is needed to strike that balance in order to maintain their trajectories.

**Having a Support Network to Maintain Balance**

Katz and Kahn (as cited in Siegall & Cummings, 1995) identified four types of role conflict: (1) intrasender conflict, (2) intersender conflict, (3) person-role conflict, and (4) interrole conflict. Intrasender conflict exists when an individual receives incompatible expectations from a single role sender and intersender conflict exists when incompatible expectations are from multiple role senders. Person-role conflict becomes apparent when an individual’s ideas of their own role expectations are not aligned to the expectations of one or more role senders. Interrole role conflict presents itself when an individual is pressured to choose which role to perform. By having a support network, one can reduce the occurrence of the four types of role conflict (Siegall & Cummings, 1995). The study participants discussed how their support networks helped them reduce such conflict and help maintain balanced leadership.

As discussed earlier, the study participants feel that having their family’s support is important in their career trajectory and discussed with their families, prior to the superintendency, what the job could entail. For Ruth, having the experience of watching her father as principal and then a superintendent, she knew how the superintendency could impact her relationships with her husband and daughter.

All through growing up, I got to hear the conversations in the house about organizing a huge event or board meetings or my dad used to sit on the negotiations team for the district. So, I got to hear all of that kind of conversation. Then when he became a superintendent, I got to watch the dynamic. My mom and him. I was in college at the time, so every time I came home for a break, I would be in the house hearing them, listening to them, talking to them. I tell you; it was very interesting.
Although Ruth had an idea of how being a superintendent impacts the family dynamic, Ruth’s husband did not. To help her husband understand what it means for a spouse to be a superintendent, Ruth relies on her parents’ support.

My husband and I had several conversations with my parents as I started to think about it…lots of conversations about what that means on a marriage. My mother had lots of conversations with me, with my husband about what it's like to be a sounding board at home, what it's like to listen to your spouse talk about things going on at work and you want to give your two cents, but it's probably best just to listen. And how frustrating that can be.

To this day, Ruth’s parents still provide support as they navigate their roles. “My husband will still call my mom at times and be like, ‘Oh, my gosh, this happened. And how did you put up with that?’” Ruth’s parents help her and her husband set the expectations of their roles, thus diminishing the conflicts that could arise from intrasender conflict, person-role conflict, and interrole conflict. Ruth recalled a traumatic experience within her district that interrole conflict would have created a strain in the relationship between her and her daughter if it had not been for her husband’s support.

My phone was going off at 2:00 in the morning. It was going off at 6:00 in the morning. It was going off at 10:00 at night. And my daughter at times was like, “Why can't they just leave her alone?” And it was my husband that actually said, “Because this is one of those times, honey, where she just needs to be there, support and help the problem. And there's no time barrier to it. All we can do is make sure that we have dinner for her, that she's eating, that she's taking some breaks. And when mom falls asleep, if it's 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon, the house goes quiet so she can get whatever sleep she's going to get until her phone goes off again.” And without that, I don't know how you could be successful for a long term.

When spending time in the community with her family, Ruth is aware that people will see her as a superintendent first and approach her as such to discuss district related business. To help prevent conflicts amongst her roles of superintendent, wife, and mother, Ruth and her husband have a pact that allows all roles to act as a priority.
We made the arrangement with each other. Give me five minutes, and after five minutes, if they're still talking to me, then you need to walk up and say, “You know what, I'm really excited that you matter today, but I brought her here so that she could be a mom to [our daughter]. [She’s] waiting for her, we really need to leave.” So, balancing that, so that work didn't take over and I wasn't able to be a mom when I needed to be…and to do that without hopefully making people feel insulted or dismissed in any way.

By allowing stakeholders five minutes to talk to Ruth as their superintendent, Ruth is able to make them feel like they are a priority all the while balancing her time with her family.

As discussed in previous sections, the job of a superintendent is not confined to school hours. While working on superintendent related duties at home, Ruth’s and Alice’s families feel comfortable to let them know when they think it’s time for them to step away from their laptops and take a break. According to Alice,

My family isn't shy…my youngest is very emotionally attuned and she's like, "I think you are too stressed right now. You're not being productive. You need to step away from your computer." So, they become my guides on the side and helping me recognize that I'm just too stressed.

When Ruth’s husband notices she has her laptop and does not seem to be working, Ruth stated,

He'll look at me and ask, “Are you doing that? Because you just like to have it in front of you? Or was there something you're working on?” And I get it. I know. And then I'll shut it and we'll put it away.

Besides family, friends are another support network that help the study participants balance their work-personal lives. Gail believes having, “a good girlfriends group helps keep that balance,” between work roles and personal roles. According to Alice, “You just need friends who say, ‘Hey, you've been off the radar for too long.’ You just need to give permission to people to say that to you.” For Sonia, “My friends have been really awesome to me and they kind of help me get away.” Giving permission to friends to check in on them and point out when they are not giving attention to their friendships help Alice, Gail, and Sonia ensure they are not neglecting personal roles, thus reducing role conflict between themselves and their friends. Alice and Sonia
find it is beneficial to maintain friendships with people outside of education. Alice believes, “making sure that you do find time to build relationships that have nothing to do with your job,” is important to maintaining balance. Alice’s friends outside of education know she is a superintendent, “but it just doesn't come up in conversations.” Sonia’s friends outside of education are, “really good at just calling and saying, let's go do something that's not teacher related.” Having friends outside of education allows Alice and Sonia to have a space that keeps work separated from their personal lives.

Support networks related to work are another way the study participants can balance their work roles and personal roles. As mentioned earlier, Sonia and her assistant code family related items on the electronic calendar, and Sonia’s assistant helps safeguard that family time. As for work related items, Sonia’s assistant helps her to streamline her focus with work related items and has access to her district email account to help her keep track of who she has responded to or not.

At least once or twice a week we meet…and during that time she's got this notebook where she keeps all the big questions that we have to answer…she'll go through and remind me about the things I need to do or issues that we need to wrap up. And that is like an invaluable service to me.

Ruth’s assistant, much like Sonia’s assistant, respects Ruth’s time with her family. Ruth recalled a time when her assistant respected an event related to a personal role, allowing it to take precedence over a work-related role.

She (Ruth’s daughter) was within her time to ride. She's dressed, she's up on the horse…and it's 72 seconds in the ring. That's all I needed was 72 seconds in the ring. And my phone starts blowing up…and I'm like, ignore, ignore, ignore, ignore. Finally, my secretary calls me and her call, I'm taking. I pick up the phone and she's like, “I am so sorry to bother you. How's [name of daughter] doing?” I said, “Well, she's about ready to get up on the horse.” And she goes, “Call me back in five minutes,” because she knows what that means when I say she's about to be on the horse. So, I was able to be a mom. She let me do that. Be a mom.
Besides her role as mom, Ruth’s assistant is cognizant of the other roles she enacts and helps Ruth to streamline her focus as a superintendent.

I have been bombarded with parent emails and she said to me, “You need to block an hour of your day when that's what you're going to do. But don't make your day answering that, because we need you focused on other things.”

By allowing their assistants to help them organize their focus on tasks, Sonia and Ruth can be more efficient, thus allowing them a bit more time to function in their other roles. Also, the assistants add another layer of protection from conflict when they respect and protect the time Sonia and Ruth spend with their families.

Another work-related support network that can help reduce role conflict is the board of education. Alice stated her board, as well as the leadership team, respect each other’s time away from work. “My boards and my admin team have been really respectful of, for the most part, that weekend time. We try to be really good about that.” An example of this is when Alice’s board president at the time noticed her work roles were dominating all her time.

My board president at the time as was coming off the board and she had lunch with me and said, “You know, I care too much about you and you care too much about this job and this community. I don’t think it's worth it. I think you're killing yourself.” And I’m so glad she said that. So, I really took that as a turning moment, that turning point where I started to do more things for myself to get myself healthier and more balanced.

According to Ruth, her board members, “are very family centered,” and encourage her to take vacations.

The other philosophy that my board has is they don't pay us for vacation days that we don't take, because they believe healthy administrators take vacation. So, they don't want us to stockpile four weeks of vacation and then pay me and now I'm stressed out and I'm tired and I didn't get personal things in.

Another way some of the board members respect and protect Ruth’s time with her family is being cognizant of the time when calling outside school hours.
My previous board president always knew that my daughter would ride out at the barn on Wednesday nights and Thursday nights. And so, every time he would call me, and it would be after 4:00, he's like, “Are you at the barn yet? Because if you're at the barn, I'm going to talk to you tomorrow”... My current board president is just as cognizant of that. And we'll say things like, if he calls me at 5:00 o'clock, he'll ask, “Are you at home?” And if I say I'm at home, he's like, “OK, talk to you tomorrow”...if it's super important, he will say, like last Sunday, “I know it's Sunday and it kills me, but do you have five minutes to talk to me?” And then literally at five minutes, he goes, “OK, I'm at five minutes.” And I said, “But you're not done talking.” He goes, “But I told you it would be five minutes.”

Ruth feels very grateful for having board members that respect and help protect her personal time. I've had board presidents that have been very, very cognizant for me at times when I have had difficulty doing that, making sure that I get my time in with my family. I've been very blessed with that.”

Having board members emphasizing the importance of personal time and respecting that personal time helps to diminish the occurrence of the four different types of role conflict, and consequently helps promote job satisfaction, thus eliminating the reasons Eckman (2004) cited for high turnover in the superintendency.

Another person-role conflict study participants addressed was society’s stereotypical expectations of their social roles of mother and homemaker and living up to those expectations. The ideas and beliefs of tasks related to social roles lies within human’s physical sex difference. Women’s reproductive activities of gestating and nursing tasked them with duties related to childrearing, keeping them near the home. Men’s size and strength brought them outside of the home to hunt for large animals, participate in warfare, or plowing (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This sexual division of labor is one of the most enduring and universal characteristics of work both in the home and in the workplace (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). When Alice’s children were still in
diapers, Alice struggled to fulfill her expectations, based on society’s expectations, of being a primary caregiver, all the while Alice’s husband was learning to be a stay-at-home dad.

So, if I go back to the early days where I still very much was like, OK, here's the chart you're going to follow. How many times the girls got fed? And when you changed their diapers. All day, I knew everything, too, you know, I couldn't sustain that. He had to become more independent...there was guilt that I wasn't around at some of their things, and he was the one that could be there...we worked through some of those things...now it's evolved to the place where we're very comfortable that the kids...this is all they know. And I think that they feel really good that he's been able to be home with them and support them, but that's been good. But I, through all this, too, I've become much better.

Even though Alice is not considered the primary caregiver to their children, she has always considered herself, “a mom and a wife first,” along her trajectory. By realizing society’s stereotypical view of being the primary caregiver was not realistic, Alice was able to create role expectations that were achievable, thus eliminate the person-role conflict.

Women spend more time than men on household duties (Eagly & Carli, 2007). As stated earlier, Alice, Sonia, and Ruth discussed with their families how the superintendency would impact the dynamics of their families and how members of the family would need to share some of household duties typically performed by the study participants before the superintendency. Specifically, Ruth explained to her daughter that the superintendency meant she would occasionally be, “cooking dinner or picking up extra things at the house.” As stated in an earlier section, Sonia discussed with her husband his capability to take over and share some of her primary household duties. According to Sonia, her and her husband, “We clean a lot. We organize a lot. We're just like that.” However, Sonia admitted, “I pretty much do laundry and clean the house and kind of get everything ready for the week.”

For those women that can afford to, another strategy to manage household duties is to hire someone to complete them (Eagly & Carli 2007). Gail noted that she, “did have a
housekeeper for years,” and that she does, “hire out for lawn work.” As for other household duties, Gail’s children and her husband contribute to the housework.

My husband provides very good balance...he's always been kind of the laundry person and he and I are both very type A. So, our house stays pretty clean...we kind of trained our kids, at least out in our area, that they have to be the same way.

By having conversations with their families about how the superintendency would impact the organization of household duties, or having hired help, the study participants do not feel the need to conform to the stereotypical roles of homemaker that are linked to their gender, and consequently, mitigate this aspect of person-role conflict.

The support networks the study participants have in place have helped them achieve balanced leadership. By giving permission to people to monitor their activities and step in when they notice a lack of involvement in a social role, or when a social role is dominating all other roles, they are able to better maintain balanced leadership along their trajectory. The study participants believed the superintendency would impact their roles as wife and/or mother, and by communicating these changes with their spouses and children, they were able to redefine their roles, set realistic expectations of their roles, thus reduce the for types of conflict.

Practicing Self-Care in Order to Function and Provide Balance amongst Their Social Roles

Focusing on self-care is vital for efficient performance and balance amongst one’s social roles, yet there is limited research on how school leaders use self-care practices in regard to improve their well-being and effectiveness (Bressi & Vaden, 2016; Cook-Cottone, 2017; Melito-Conners, 2019). Self-care as defined by Cook-Cottone (2017) is, “The daily process of being aware of and attending to one’s basic physiological and emotional needs including the shaping of
one’s daily routine, relationships, and environment as needed to promote self-care” (p. 297). Self-care is fundamental for an individual’s physical, emotional, and mental well-being (Cook-Cottone, 2017). By incorporating daily self-care practices, one reaps the benefits of lowered stress levels, elevated levels of happiness, a positive boost to the immune system, improved sleep, and improved cardiovascular health, thus decreasing burnout and increasing productivity, and consequently eliminating interrole conflict between choosing to attend to their individual self-role’s health problems related to stress and their work and personal roles (Bressi & Vaden, 2016; Cook-Cottone, 2017; Melito-Conners, 2019).

Sonia and Ruth believe in the importance of self-care and have established routines and activities to care for themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally. Ruth recalled her instructor for her doctoral program telling her to, “Be really healthy on the first day you go into it (the superintendency), because you'll never be as healthy again until you retire.” Both Ruth and Sonia work out before going into the office. For Ruth, she found a way to exercise in the morning while responding to emails.

My husband figured out how I can strap my laptop to the treadmill. I have a Mac, so I can hit where it talks the email to me and then I can hit the microphone and I can talk back and send emails while I'm on my treadmill.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Sonia worked out with a small group. “I had been trying to work out like 5:00, 5:30 in the morning. I had a small group that I had joined, and it really worked out well before the pandemic.” Although the pandemic required the place where Sonia worked out to temporarily close, Sonia found other ways to ensure she got her exercise in for the day.

Now, we can't really go back to that organization at this point in time, but at least taking a walk once a day and doing those kinds of things would help. My husband and I have a
really cool bike trail right by our house. So, we'll hop on that. It's really pretty and it's really super relaxing.

In addition to an exercise regime, both Ruth and Sonia try their best to schedule times to eat healthy meals. Ruth stated, “I have found a multitude of things that I can do to make myself a breakfast at work so that I can eat at somewhat of a normal time.” As for Sonia, working out and her schedule dictate when and what she eats.

If I don't work out in the morning, I sometimes don't eat breakfast...One of the things that I do at lunch is, depending on the day of the week, if I know I'm going to be in my office all day, I'll usually take my lunch. Oftentimes, I'll have a meeting...so I just try to minimize how much I eat at those things, because they're meals that are never that great or hopefully they have salad or something. I try to not overeat during the day, because it switches your metabolism. You don't feel as fresh, and it is easy to keep going and realize at two o'clock that you haven't really had anything. So, I have a small closet...and I try to keep some little things like soups and crackers and things like that to keep my metabolism going and everything throughout the day.

Sonia acknowledges trying to maintain a healthy diet and exercise routine is difficult, but necessary.

I think one of my biggest pet peeves of this is oftentimes I'm eating dinner late, which is not good for you. So, it's important to continue to work out and continue to make that a part of my day and then try not to eat when it's late at night. Those are the hardest things...the worst parts of this job are the eating and then the ups and downs of different times that I exercise and don't exercise. So, I've fluctuated quite a bit. I'm never super overweight, but just, you know, not being where I want to be in my own personal opinion.

A person who takes the time to eat right and exercise creates a body that is more adept to handle the rigors of stress than an unhealthy body (Cook-Cottone, 2017). Taking the time to exercise and to eat healthy meals, Sonia and Ruth are preparing their bodies to sustain the daily stress they experience within their social roles as well as balancing them.

Self-care is not only important to Ruth, but to those around her as well. Ruth displays a sign in her office, reminding her and others of the importance of self-care. “I have a sign that one
of the administrators I work with gave to me…that says, ‘Self-care is not selfish.’” By creating an environment that supports self-care, Ruth and her administrators can talk to each other freely when they notice someone is not as their best.

We do have those times where everybody knows they need to shut down. And quite frankly, my administrative team, including myself, have some hard conversations with each other where we're like, “You know what? You're snapping at people. You need to take a step back. You need to take a couple hours away. You need to do something because you're not being you. And so, we need to find a way to get you to recharge, because you're just not doing well.

By having colleagues check-in with her and each other, Ruth adds another layer of protection to self-care that will help prevent burnout, thus diminishing a high turnover rate between her and her colleagues.

The daily routine of a leader can be very demanding; therefore, many leaders sacrifice time for self-care in order to tackle the multitude of tasks they see each day (Melito-Conners, 2019). Maya does not have a daily routine for self-care, stating, “the work comes first,” but acknowledges the importance of healthy eating habits.

I don't have a set lunch hour. I know a lot of people do. They'll say, “OK, I'm off from this time to this time.” And it really is healthy to do that, because you're just going, going, going. But bathroom breaks and lunch breaks, you know, you get it when you can…so, maybe I won't eat lunch until three o'clock.

Although Maya does not have a daily regiment for self-care, she does, as stated earlier, take any free moment she gets and sets time aside for, “emotional healing,” and attends church on a weekly basis for, “inner-peace,” and, “strength.” However, by not having a daily self-care routine, Maya runs the risk of experiencing the consequences of chronic or elevated levels of stress that could impact her well-being (Cook-Cottone, 2017; Melito-Conners, 2019).

Gail and Alice admitted they have experienced the consequences of an absent self-care routine. In Gail’s first superintendency, she noticed, “a lot of dysfunctions,” amongst the school
board. “So, there was this dysfunction there which contributed to what I thought would be kind of a shorter term superintendency, because dysfunctional boards usually stay dysfunctional.”

Gail did not mention a daily routine for self-care, and stated, “I manage stress very well, because I worked in a district with a lot of crises for a long time,” however, the chronic stress started to take a toll on her health.

I wasn't noticing things like weight gain, but what I did notice was I started itching all over, which was very weird. I remember going to my doctor, which I hardly ever went to…and he stated, “I have the cure. You need to get a different job.”

Gail did leave the district, but was still experiencing the consequences of chronic stress in her second superintendency with disrupted sleep.

Generally, I go to bed like 10:30ish and I'm usually up for at least an hour from 2:00-3:00 or 2:00 to 4:00. I would say at least six nights a week, and I'm usually working during that time. There are things running through your mind and I'm either making a list or just getting some of it down.

It was not until the mandatory shut down of COVID-19 that gave Gail the opportunity to take care of herself.

What is so weird is that I've learned to sleep through the night again…I don't think I have done that in like 10 years, I think it's just your brain is not racing. There's not so much going on… I've been cooking more during the pandemic, so we're doing a lot better now. We're sleeping, we're cooking meals…and so I honestly have felt better. Which is horrible, but I felt better than I have in a long time, just from having six to seven hours of sleep straight through.

If Gail continues to care for herself after the pandemic, when her schedule becomes more demanding, perhaps she will be able to maintain her lowered stress levels and continue to sleep through the night, thus reducing her interrole conflict between work and self.

Like Gail, it took an event in Alice’s life to realize there was an interrole conflict between her work roles and self. As stated earlier, when the referendum did not pass, Alice was discontent with the amount of time she devoted to work, and consequently, began to notice
effects from neglecting self-care. “I was really unhealthy. I put on a weight.” At that point, Alice realized she needed to practice self-care in order to be her best self in all that she does.

I really took that as a turning moment where I started to do more things for myself to get myself healthier and more balanced… regularly exercising, which, yes, I look better, but also it's just that being able to manage stress. It's so critical...I say it's probably the most important thing that I do to keep my balance and my sanity…being strong for my team and new board members that came in.

Alice also believes it is important to model self-care practices for her staff. “If I'm going to lead and model and expect others to take care of themselves and believe in that, I have to do that myself.” Taking better care of herself has helped Alice reduce her stress levels and provided balance between her work roles and self, thus eliminating this aspect of interrole conflict and the consequences of such conflict.

Besides regular diet and exercise, there are other methods the study participants practice for self-care. Alice and Sonia mentioned reading as a way to practice self-care and to learn about self-care. Sonia stated she is, “an avid reader.” On the weekends, Sonia will, “get up early in the morning and read for an hour.” For Alice, she finds a peaceful time on the weekends to read in the morning before the rest of the family rises.

My cherished moment is if I wake up and everybody else is still in bed, I make my coffee and I get to sit and either read the paper or sit outside for like maybe half an hour. That is, to me, the gift of the week.

Sonia belongs to a book club and recalls a book with life balance being a theme. “We read Wash Your Face this year, which was kind of a short one about kind of balancing life and things like that.” As for Alice, she has two authors that she credits as having helped her find a work-life balance. “I read Sean Baker's, Happiness Advantage, and I still say that he and Brené Brown are my two kind of go-tos just to help me.”
Another self-care practice Sonia and Gail do to protect their mental and emotional health is ignoring social media. Sonia, stating her opinion,

I would say that this era of superintendent, the last five to ten years has been just on an uphill battle with social media and people's opinions. And you can be feeling good about yourself one minute and feeling horrible the next…But by staying off of it, I saved myself from a lot of it, because so much of it is just not worth me reading. It would hurt your soul a little bit.

Gail shared a similar opinion as Sonia. “I think that's the challenge that people can reach you. It's not just email or phone, but text and social networking and messaging… I try to stay off social networking…I try to ignore that as much as I can.” Both study participants recognize social media is a way for stakeholders to communicate with them, so they each have a designated person to monitor social media accounts related their districts. Gail stated, “I do have someone who manages our Facebook page for us, but she'll usually give me a heads up if there's something I need to respond to.” For Sonia,

It's a really important thing to have somebody that can keep their pulse on it. So, I do have a person that kind of just helps me monitor our own district social media accounts where we're trying to put out the positives, but yet also deal with any negative vibes that are coming.

By staying off social media and having another person monitor the accounts linked to their districts, Sonia and Gail are safeguarding their mental and emotional well-being from any unnecessary negativity that could compromise their health.

The study participants recognize the importance of self-care as a way of preserving their best selves in the multiple roles they portray each day. By taking the time to care for themselves, the study participants decrease their chance of having health ailments related to chronic stress, thus reducing the instance of interrole conflict between the role of self and work-personal roles.
Along their trajectories, the study participants have experienced role conflicts. By aiming for a balanced leadership style, the study participants are able to manage role conflicts and role commitments. In order to achieve a balanced leadership style, the study participants define and set expectations and parameters for their roles, communicate their role expectations in relation to others, thus reducing the occurrence of role conflict. For the most part, the study participants try to keep work roles separate from personal roles, and having others help monitor role commitments, the study participants increase their chances of having balanced leadership. At times, the study participants have had to combine work roles with personal roles, and in such instances, they have experienced positive effects, not negative consequences. Above all, to function at their best capacity in each role and to find balance amongst their roles, attention to self-care is key. For those study participants that practice self-care, they notice improvements to their physical, mental, and emotional health. When attention to self-care is absent, the study participants see negative effects to their overall health. Having a balanced leadership style has helped the study participants diminish role conflicts, thus increasing their chances of a successful career trajectory.

Concept of Power and Leadership

As stated earlier in this chapter, the inception of the superintendency was to have a male leader act as a manager overseeing the day-to-day operations and monitoring the actions of teachers (Blount, 1998; Fowler, 2013). Presently, male superintendents still tend to view their role as managerial by viewing colleagues as subordinates, delivering rewards and consequences, and believe that power is linked to their position (Rosener, 2011). Women superintendents,
however, tend to disavow hierarchal systems, opting for a communal system, and take interest in helping subordinates transform their own interests to serve the interests of the group. As such, women believe power is something to be shared and not a device that is used to control others (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Rosener, 2011).

As the study participants discussed their roles as superintendents, five sub-themes emerged: (1) relational leadership, (2) connection to community, (3) focus on social justice, (4) leadership for learning, and (5) leading with a moral compass.

**Relational Leadership**

Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) define relational leadership as, “A way of engaging with the world in which the leader holds herself/himself as always in relation with, and therefore morally accountable to others; recognizes the inherently polyphonic and heteroglossic nature of life; and engages in relational dialogue” (p. 1425). Relational leaders value relationships, emphasize human interactions, and view interpersonal relations as a way for an organization to collectively construct communal meaning and structure, and in turn, can achieve organizational growth and value (Sanders, 2018). Within this paradigm, leaders place themselves on the same line as subordinates, thus power is shared, not used to control, to help others and strengthen relationships (Brunner, 2000; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Sanders, 2018).

As stated earlier, all the study participants emphasized the value of relationships within the superintendency. According to Sonia, “The number one thing that I would tell myself is it's all about relationships. It's about creating relationships with the community, with your colleagues, with your school team.” Alice believes, “If you have a really good relationship and a
system and a clear process with staff, there's a lot you can accomplish for students and bring to the community.” Gail also believes relationships are important to the superintendency, but more importantly, it’s how a superintendent builds those relationships. “I think the most regarded qualities will be the ways you build relationships with people. Are you a good listener? Can you understand people? Can you connect with people? Can you disagree with people, but still make them feel respected?” Gail builds a relationship with the educators in her district by having them, “…be a part of the decisions, a true part, and not just sign off on [the superintendent’s] decisions.” By gaining input from staff, Gail fosters a communal environment by placing herself on the same line as her subordinates and feels comfortable if a colleague has a better idea than her. “For me, what feels good is trusting in the process that if you put a lot of people in a room, they'll come up with something better than the idea you had yourself.” Just like Gail, the other study participants believe a communal environment, not a hierarchy, builds trusting relationships. Sonia shared her opinion of a hierarchy versus a communal environment. “I don't think the superintendent is going to be able to be this autocratic leader that just says this is the way it's going to be. It's going to have to be very collaborative.” According to Maya, “I think that when you're present, then things happen because they know that you care. And it's not something that is just coming from the top down. But we're in this together.” Maya reiterates this communal environment to her colleagues and staff by telling them, “If you are unsuccessful then that means I am unsuccessful. So, we all are in this together.” Alice creates a communal environment by placing herself on the “team” as an equal player.

A key piece of a superintendency is you have to have a really strong team. You can't do it on your own. If you're self-aware of your strengths and weaknesses, you build your team around you. So, it's not to view the superintendency as I do all that. It's not. It's here's my strengths. Here's what I need to shore up.
As a team player, Alice will consult other members of the team to solicit their opinions and feedback.

I trust my administration team so, so much, and depend on them…and they appreciate that. All the principals have said, “We appreciate that you'll call us and just say, hey, what do you think about that?”...people want to be needed and appreciated. That's real important.

Alice further demonstrated her beliefs of a communal environment when she discussed the initiatives implemented in her district.

It's real important to me that none of these things ever get attributed to me, because I hope it has become so ingrained into what the school is and the organization that it becomes part of their cultural identity. It's not because, you know, Alice wanted it. Because really good, really effective changes in the organization is going to be because that organization made it happen, and it will continue it.

Ruth denounces a hierarchal system by encouraging people to call her by her first name and not by title.

You have to make relationships with people, so they know who you are. I like the fact that people call me Ruth. I don't need to be called Dr. [last name]. People call me Ruth, and that's fine…I said the district uses title when they put my name on things. I want them to know me as a person.

Ruth, like Gail, is comfortable if someone has a better idea or plan than her, but she also gives permission to colleagues to stop her in the middle of an idea if they know why it will not work.

An example Ruth gave was when talking to the district’s union representatives.

I'm really looking for us to work on this together. And if you've got a great idea for it, awesome. If I have an out of the box idea and you're like, whoa, whoa, whoa, I don't think we'll get people to buy that contractually, then stop me right from the beginning.

Another way Ruth supports a communal environment is encouraging everyone to be a part of the planning process. “People are with us, because they're a part of it. It's not happening to them. It's happening with them. And they get a voice.” Ruth acknowledges her district is not
“Candyland” and that you will not always have total consensus or support for a plan, but she still tries to find a way to include and support those who oppose.

But at some point, if you have one person saying, I disagree, do you let an entire organization of fifteen hundred people stop progress, because one person isn't onboard? So, you have to have a guiding light of how you get people onboard and at what point you say we have a consensus. And this is what that looks like. And how can I help you support what we're doing? I know you may not love it, but can you live with it? And how do we move forward with that?

Interpersonal connections are another way relational leaders build and maintain relationships (Sanders 2018). Alice does not see her building principals as much as her office staff, so she takes the time to ensure the building principals know they are supported.

I try to really keep tabs on the principals because I see the central office a lot more. But I really try to make sure that those principals feel supported and are connected with on a regular basis. If I haven't talked to a principal in two days, I get nervous. I just want to make sure things are OK.

Alice took her support for her principals one step further by giving each a gift to remind them of the supports they have in their lives.

For my principals on Principal Appreciation Day, I gave them a frame and said, “Put your family or your closest friends in there. And on the crappiest day you've had, you look at that and if they’re okay with you, everything else is fine.”

Maya makes her interpersonal connections by being “present” and believes being, “visible so they can see you what you're doing…builds relationships and rapport with them.” The union has told Maya, teachers, “like it when you come to classes,” and she finds her classroom visits help her connect with her staff.

You also get to sort of gauge, because there's been times when I've walked through, and some teachers are not as spunky and maybe not as engaged. And I'll check later and ask, “Are you OK? Is everything OK? If you need anything, you let us know. You know we are here.”
Ruth finds it is important for interpersonal connections to happen with people in their spaces instead of her office.

I try to get out in the buildings. I try to meet them in their space instead of always saying, “Well, you have to come to central office.”…trying to keep a connection with the buildings, trying to be out in the buildings. Be a real person to people.

Due to COVID-19, school buildings had to shut down, but Ruth did find a way to stay connected and check-in with her staff.

Thursday mornings I do a Zoom call for my staff, because I know that it's summer, but they're all thinking about it (school reopening), and they're concerned. I get anywhere from about 100 to 130 people that join me every Thursday morning…And it's their hour.

Ruth believes in being transparent in her interactions, and that such transparency helps build trusting relationships.

I really believe in the relationship piece and that I've always told my staff, you're going to get one or three answers from me You're going to get the truth, which is the answer. You're going to get I don't know and I can find out, or I don't know when I'm going to find out, or I know the answer to that and I can't share it right now.

Another characteristic of relational leaders is having empathy (Sanders, 2018). Sonia, Ruth, and Maya stated being empathetic was important to their leadership. Sonia described how having empathy can assist everyone through tough situations.

I think that's probably the most important to me is just always remembering that I'm a person and everybody else are humans and have things going on in their lives. And we just have to support one another through the difficult times and together we'll get there.

Ruth shared some of the difficult situations she had to face with personnel and community members in her district. With each situation, she used an empathetic approach.

I always try to think, how would I like to be treated? When I'm dealing with parents, am I asking them to do anything different than I do for my own child? Because if I wouldn't do it for my own child, why should I ask one my parents to do that and be OK with it? And so, in all the experiences I've had, whether it's reassigning principals, or letting one go, or dealing with the people on the list with the rooster, dealing with the woman with the videotape, the hate crime, and sitting with the parents in the waiting room of the
operating room, I just try to put myself in their place. Treat them with the dignity and respect I would want to be treated and give people a little grace.

For Maya, empathy is more than putting yourself in someone else’s shoes; it is understanding the “why” of a situation. “You have to be involved enough and concerned enough to really get the why.” Leading with empathy is important to Maya and she described an exercise she did with her staff to promote empathy in her district.

We did an exercise where there is a list of questions, maybe about 25 questions on there and some of them were you lost a parent. You were adopted. You were raised in a single-family home and all of those. They don't have any names on the papers at all, but you ask them to fill it out, they fold their paper over, and they exchange with someone else for a total of five times. Then at the end, you ask, “OK, now as we're looking at our children, tell me how this might impact you?” And so, I'll read the first one. In a single-family home and the people had that sheet, they stand up and so everyone else is looking. OK. Lost a parent. You look at that and then it sort of brings you in because then you can see, oh, my gosh, people are really going through things.

From this exercise, Maya realizes they may not be able change the situations people are going through, but it is hoped that people will begin to understand the why of situations and have a bit more compassion when interacting with staff, parents, and students.

You may not be able to change anything…but it allows you to open your eyes and to just be more aware and just to be able to give people some grace because it's OK. All of us coming from a different background, you know, and we have to be able to appreciate that and sort of deal with people where they are.

By exhibiting the characteristics of a relational leader, Alice, Gail, and Ruth, described positive moments that were a result of being empathetic, making interpersonal connections, being communal, and valuing relationships. When Alice stepped into the superintendency for her district, morale was not where she would like it, but it has increased significantly during her tenure.

The morale of the teachers was moderate…it was something like 60 percent of the staff in a very wonderful place we're feeling good about what they did. I think the last time we did a survey we were at 94 percent. We recently got Best Places to Work award, which is
not about the award, but it means if teachers feel good and voices heard, you're going to get more creativity…and more is going to happen because the teachers feel they have the agency and voice and value to make that happen. So that's significant.

Although Gail had only served for a few months as a principal in the district before accepting her second superintendency, she had managed to make an impressionable impact as a relational leader. Gail recalled a reaction from a teacher when it was announced she would be promoted to superintendent and would be helping hire a new principal. “They trusted me to do that. And the staff did, too. I remember a teacher standing up saying, ‘We trust you. We don't want to lose you, but we trust whoever you hire will continue what you've been doing.’” This type of feedback let Gail know that what she was doing supported the teachers and students and that they hoped Gail would find someone to continue the great groundwork she had in place.

In Ruth’s district, because she has created a communal environment, staff feels comfortable sharing their opinions with her and other leaders.

I don't know how staffs are in other districts, but my staff is very comfortable talking to their leaders. Whether it be the board of education, or whether it be me, of I don't like this. I don't like that. Or it doesn't sound like you're considering this. And some people may find that obtrusive or rude. I see it as engagement. I see it as you're engaged. And if you're engaged, then we may disagree, but let's talk about where we can find common ground and move forward.

With a staff feeling it is part of the culture to share what they believe is working, not working, or present ideas the district has not considered, Ruth is able to gain a multifaceted view of her district. Having input from varying vantage points has helped the district come up with a plan for reopening during COVID-19 that the staff could be happy with.

And then they said to me, “Ruth, we just want to thank you for meeting with us. We've heard too many stories from other districts where unions were told, ‘Well, here's the best plan we could put together and you have to go along with it, because it's just the best we've got.’ And when people talk to us, we're kind of here are some options.” I don't want to take anything to my board that the teachers are not going to be happy with. That doesn't serve anybody well.
The key characteristics of a relational leader parallel what school boards look for in potential superintendents, and coincidentally, social role theorists have noted women, more so than men, tend to exhibit the characteristics of a relational leader (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Kowalski et al., 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). As stated in an earlier section, the study participants either have met or surpassed the national average tenure of a superintendent within their trajectory, thus being a relational leader, exhibiting qualities female leaders are more likely to display, the study participants have experienced successful tenures as superintendents.

**Connection to Community**

Lanoue and Zepeda (2018) believe dynamic leaders of change will need to form strong relationships with school boards, teachers, school leaders, parents, members of the community, and local and state government officials. The previous section highlighted the relationships the study participants built with teachers and school leaders, so this section will focus on the relationships between superintendents and the communities they serve.

Alice, Sonia, and Gail made references to community engagement during their study interviews. Alice views the “superintendent as this important community member,” and believes, “all my peers, we are working together for this community,” thus she keeps all stakeholders in mind when making decisions.

So, I think part of the challenge is being able to take all these perspectives and ultimately, most decisions I have to make don't have a clear right or wrong, you just have to make one that you can stand behind and get your board behind.
Sonia observed her predecessor’s lack of involvement within the community and believes that was a catalyst for the district’s turmoil.

So, I watched the previous superintendent not work alongside the community very well. He wasn't present. He just wasn't doing the things so that people can put their trust in him…and when I saw that that fell off, I knew exactly what I needed to do; to go back and bring it back to the community.

To help build a connection between the school and community, Alice, Gail, and Sonia solicited feedback from their communities and held community engagement sessions within their districts. As stated earlier, Alice did over 200 hours of engagement sessions with her community. The end result was the creation of a shared vision amongst all stakeholders. “We focused on here's what's important to us…We created that vision and the why, because it had so many voices to it.”

Gail held similar community engagement sessions for both of her superintendencies to help her and the stakeholders prioritize what was important to their districts.

But we still followed a similar community engagement process where we had, and just like we did in [town of first superintendency], we had meetings in [town of second superintendency]. We had over 150 people at every meeting, and we went through what do we need and what do we already have? What do other schools around us have? What do we need to stand out? And that sort of thing.

Sonia believed gaining input from the community and giving them opportunities to voice their concerns and opinions would improve the relationship with the stakeholders.

The time before my superintendency was a time of negative impact on our school district…and that's what I had to spend my first two years on as superintendent was rebuilding that perception of our district…That was a huge piece with the strategic planning to really be speaking one voice and having one message in our community…We had nine huge community engagement sessions where there was like 250 people and each session we looked at our facilities, we talked about what we needed. We got the community's buy in and input into what needed to be done. Then we drafted a plan of what we would do at our facilities.
Besides gaining input from the community, Sonia believes it is important for her stakeholders to see their superintendent be involved in their community.

I really try to be as visible as possible and not just in my office…I think that it is very important to make sure you're connected and make sure you have as many opportunities that you can to connect with people.

To help foster a connection to her district’s community, Sonia sits on the board of various community groups.

On a typical day, I generally have at least one or more contacts with community outreach, whether it be a United Way meeting or a chamber board meeting or a small group that has bridged off of that…and I'm on the YMCA board too, so each of those have breakout groups…For instance, today, I was e-mailing back and forth with our, it's called the [name of town] Growth Alliance, which is like our economic development council. And I see a lot of my effort over the next two years going into that work with them…And I really think that kind of thinking ahead and making those community connections are a big part of my day.

By having a connection to the communities they serve, the study participants have been able to rely on their stakeholders to assist them with changes in their districts. Sonia and Gail credit the relationship between their schools and communities as being the reason for passing referendums. Sonia shared her thoughts about passing the referendum.

This is my community, and so I think that that's a big thing. But I would say developing the strategic goals and the league, just rebranding our whole district was huge. The community work was huge. And then the result in having a sales tax referendum and now starting to work on all of those pieces, that's a big significant impact.

Gail described how she was able to use community members to help pass the referendum.

We kind of followed what [name of town] School District had done. And we picked three people who had a big influence in the community. One is a parent, one is a businessperson, and one is a community person, and we used that model. We went to every Lions Club morning breakfast meeting, brunches. We kind of spread out. We had a large district leadership team. We walked the streets with information and flyers, and we just really had a huge information and communication campaign.
When Alice was faced with a challenging group of parents that were having meetings in an attempt to undermine new initiatives she was trying to implement, she had parents approach her to volunteer to speak up at those private meetings.

You have the right people in the community. I have an early childhood group I work with, too. And they were awesome when that (the private community meetings) started happening. “We'll squash it. We’ll squash those coffees right away.”…So we got through that, but that was tough too.

Gail also witnessed the support the community had for her in her first superintendency when the board of education announced they were going to wait a year to extend her contract.

They made some statements like we're making that decision next year. We're not extending at this time, and it just completely blew up. There was this whole, I think it was Team Gail…I've never seen such overwhelming positive support. That was not anticipated, but I had been there a long time and I had credibility with staff and the community…all of our board meetings had to be moved to auditoriums and former students coming and crying she's the best thing that ever happened to me.

Seeing the outpour of support from her community, Gail realized the impact she had on her district and that she did not need to change her leadership style. “It was just kind of an affirmation that I had done a lot of good things and that I was not going to change what I was doing, because somebody wanted me to when it was unethical and not right.”

As noted in the previous section of relational leadership, women tend to focus on community, a trait school boards value in their superintendents. By placing an emphasis on connecting with their communities, Alice, Sonia, and Gail were able to build relationships with their stakeholders, thus bring about improvements to move their districts forward, all the while, securing their tenures in their current districts.
Focus on Social Justice

A community concern Maya, Alice, and Sonia talked to during their study interviews were issues stemming from systemic racism and equity disparity. Sonia stated, “The most important one that I need to lead forward, and I need to really address, is that equity issue and the systemic racism and the conversations around that. To me, it's my most important next step.”

Studies have found women teachers and administrators identify educational careers as social justice work, aiming to create educational equity for students (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). In order to bring about equity in their schools, many women administrators state they work alongside teachers, leaders, community members and stakeholder groups, and that is exactly what Alice, Sonia, and Maya do as leaders in their districts (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Alice recognizes issues of social injustice impact her district’s community and schools, and that now is the time to act.

A lot of systems and racist infrastructure are in the public school system. You've got a lot of white administrators and a lot of segregated communities…So you're going to need leaders who are comfortable and are very adaptive and can rewrite what education is going to mean to our communities, to our concrete society…who are going to see the communities through this and rebuild this and bring people along.

To help bring about change in her district, Alice educated herself, as well as the members of her district, about social justice issues.

One of the most significant things I did was to really understand inclusion, special ed, and of course, that now is under the umbrella of equity. So, we did some of that work for gender identity, too. But now with racial injustice, it's all just coming under that umbrella. So, I just see that expanding and using that as an example.
Alice hopes that the work they do as a district to help correct the issues related to social injustice will not be viewed as something happening to them, but as a cultural change happening with them.

That it becomes in the culture of the district. Again, I hope nobody says, “I remember when Alice made us do inclusion.” I don't think they will, because of how it rolls out and people, you know, a teacher feels good. They're, “Yeah, I did that,” become part of what they believe in, too.

In light of current social injustice events, Sonia feels it is important to educate herself and to have those hard conversations about equity and social justice.

It’s something that we're dealing with right now. Is the notion of equity in our system. Having those hard conversations around equity, white fragility, social justice, all of those things are so important with what's happening right now in light of George Floyd and the severe, horrible things that we had to watch on TV in order to realize the impact that that was having on our black and brown communities here in [name of city] and across the country. And then just being able to talk with others about it, not feeling comfortable. And that's where that white fragility piece came that I'm actually reading that book right now. It was very helpful. We have a lot of pain in our community around that right now. And it's just, it's horrible.

In order to help ease the pain of her community, Sonia has taken measures to correct and help educate members of her district about issues related to social injustice.

We've done some book studies that dug into some things that we needed to dig into as a team over the last year. We read that 1619 Project with The New York Times together about slavery in America and the historical content behind it, and then looking at systemic racism, and those were hard conversations that are very important for our community and for the cabinet that serves with me.

When it comes to the staff, Sonia takes the time to listen and examine points of inequality and takes corrective measures.

We often hear that our black, African-American, Latino educators feel oftentimes on an island. They may be the only one that looks like them in a school or in their department, or perhaps there is nobody of a minority status that's in leadership in certain areas...We're constantly working on the recruiting and making sure that we think about those things.
Another proactive step Sonia has implemented is partnering with an organization whose mission is to support the academic success of underrepresented students.

We partnered with [name of consulting firm] and it's a sort of an equity consulting group that works with getting more of our underrepresented students involved in Advanced Placement to accredited colleges, college path coursework, and that's been something that has touched, has been a positive lever, but it's also been a spark plug a little bit with a few sparks that have come off of it, because schools don't want to think that they do that. But when you look at the data, it shows that our advanced placement courses are underrepresented. So, what are we not doing maybe in eighth grade or seventh grade with some students to help them feel that they can do those things?

By teaming up with an equity consulting firm, Sonia has an outsider’s perspective gauging the social climate of the school, helping her see inequities she and her district members may have overlooked. The data generated by the consulting firm highlighted areas needing more representation, and Sonia had those difficult conversations to help improve learning for minority students.

Maya recognized the various backgrounds of her staff could influence their interactions and judgements when working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds. To help improve these relations, Maya provided ongoing professional development to offer perspective and education.

We started doing some implicit bias training and it was very eye opening. All of us come with implicit bias, and it doesn't matter what color you are or where you come from. It is just a result of your experiences, your life experiences that you've had in the way that you look at things and perceive things and people...because sometimes, when you sit in a position of privilege or something, you know, you don't think about what we're eating tonight, but that is not everyone's reality. And so, once you get to see that thing, you get to be more empathetic.

Maya has also found inspiration from books to help her, and her staff, gain a better understanding of their students’ backgrounds.

We started reading *Emotional Poverty in Every and All Demographics* by Ruby Payne. I think that that has been monumental in helping us to move in a different direction and
also to understand maybe some of the complexities that some of our children come into school with.

From this new perspective Maya and her staff are able to look at students and address the why of situations.

And so, I think that's maybe the most significant thing is starting to turn around and to look at the whys. Why are they doing this? Why are you staying here with me? Why do you not want to go there?... And so that's something else that's heavy, because you're saying, I need to help you, I got to help you. What can I do here? And so, you do the most that you can. I'm sending children home with food...if you want another lunch, I'm going against the rules of the nutrition specialist...I'm going to give it to you because I don't know if you'll eat anything later on. So, yeah, I'm going to make sure you're stocked up.

By examining the whys, Maya and her staff are recognizing inequities of the students and are able to find ways to correct the inequities, thus improving the chances of academic success for their struggling students.

Women have the tendency to see the school setting as a way to improve opportunities for those who have been systemically underserved by educational policies and practices (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Maya, Sonia, and Alice recognize the inequities and social injustices within their schools and communities and view the issues as “our” problems, not “your” problems that need collective solutions. By educating their staff about equity and social justice issues, the study participants are finding ways for organization members to support the academic success of underrepresented students, therefore improving the lives of students and community members for the long term and increasing the success of each study participant’s trajectory.
Leadership for Learning

The most important change women leaders typically make in education is instruction (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Researchers believe women favor instructional leadership or learning-centered leadership, because they have spent more time in the classroom than men before taking a leadership position (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). However, as stated earlier in this chapter, the study participants have spent less time in the classroom than the average male and female teacher, but nonetheless, instruction and learning are top priorities. For Ruth, the greater impact she could potentially make on instruction and learning was why her trajectory led her to the superintendency. “You get into this so that you can make a wider impact, or at least I got into this, so you can make a wider impact on kids and staff in the classroom.” Alice believes, “Good superintendents know teaching and learning, and we'll never forget what it means to really educate the child and do the right thing for the child.” Maya is, “laser focused on individualized or personalized learning,” so when looking for ways to improve teaching and learning, she keeps in mind what will be good for the students as well as the district. “I'm always looking for something that is going to be very innovative and something that is going to allow us to make our mark…To be able to meet children where they are and take them to the next level.”

Alice and Sonia mentioned specific examples of implementing change for teaching and learning. As discussed in the previous section, focus on social justice, Sonia used a consulting company to help bring to the surface inequities in the schools. The data the consulting firm shared showed minority students were underrepresented in advanced placement courses. Sonia
shared the reaction from staff as she pushed for underrepresented students to be enrolled in advanced placement courses.

When you show people the data about the types of students that have taken your advanced placement classes, it sticks out really badly and then people want to justify it. Then when we tried to push more underrepresented groups into those programs, we had teachers saying things like, “These people don't belong.” OK. We can't say that kind of stuff. So, what supports do we need to help students be more successful. So, it's a significant thing we've started.

It is Sonia’s hope that by increasing the enrollment of underrepresented students in advanced placement courses and providing support for teachers to assist their students, the district will see an increase of first-generation college students.

Just to go back to the equity piece, that we had [the equity consulting firm]. It was really focused on increasing the numbers of first-time college black students and also students that come from low-income backgrounds. And we were focused on our black students specifically, because that's our primary minority group.

By improving instruction and learning to support the enrollment of underrepresented students in advanced placement courses, Sonia decreases inequity within the district, all the while increasing the chances of academic success.

When discussing the improvements made to teaching and learning in her district, Alice felt “proud” being able to work with teachers, staff, and parents to extend the day for kindergarten to full-day, improve inclusion for special education students, revamp an outdated professional development system, and improve the learning environment with the implementation of maker spaces, inquiry-based spaces for learning. Below is Alice discussing details about improving inclusion and the professional development system.

Probably one of things I'm most proud of is we took on head on inclusion for special ed. And that is going to change the trajectory of more children's lives than anything else I did… I also feel really good—we built a professional development system in the one negotiation, worked hand-in-hand with the union…and disbanded a professional development system that was so outdated…So I know that is something, too that will live
on for a long time. So significant that I know it's going to have long term change in the system.

When talking about improvements to teaching and learning, Alice uses the pronoun “we” and mentions working with others to bring about change, thus again demonstrating the importance of being a relational leader to implement change for the betterment of students.

The educational mandates of NCLB and ESSA, have forced districts to ensure they are meeting the needs of all students, thus leadership for learning is a must (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). The study participants stated they focus on improving instruction and learning; however, Sonia and Alice demonstrated their leadership style and sense of power, being relational leaders, is helping to implement the much-needed changes for teaching and learning.

**Leading With a Moral Compass**

Karakus (2018) noted that today’s world is plagued with constantly changing environments where moral dilemmas are commonplace, and schools are not immune to such dilemmas, hence the need for ethical leaders. When examining ethical leadership through a social role lens, men tend to lead with a competitive nature, thus are more prone to act unethically in order to succeed, whereas women tend to lead in a nurturing manner, and as such, are more likely to remain ethical for the organization to succeed (Mullen et al., 2016).

Maya, Alice, Gail, and Ruth stressed the importance of being an ethical leader, letting their morals help guide them through difficult decisions. Maya spoke to the power associated with being a superintendent and the responsibilities of such power. “It is a powerful position, but
it's up to you to choose if you use your power for good or for bad. And if you are aligned with your mission and vision, then it's going to be all good.” Alice believes superintendents should, “…really pay attention, build inside of you, your core values so that you really do know what you will die on the hill for, the integrity piece of the job.” Ruth finds building and sharing her core values helps people understand the why of her decisions.

You have to know what you believe in and make your decisions based on that. Because if you do that, you're never going to surprise somebody with your decision making, because they're going to be like, “Well, we always knew this was her top priority. And so why would that shock us that she's gone in this direction?”

Ruth recognizes that she is human, thus prone to mistakes; however she feels it is her moral imperative to admit when she is wrong.

I believe it is an exercise of humility and relationships and you have to know your values...when you misstep, boy you better sure be willing to say I had that one wrong, or I didn't have this information, or I made a snap judgment, and I shouldn't have. You've got to be able to admit when something you did wasn't what you planned or that you didn't have all the information, so that people continue to understand that you're driven by your values and you're willing to accept that sometimes you're not always right and that you're willing to take that information.

Maya echoed the same sentiments as Ruth about the power of being right.

Is it more important that you're always right or is it more important that we get the job done? And sometimes it may not be your idea and it's okay, as long as it goes right back to the mission and the vision of doing what's best for children.

By admitting when they are wrong and being okay with ideas coming from others, Ruth and Maya demonstrate they are not in competition with their staff and colleagues, thus further installing the notion that power and responsibility are shared amongst the organization.

When faced with ethical dilemmas, Maya and Gail used their morals to help them navigate through the situations. Maya recalled a difficult decision she had to make regarding a popular teacher.
We had someone who was a very good teacher, who had made some mistakes…and I had to act on it right then. So now I'm stuck with a staff that is more divided than they were before…But just having to keep the code of ethics in mind and what you're commissioned to do, and the number one thing is making sure that you're taking care of the children. And so, they came first.

Gail’s experience with an ethical dilemma was with her board of education during her first superintendency and their demands of her as the most powerful person in charge of the district. “They wanted you to do it their way, pushing to hire friends of theirs and I really, at that point, I decided to take a stance…making it clear that I'm not going to do some of these things.”

The board of education was displeased with Gail’s reaction and employed tactics to steer Gail from her moral compass.

And so, they started to look for things, because they knew I just wasn't going to do all the things they were asking me to do…I had my evaluation, which was overwhelmingly positive. Two of the board members had a lot of negative things in there, but it still averaged out to an excellent rating. So, they were kind of mad about that and they wanted to wait a year to extend my contract…they said, “We'll make that decision next year and you can decide if you're going to do some of the things we're asking you to do or not.” So basically, you get to keep your job if you do what we say.

Gail stuck to her core values and her intrapersonal response to the board’s ultimatum was, “I just can't do this. There's too many ethical issues at this point,” and had already begun interviewing for the district that would eventually hire as a principal and later promote her to her second superintendency.

Both Maya and Gail faced ethical dilemmas of choosing what was ethically wrong or what was ethically right. If Maya did not dismiss the teacher, that staff would be happy and unified, but then students and parents affected by the teacher’s poor judgement would suffer. If Gail went along with her board’s requests, they would be happy and Gail’s tenure would not have been in question, but then district could suffer from the choices she made. By following
their core values and being ethical leaders, Maya and Gail used their power for what was ethically right for students and stakeholders.

Before accepting their current superintendencies, the study participants stated there were various levels of turmoil happening prior to their hiring. The preceding male superintendent in Ruth’s district, “…left rapidly at the end of the school year;” and the male superintendent that hired Gail in her current district told her, “I just want to let you know that you were approved by the board and the board does not want me to return. So, I won't be back after this year.” As stated earlier, Gail took over for that superintendent mid-year, much earlier than the anticipated end of the academic year. Maya noticed her predecessors, “…did not make it through their three-year contracts,” and Alice’s district had, “…six superintendents in ten years.” Sonia had observed some dysfunction happening within the town of her current superintendency, as well as with the former male superintendent. “There were some bad things going down here in [name of city] and with our previous superintendent. He did not leave in a good fashion, got into a big community issue with our school board and everything.” By exhibiting leadership characteristics and ideas about power that female leaders are more likely to exhibit, such as shared power, being relational leaders, communal, focused on learning, and ethical, that are coincidentally, as stated earlier, the same characteristics school boards desire of their superintendents, the study participants were able to improve functionality and provide stability to their districts, hence their longer than average tenures. By aligning their decisions with their core values, as well as focusing on instruction, learning, and social justice, the study participants are addressing issues of equity, creating learning environments that foster success for every student, thus helping their districts to meet the mandates of NCLB and ESSA.
Chapter 4 presented an analysis of data collected from five, Illinois, female superintendents about their experiences along their career trajectories. Personal and professional demographic profiles were created for each study participant. Data collected from the study participants were used to answer the two research questions that focused on the participants’ experiences regarding their access to the superintendency and factors they perceived as being critical in their career trajectories. The data revealed women’s access to the superintendency is restricted due to intrinsic and extrinsic barriers related to their gender and social roles, however, the study participants have found ways to overcome these barriers. The analysis of data also revealed the women’s leadership styles, concepts of power, and work ethic are critical strategies that have helped the study participants experience successful trajectories and tenures as superintendents.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter five begins with a brief summary of the study, followed by a discussion and conclusions of the findings in relation to previous research and literature. The concluding section of this chapter is recommendations for practice and future research.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain the essence of lived experiences of female superintendents from Illinois as they transitioned to the superintendency, as well as within the role itself. Five, currently serving female superintendents with five years or more experience participated in this study. Seidman’s (2006) three interview approach was utilized to guide the interview process. The researcher developed interview protocols (see Appendices D, E, & F) to foster discussions about the participants’ life histories, present lived experiences, and reflections on the meaning of their experiences. The interviews were transcribed using the cloud based NVivo transcription software and the Moustakas (1994) method was used to analyze the data. NVivo data analysis software was used to aid in the coding of themes. The findings from the analysis of data were presented in Chapter Four and are reviewed in the following discussion of the findings.
Discussion of Findings

The argument has been made that there is a superintendent shortage due to inadequate pools of candidates, high turnover rate, and a growing number of retirees (Björk et al., 2003; Glass & Björk, 2003; Kowalski, 2003). Some researchers have countered this argument, stating the shortage is a myth, but argue there are problems, such as gender bias, inadequate mentors, and the recruitment and selection process, that perpetuate the myth and must be addressed (Björk et al., 2003; Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Glass & Björk, 2003; Kowalski, 2003; McGee, 2010; Robinson et al., 2017; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Even though women have made progress in closing the gender gap within the superintendency and are earning almost half of the specialized degrees in education, given the rate of change/progress and barriers women must overcome in the “labyrinth”, the Center for American Progress (Warner & Corley, 2017) estimates that women will only likely reach equality with men in key leadership roles in 2085 (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Heffernan & Wasonga, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Tienken, 2021). Waiting until 2085 for women to reach parity with men in leadership roles does not seem to be an option, as NCLB and ESSA created a paradigm shift, forcing superintendents to transform schools from meeting the needs of some students to a new responsibility of ensuring the success of all students (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). In order to change an organization’s culture to one where everyone accepts the responsibility for all students’ success, today’s superintendents will need to discontinue command-and-control styles of leadership and adopt a style that engages themselves and members of their organization in continuous conversations about their beliefs and actions (Blount, 1998; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018).
Coincidentally, the description of today’s superintendent mirrors the leadership styles and characteristics of female superintendents—communal, value relationships, leadership for learning, beliefs and spiritual leadership, and focus on social justice (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). Tully (1989) noted women’s leadership style is better suited for the superintendency and should be incorporated in all levels of leadership.

Analysis of data related to research question one and research question two, produced themes showing how women navigate their way through what Eagly and Carli (2007) call the “labyrinth” to gain access to the most powerful position in basic education systems. A discussion of those themes is included in the following sections.

**Research Question 1: What are the Participants Experiences Regarding Their Access to the Superintendency?**

The purpose of this study was to gain the essence of lived experiences of female superintendents from Illinois as they transitioned to the superintendency, as well as within the role itself. The findings of this study indicated that access to the superintendency among females is limited by socialization which includes two themes: (1) mobilization of bias, and (2) shaping of consciousness. A discussion of the two themes is contained in the following paragraphs.
Mobilization of Bias

Frances Fowler (2013) described mobilization of bias as implicit power, that when exercised by others or in the community, limits the participation of certain groups of people or individuals. The uniqueness and power of mobilization of bias is that few or none of the participants against which this power is mobilized and agents realize that this power is being enacted (Fowler, 2013).

The women of the current study experienced the effects of mobilized bias as they ascended to leadership positions. Social role theory suggests some leadership roles are viewed culturally as being masculine, putting women at a disadvantage for such jobs, even if they are characteristically equal to their male counterpart in all aspects, except for sex (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The study participants encountered gatekeepers, individuals who Davis and Bowers (2019) described as being in control of who is considered desirable for a position, who held biases against women in leadership positions.

In this study, Ruth and Gail encountered gatekeepers who publicly expressed beliefs that women are “not capable” of handling the demands of the superintendency. For example, a board member told Ruth, “I like you a lot…I just don’t think women have what it takes to run the whole thing.” Another example, in Gail’s current district, a colleague pointed to a board member and stated, “She’s the reason you didn’t get it (the superintendency the first time she applied)…she flat out said…she didn’t think a woman could do the job.” These women were told they did not fit the mold of a leader, meaning a man, and based on their gender and/or looks, women would not be considered for leadership positions. The opinions of the gatekeepers of this study mirror the findings of Elsesser and Lever (2011), in which 72% of their study participants
who had a gender preference for their leaders, preferred men over women as their leaders. Some of the reasons cited for wanting a man as a manager were negative opinions of female leaders and that, “Men just have a better business sense” (Elsesser & Lever, 2011, p.1571). When these assertions are repeated to aspiring female superintendents and the communities in which they work, the ideas are internalized by both community and individuals creating a bias against women, thus reducing their chances of being selected to be superintendents (Fowler, 2013). Fowler (2013) explains that those holding and sharing these opinions, consciously or subconsciously, mobilize bias; consequently, restricting women’s access to leadership roles.

Besides their gender, lack of experience was used to create bias against women seeking the superintendency. Work experience is the biggest influential factor in determining potential employment (Cole et al., 2007). However, if boards want women candidates to have experience as superintendents, but are reluctant to hire women for the superintendency, then a paradox exists that prevents women from ascending to the superintendency. Ruth and Alice indicated that they were denied access to leadership positions because of limited experience in the position. In Ruth’s case, a district “wanted somebody who had been a superintendent,” and in Alice’s case, the district was looking for a person with “a little more experience.” These statements give the impression that without experience, these women cannot do the job of a leader, and therefore, should not be selected. The existence of a bias against those who lack experience is an excuse that is likely to keep females from accessing the superintendency, especially when districts are reluctant to hire a leader based on gender, as is found in Ruth and Alice’s experiences (Cole et al., 2007).
Shaping of Consciousness

The shaping of consciousness is, “The systemic inculcation of a set of ideas about the general worth and proper role of another person or a group of people” (Fowler, 2013, p. 330). Expectations that people associate with roles shape their consciousness of how they, themselves, should perform in the role, as well as how others should perform in the role (Fowler, 2013; Hoyt et al., 2013). In other words, how the community perceives the role of the superintendent, specifically in relation to women, is likely to influence who they hire; and how women perform in the role of a superintendent, shapes community consciousness.

When women hear antiquated ideas of leadership, such as a Gail being told a “big ugly” man is needed to run a school or Alice’s superintendent telling her women “break” under the stress of leadership positions, their opinions of self-worth as leaders may be misguided and they may begin to doubt their ability to be a leader (Fowler 2013). Case in point is the example of Gail who almost gave up her leadership trajectory early in her career, because she was not a “big ugly” man and was turned down for the assistant principalship four times in her district due to her gender. “I had stopped applying...I just felt like there was no chance.” Gail’s district had interview protocols in place to prevent biases from influencing the selection process; however, Gail was denied assistant principalships she interviewed for, even though she had the highest interview scores. In Gail’s case, gender bias due to shaping of consciousness outweighed the protocols to prevent such biases, thus delaying the start of her leadership trajectory. If it were not for the human resource director, who was a woman, discovering the discrepancy between interview scores and who was hired, Gail’s self-conscience as a leader and her trajectory may have looked different than what she has today. Therefore, other districts that trust their interview
protocols to eliminate biases from their selection process should have a third party outside of the interviewing process review the interview data to ensure the appointment of a leader, was in fact, free from biases.

According to participants in the study, changing minds of the community and gatekeepers that women can lead school districts, only came after they gained access to the superintendency. Evidence in this study shows that, over time, Ruth, Alice, Sonia, and Gail were able to change the opinions of those who believed women could not be effective leaders. Proof of this reshaping of consciousness is exemplified by Ruth’s, Alice’s, and Sonia’s tenures surpassing the national average tenure of a superintendent of five to six years (Kowalski et al., 2011) with each serving seven years. Additional evidence is in the emails Gail receives, where community members express how “happy” they are to have her as superintendent and that they, “never thought a female could be a superintendent.” Much like the study results of Bandura et al. (2018), gender’s influence over who should be a leader is reduced when more time is spent interacting with women leaders. The implication of the participants’ experiences of the current study is there is a way to reshape the negative beliefs held and perpetuated among communities and gatekeepers about women leaders. The successes demonstrated by participants in this study indicates that success breeds success and it will take success of women in the superintendency to convince school boards to hire women for the superintendency. As more women enter the superintendency, this is likely to shape how communities perceive women in leadership positions (Elsesser & Lever, 2011).

The study participants recognize, as Adler (1999) noted in research, that society will recognize them as women first and leaders second. As such, the women of this study demonstrated a belief that they must do more to be accepted as leaders. This, the study
participants did by, for example, making themselves visible in the schools and community, building relationships with all stakeholders in order to be accepted as superintendents, and making decisions that had immediate positive impacts in the school and community at large. Building relationships is a desirable characteristic trait boards look for when hiring superintendents and it has proven to be a successful element for the study participants’ tenures; however, it does take time away from corresponding to emails and completing reports, so personal time is used for office tasks (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

Based on research, and the findings of this study, gender restricts access to the superintendency for women (Bandura et al., 2018; Cole et al., 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Elsesser & Lever, 2011, Fowler, 2013; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Hoyt et al., 2013). Gatekeepers who hold beliefs that women cannot lead a district unfairly prevent women from accessing leadership positions, even when protocols are in place to prevent biases influencing hiring practices, as seen in the case of Gail. However, as gatekeepers and stakeholders spent time with the study participants, their opinions changed in support of female leaders. The suggestion of Bandura et al. (2018), as well as the findings of this study, is to provide more time during interviews for greater opportunities to interact with candidates. This is likely to diffuse gender influence and who is hired and who is not for the superintendency.

**Research Question 2: What Factors do Participants Perceive as Being Critical in Their Career Trajectory?**

Research question two sought to identify factors the study participants perceive as being critical in their career trajectories. The finding of this study indicated that women experience
obstacles that researchers have identified as common barriers that aspiring women leaders contend with along their paths to the superintendency (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Glass, 2000; McGee, 2010; Robinson et al., 2017; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). Because of these barriers, it is important to note that women’s paths to the superintendency may not be linear as Copeland and Calhoun (2014) have described, where women leaders begin as teachers, then assistant principals, then principals, then central office administrators, and then superintendents. The barriers women encounter on their trajectories make the path to the superintendency align more with what Eagly and Carli (2007) have metaphorically referred to as a “labyrinth”, symbolizing surmountable barriers, detours, and dead ends women must overcome along the way towards leadership positions, specifically the superintendency. The study participants discussed some of the barriers they contended with along their ascension to the superintendency and identified factors they perceive as being critical in their career trajectories. The three themes that emerged from the data while attempting to answer research question two are: (1) navigating their career trajectories through the labyrinth; (2) managing role conflict and role commitment through balanced leadership; and (3) women’s concept of power and leadership. A discussion of each theme is in the following paragraphs.

Navigating Their Career Trajectories Through the Labyrinth

When looking at the demographic data of the study participants, Sonia is the only study participant to have had a career trajectory that mirrors what Copeland and Calhoun (2014) call a traditional or linear career trajectory. The remaining study participants’ trajectories resemble what Eagly and Carli (2007) refer to as a “labyrinth”, indicating that women’s trajectories are
likely nontraditional. Perhaps, much like previous research (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Grogan, 2010; Osler & Webb, 2014) that has shown women who mimic male leadership are less likely to succeed in their leadership roles, this study’s findings indicate that those women who wish to become superintendents should not necessarily follow traditional career trajectories of male leaders; instead they should consider alternative trajectories that are different and unique, much like their situations. In this study, though there were similarities amongst the career paths of the study participants, no two career trajectories were alike. Ruth was never an assistant principal, and along with Alice, never a principal. The first leadership positions Maya, Alice, and Ruth held were at the district level, and Gail, along with Maya, took steps back on their trajectories to become building level leaders before ascending to their current superintendencies. Women encounter barriers along their career trajectories that men do not (Kowalski et al., 2011; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). By going against the traditional trajectory and carving paths unique to their situations, the study participants were able to find ways around their obstacles.

Participants discussed key areas that lead to success along their trajectories. For example, having a mentor was considered key to success for the participants when accessing leadership roles. Having a mentor has been discussed in the literature as an influential factor for women overcoming the barriers to the superintendency and creating job success as a newly hired superintendent (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). All of the study participants mentioned that having a mentor or mentors helped them along their trajectory through positive feedback, support, or influencing others (board members) to consider them for the superintendency. However, some mentors can be damaging to a mentee’s career trajectory (Baugh & Sullivan, 2005; Tolar, 2012). Gail was the only one to mention having toxic mentors.
who, coincidentally, were both male and assigned to her for both superintendencies. For instance, the advice Gail received from her assigned mentor when her board wanted her to do something she was not morally comfortable with was, “You can just do what they want you to do and keep your job. You know, even if it’s wrong, they can give you directives, if you can just do it and play along.” After this advice, Gail, much like the research findings of Copeland and Calhoun (2014), sought out advice from a female that was, “like a mentor,” who, “gets it,” when it comes to being a female superintendent in a man’s world. Other reasons women seek out female leaders as mentors are because they bring a unique perspective as to how to navigate the barriers of political minefields, balance work/family life, strategies and mistakes to avoid, and time management skills (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; McGee 2010).

Based on the findings in this study, as well as existing research, women develop positive mentor-mentee relationships if they choose their mentors and/or if the mentor is female. Female mentors are likely to be empathic having had experiences that aspiring female superintendents are likely to have (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; McGee, 2010). In addition, some men do not believe barriers exist for women along their trajectories, even though research has established the barriers women must contend with along their career paths (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Glass, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; McGee, 2010; Robinson et al., 2017; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). By thinking there are no barriers that restrict women’s access to the superintendency, male mentors lack the knowledge and information needed to advise new or aspiring women superintendents (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; McGee, 2010). Based on these findings this study, as well as Copeland & Calhoun (2014) and McGee (2010) it is suggested that mentoring programs modify their training of mentors, so they can best support aspiring female leaders and the obstacles unique to their gender.
Another barrier women leaders experience in their trajectories is family responsibilities and lack of support (Clark & Hill, 2010; McGee, 2010). Women tend to carry the brunt of household duties and child rearing, thus creating a potential barrier to the superintendency (Clark & Hill, 2010). A significant revelation from the data of the current study is none of the study participants cited family responsibilities and lack of family support as a barrier along their leadership trajectories; instead, they cited family support as assets. Recognizing the significance of family in their success as superintendents, all of the participants stated that prior to seeking and taking up the job, they had conversations with their families about anticipated changes to routines, social roles, and family dynamics that could happen upon accepting the role of superintendent. By preparing their families for the anticipated changes, the family members planned for the changes and were supportive of the study participants, thus reducing family responsibilities and lack of support as an obstacle. However, all the study participants stated that if their families were not on board with them becoming superintendents, then they probably would not have accepted the position.

Women’s roles in their families are unique, especially when they have young children (Connell, et al., 2015; Eagly & Carli, 2007). This makes the role of the family in the decision to take the job of superintendency impactful. Thus, implications for aspiring women superintendents who have families is to view the decisions to pursue the superintendency as a family decision and this is likely to diminish family responsibilities and lack of support as barriers to the superintendency.

Being reluctant to relocate for a superintendent position is another barrier research has shown as being an obstacle for aspiring women leaders (McGee, 2010; Sharp et al., 2004). Unwillingness to relocate for leadership roles was not an issue for the study participants as all the
participants applied for leadership roles outside of a previously employing district. When examining Ruth’s case, it should be noted that she was denied the superintendency the first time she applied but was promoted to the position after demonstrating her leadership skills as an interim superintendent in her currently employed district. Research by Robinson et al. (2017) demonstrated that women are more likely than men to be hired for the superintendency from within a currently employing district. Although this is in agreement with the idea that women have to prove themselves before they are hired, it also suggests that school boards are more likely to take a chance on an unknown male candidate than an unknown female candidate. The findings of Robinson et al. (2017) and Ruth’s experience give a new perspective as to why women may be reluctant to relocate for the superintendency; they are unlikely to be hired in a district that does not know them.

**Managing Role Conflict and Role Commitment through Balanced Leadership**

Women spend considerably more time than men tending to domestic tasks of housework and childrearing, even if both spouses work outside of the home, and as such, may find their social roles in conflict as they address issues or role commitment (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Eckman, 2004). To minimize negative outcomes from role commitment and role conflict, women leaders tend to aim for balanced leadership between work and family lives (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Achieving balanced leadership was recognized as being crucial in the study participants’ career trajectories. Being able to compartmentalize their time to manage their social and professional roles helped the study participants achieve balance. The ways the study participants went about managing their social roles was by setting boundaries and communicating these boundaries,
keeping work roles separate from family roles, and calendaring and coding their time within each role. There were times, however, that Ruth, Gail, and Sonia, enacted multiple roles at the same time, with the results being positive. At times, Ruth, Gail, and Sonia have “weird date nights” where they have their spouses go with them to attend school functions or school sporting events. During these instances, the study participants are simultaneously enacting their roles as superintendents and spouses. Research has established the negative outcomes that can occur when forced to choose between work roles and family roles (Eckman, 2004; Greenhaus & Powell, 2000); however, when conducting a search in Google Scholar and ERIC via EBSCO, no research could be found about the outcome for enacting personal and professional roles at the same time. Further research is needed to see if enacting a work role and family role at the same time replicates the same data from this study. If the same results are produced, then current and aspiring women superintendents would have another option to help maintain balance, reducing the dilemma of having to choose between work and family, and consequently diminishing the negative outcomes of such choices.

Another way the study participants manage role conflict and role commitment is by having a support network to help maintain balance. Social role theory (Eagly & Carli, 2007) suggests women are communal in nature. All of the study participants mentioned having a support network that consisted of family members, mentors, coworkers, and/or friends from which they seek advice or assistance for maintaining balanced leadership. Ruth and Sonia stated their administrative assistants help protect their personal time by trying to ensure work does not interrupt scheduled family time. Alice and Ruth said their school boards are respectful of their time with their families and try their best to not interrupt that time. By being communal and seeking the support of so many people, in both their personal and professional lives, the study
participants reduce the occurrence of role conflict and role commitment issues and the negative outcomes of such conflicts. Implications from social role theory (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and the data from this study are women leaders should enact communal checks and balances systems amongst their support networks to help ensure balanced leadership.

Practicing self-care is an additional way the study participants achieve balance in their life. Focusing on self is vital for efficient performance and balance amongst social roles, yet there is limited research on how school leaders use self-care practices (Bressi & Vaden, 2016; Cook-Cottone, 2017; Melito-Conners, 2019). Whether they have a self-care routine or not, all of the study participants recognize that self-care is vital for efficiency and balance amongst their social roles. Gail and Alice suffered the consequences of an absent self-care routine. For example, Gail used to, “itch all over,” from stress and found herself awake for an hour or two in the middle of the night. For Alice, she, “put on weight,” and “really felt unhealthy.” After learning to take time for themselves and creating better habits, Gail has learned to, “sleep through the night,” and Alice believes she, “looks better,” and is, “able to manage stress.” By taking care of themselves, women are more able to handle the rigors of stress associated with the superintendency and from balancing their social roles (Cook-Cottone, 2017).

Ruth and Alice believe self-care is important for their employees as well, so they model and encourage self-care practices. Ruth encourages colleagues to check-in with each other and herself to ensure self-care is practiced. Alice expects, “others to take care of themselves and believe in that,” and to foster that mentality she believes it is important to model and practice self-care techniques. By creating environments where self-care is valued, the study participants are helping to lower stress and burnout amongst their staff and themselves, reducing the costly instance of high turnover rates within their districts (Eckman, 2004).
Concept of Power and Leadership

The final significant theme from the study participants’ experiences is their concept of power. The concepts of power and leadership differ between women and men leaders (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Rosener, 2011). Male superintendents tend to view their leadership role as transactional and power is used over subordinates, whereas women superintendents tend to view their role as transformational and power is used to empower subordinates (Rosener, 2011). A common theme amongst the study participants is they are relational leaders, modeling the key concepts of women’s ideologies of power. All of the study participants experience positive moments that were a direct result from valuing relationships, emphasizing human interactions, creating communal environments, and empowering those around them. Alice saw an increase in morale in her district; Gail’s teachers stated they, “trust her;” and Ruth’s staff feel, “very comfortable talking to their leaders.” Sonia and Gail credit their relationships with their communities as being the reason for successfully passing referendums. Based on the findings of this study, as well as the research of Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) and Rosener (2011), females aspiring to the superintendency would benefit from developing a relational leadership style.

Another concept of women’s ideas of leadership and power is to use their leadership status to focus on social justice work to create educational equity (Grogan & Shakeshaft 2011). Maya, Alice, and Sonia discussed the disparities and evidence of systemic racism within their communities and how education can correct these wrongs. By attempting to create educational equity, Maya, Alice, and Sonia are using their power, as described by Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), to change the learning environments to foster success for all students, and consequently, follow the mandates of the ESSA.
A final concept of power where women and men differ is the abuse of power. Ethical dilemmas in schools are commonplace; therefore ethical leaders are needed for the superintendency (Karakus, 2018). Under the scrutiny of a social role lens, men are more prone to use their power in unethical ways in order to succeed, whereas women tend to use their power as a way to support their colleagues, and as such, are more likely to remain ethical for the success of the organization (Mullen et al., 2016). All of the study participants stated there was turmoil in their districts prior to their hiring as superintendents and all but Maya stated their predecessors were male. For example, Sonia stated, “Our previous superintendent, he did not leave in a good fashion. Got into a big community issue with our school board and everything…Some of the issues you could read about in the papers if you Googled it.” In Gail’s current district, when she accepted the principalship, the superintendent told her, “The board does not want me to return, so I won't be back after this year…I'll be lucky to make it through the year.” By exhibiting leadership qualities and ideas about power women are more likely to characterize, such as shared power, being relational leaders, communal, focused on learning, and ethical, the study participants were able to improve functionality and provide stability to their districts. The proof of their success is evident, again, by the length of their tenures. Therefore, the implication of this study for current and aspiring women superintendents is to avoid conforming to the leadership styles of men, and the implication for school boards who desire ethical, transformational leaders, is to consider selecting women, as they have the tendency to exhibit these characteristics (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Mullen et al., 2016; Rosener, 2011).
Conclusions

It has been nearly 49 years since the implementation of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex (OCR, 2021). Since then, the number of women superintendents has increased from 1% to 26.7% nationwide and 27.75% in Illinois; however, these numbers are far below the number of women earning advanced degrees needed for the superintendency, 60.5%, and the number women teachers in public K-12 schools, 76% (Finnan & McCord, 2017; Heffernan & Wasonga, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Robinson et al., 2017; Tienken, 2021; Warner & Corley, 2017). These statistics, along with data of this study and previous research and literature (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Glass, 2000; McGee, 2010; Robinson et al., 2017; Tallerico & Blount, 2004) demonstrate barriers exist that restrict women from accessing the superintendency. When districts limit women access to the superintendency based on their gender, they run the risk of denying their stakeholders the type of leadership contributions that may be unique to women and that are needed for improving schools (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018). Coincidentally, the characteristics school boards seek in superintendents align closely with leadership characteristics of women leaders, and thus, limiting women in leadership positions based on their gender may be denying school districts the type of leadership that is needed for today’s schools (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Implications of this study are for those in positions to promote, recruit, and select superintendents should uncover and address implicit biases that restrict women’s access to the superintendency.
Gender bias, when combined with the other barriers of inadequate mentors and the recruitment and selection process, forced all but Sonia to deviate from what Copeland and Calhoun (2014) have described as the traditional, linear career path to the superintendency and carve untraditional career paths that resemble what Eagly and Carli (2007) have described as a “labyrinth”. Much like when women mimic the leadership styles men are more likely to characterize, the findings of this study indicate that if women follow the traditional career trajectory set by men, they may find the path unsuccessful (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Osler & Webb, 2014). Because men do not have the same obstacles as women on their career paths, indications of this study demonstrate women can have successful trajectories if they create paths that are unique to the barriers associated with their gender (Kowalski et al., 2011; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). The number of participants for the current study was limited, so further research is needed to determine if the findings are conclusive.

For the study participants, there were factors they perceived as being critical in their career trajectories. All of the participants mentioned having positive, gender sensitive mentors that guided them along their trajectories, which, coincidentally, having a mentor has been noted as being an imperative factor for assisting current and aspiring women superintendents overcome the barriers to the superintendency (Connell et al., 2015; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014). Leadership style was another critical factor in the study participants’ trajectories. By displaying the leadership traits women are more likely to exhibit, such as being ethical, relational leaders who focus on the education of all students, the study participants were able to bring back order and stability and boost morale in their districts (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018).
McGee (2010) stated women tend to delay their leadership trajectories in order to raise their children first before applying for leadership positions. The study participants of the current study had school aged children in the home when they began their superintendency and did not delay their trajectories, thus demonstrating women can perform the social role of mother while being a leader. Furthermore, all of the study participants did not cite family responsibilities as a barrier to the superintendency and believed family support was crucial for pursuing the superintendency. To help maintain the support from their families and reduce the risk of social role conflict, the study participants strive for balanced leadership, ensuring that work roles do not dominate family roles and vice versa (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Additionally, when the study participants practiced a self-care regimen, they noticed what Cook-Cottone (2017) and Melito-Conners (2019) have noted which is efficient performance and balance amongst their social roles.

Eagly and Carli (2007) noted that when women understand the possible causes that may limit their access to powerful positions; they can then navigate their paths through the “labyrinth”. It is hoped that this dissertation will inform aspiring women superintendents of potential barriers that may restrict their access to the superintendency. After determining their possible barriers, aspiring women superintendents can develop plans to help overcome potential barriers as they navigate their paths through the “labyrinth”, thus increasing the number of women leaders that are needed to lead in order for districts to be successful (Blount, 1998; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lanoue & Zepeda, 2018).
Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, along with previous literature and research, the following suggestions for professional practice and subsequent research are recommended to help narrow the gap between women and men leaders, thus providing districts the leadership they may need.

Because the population size of this study was so small, it would be beneficial to conduct similar research with a larger pool of women superintendents. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) have stated there is little research about women superintendents and a current search in ERIC via EBSCO within the past ten years yielded 15 scholarly works. Therefore, accessing a larger population will lead to further findings about women’s access to the superintendency, or confirm the barriers and successes they encounter, and their career trajectories. Another area lacking research is the outcomes of enacting a professional role simultaneously with a personal role. A search in Google Scholar and ERIC via EBSCO on this topic did not yield any results. Because some of the participants of this study enacted two social roles at once with great success, it would be of interest to know if women leaders exercise the same practice with similar or differing outcomes. It would also be insightful to conduct additional research of similar leadership positions to the superintendency in other fields to see if the known barriers are universal or just isolated to women leaders in education, and if solutions to universal barriers are similar across career fields.

Training is strongly encouraged for those responsible for the hiring of superintendents and the mentoring of women leaders. Implicit bias training is encouraged for school board members, recruiters, and those involved with the recruitment and selection process of school and district
leaders. Through such training, known and hidden biases of women leaders that restrict their accession to the superintendency may be corrected, thus helping to diminish this barrier. Better training of mentors is needed in order to support future women leaders and their unique career trajectories and differing, but proven successful, leadership styles.

Final recommendations are to review and enhance practices to support aspiring women leaders. It is suggested that universities and colleges review their leadership programs and how they support aspiring women leaders. Also, making future leaders aware of the barriers women encounter along their trajectories is strongly encouraged. Within school districts, resources for networking and support should be provided for women wishing to pursue leadership positions. Finally, the last practice that is recommended is for professional search firms responsible for the recruitment and selection of potential superintendents, as well as school districts, should conduct audits of their hiring practices to ensure access to leadership positions do not limit access to the superintendency for women.
REFERENCES


Melito-Conners, T. (2019). *The perceptions of private special education school leaders regarding their role in promoting self-care and renewal practices for themselves and their teachers* [Doctoral dissertation, Lesley University]. DigitalCommons@Lesly. https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1155&context=education_dissertations


RECRUITMENT/INTRODUCTORY LETTER

Dear Superintendent,

In fulfillment of my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a study to gather information about the lived experiences of female school superintendents in the state of Illinois. Further understanding from women themselves of the potential barriers they face on the path towards the superintendency, as well as within their roles, and how they overcome them, will supplement existing leadership research. It is hoped that sharing insights from those women who have made their way through the “labyrinth” will help future aspiring female superintendents better prepare for their career path.

Your voluntary participation in this study will require three one-on-one interviews that follow Seidman’s interview process. Each interview will last approximately 90 minutes and the suggested spacing between the interviews will be a few days to one week apart. The goal of data collection for a case study utilizing Seidman’s interview method is for each research participant to reconstruct her experiences within the topic of study. The purpose of the first interview is to focus on your life history within the context of the study. During the first interview, you will be asked to reconstruct early life experiences that led you to various leadership roles. The purpose of the second interview is to provide concrete details of your present lived experience within the topic of study. For the second interview, you will be asked to recount each waking moment of a typical workday, as well as a non-workday. The third interview requires participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience. During the third interview, we will look at how the factors in your life interacted to bring you to your current superintendent position. Member checking will be performed to ensure I have authentically recorded and interpreted the experiences of each participant within their intentions. Invariant constituents and themes will be sent to each research member to ensure I have correctly captured their experiences. After each participant provides their feedback, any necessary additions, deletions, or corrections will be made to the invariant constituents and themes.

Your responses will be held in strictest confidence, and any published results will not contain any identifying information. In addition, if you would like a copy of the results sent to you upon completion of the study, kindly indicate this to me.

If you are interested in participating in this study, I would greatly appreciate your response by (INSERT DATE ONCE STUDY HAS BEEN APPROVED) with the best way to reach you for further contact. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, feel free to contact either my advisor or myself:

Michelle C. Graham
1102 N. President Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187
708-373-0090
Z1722989@students.niu.edu

Prof. Teresa Wasonga
Department of Leadership, Educational Psychology and Foundations
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois 60115
If you wish further information regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588 or email Patty Wallace, Research Compliance Coordinator, at pwallace@niu.edu.

Thank you in advance for your consideration to participate in this study. It is my hope that the information provided will add important insights to the current body of literature regarding women and the superintendency in the state of Illinois.

Sincerely,
Michelle C. Graham
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR INTERVIEW #1
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR INTERVIEW #1

Interview #1: Life History

Opening Question: Please state your name and the number of years you have been in education.

Introductory Question: Please tell me about your work history and leadership positions you have held prior to your current superintendency.

Transition Question: Please describe the moment you realized you wanted to pursue the superintendency.

Key Question 1: Please share the personal and professional things you considered before applying for the superintendency.

Key Question 2: Please share your significant experiences along the way to the superintendency.

Key Question 3: Please describe your experiences with the recruitment and selection process for the superintendency.

Ending Question 1 (Summary Question): After a brief, two to three-minute summary of the key points covered, the researcher will ask, “How well does the summary capture what was said during the interview?”

Ending Question 2 (All Things Considered Question): Of all the topics discussed today, which one is the most important to you?

Ending Question 3 (Final Question): Is there anything about the path to the superintendency we should have discussed today?
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR INTERVIEW #2
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR INTERVIEW #2

Interview #2: Present Lived Experience

Opening Question: Please state your name and the number of years you have been a superintendent.

Introductory Question: What do you find easy and challenging about being a superintendent?

Transition Question: How do you find balance between your personal life and your professional life?

Key Question 1: Please share the details of a typical workday as a superintendent.

Key Question 2: Please share the details of a typical non-workday as a superintendent.

Key Question 3: Please share your significant experiences within the superintendency.

Ending Question 1 (Summary Question): After a brief, two to three-minute summary of the key points covered, the researcher will ask, “How well does the summary capture what was said during the interview?”

Ending Question 2 (All Things Considered Question): Of all the topics discussed today, which one is the most important to you?

Ending Question 3 (Final Question): Is there anything about the present lived experiences of a superintendent we should have discussed today?
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR INTERVIEW #3
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR INTERVIEW #3

Interview #3: Reflection on the Meaning

**Opening Question:** Please state your name and an adjective to describe the job of a superintendent.

**Introductory Question:** Suppose you were able to speak to your younger self. What would you tell her about leadership?

**Transition Question:** If you were speaking to a young female who has future aspirations of being a superintendent, what would you say to her?

**Key Question 1:** Now that you have achieved the role of superintendent, how do you influence or encourage other females to pursue leadership positions? If you do not influence or encourage other females to pursue leadership positions, why not?

**Key Question 2:** How has your role as superintendent been different from the one you expected when you began your career?

**Key Question 3:** As the field of education changes and school reform continues to occur, what qualities do you believe will be required of tomorrow’s superintendent?

**Ending Question 1 (Summary Question):** After a brief, two to three-minute summary of the key points covered, the researcher will ask, “How well does the summary capture what was said during the interview?”

**Ending Question 2 (All Things Considered Question):** Of all the topics discussed today, which one is the most important to you?

**Ending Question 3 (Final Question):** Is there anything about female leadership and the superintendency we should have discussed today?
CONSENT LETTER

I agree to participate in the research project titled “Through the Labyrinth: Lived Experiences of Women and the Superintendency” being conducted by Michelle C. Graham, a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to gather information about the lived experiences of female school superintendents in the state of Illinois.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to participate in three one-on-one interviews, with each interview being approximately 90 minutes in length.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and if I have any additional questions regarding this study, I may contact Michelle Graham at 708-373-0090 (cell phone) or Dr. Teresa Wasonga at 815-753-8750. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588 or email Patty Wallace, Research Compliance Coordinator, at pwallace@niu.edu.

I understand that the intended benefits of this study are (1) it will add to existing literature; (2) it may provide useful information for the development of training programs for female superintendents; and (3) it may enlighten those in key positions responsible for the recruitment and hiring of superintendents.

I understand that all information gathered during this research project will be kept confidential by the omission of names and school districts in the presentation of the data, and all “hard copies” of the research notes collected during the interviews will be destroyed at the completion of this project.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress that I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

You may email your signed and dated copy of this consent to my email address at Z1722989@students.niu.edu. In the event that you are unable to sign and email, you may type your name and the date on the signature and date lines, and this will be accepted as consent.

___________________________________________  ________________
Signature                                      Date