

EXAMINING THE JOURNEY AND EXPERIENCES OF FEMALES WHO BECOME
OREGON SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

By
RACHAEL GEORGE

FACULTY RESEARCH COMMITTEE:

Chair: Ginny Birky, PhD

Members: Suzanne Harrison, PhD

Terry Huffman, PhD

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This dissertation has been approved and accepted by:

11/29/13 *Ginny Birky* Committee Chair
Date Ginny Birky, PhD Professor of Education

11-18-2013 *Suzanne Harrison*
Date Suzanne Harrison, PhD Assistant Professor of Education

11/18/13 *Terry Huffman*
Date Terry Huffman, PhD Professor of Education

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the journey of female superintendents within the state of Oregon through the use of personal interviews, field notes, and researcher's reflections. Six women currently serving in the capacity of superintendent were interviewed in order to better understand the opportunities and challenges females experienced during their journey to becoming a superintendent, as well as their experiences in the position. Findings included opportunities presented to them through their hard work and dedication, the challenge of balancing personal and professional lives, understanding the importance of holding true to personal values, and the encouragement of more women to pursue the superintendency. Recommendations for future studies include exploring the experiences of female superintendents with a larger sample population, compare and contrast the experiences of female superintendents that assume the position in their 40s versus those in their 50s or 60s, and how family has impacted younger superintendents.

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DEDICATION

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Chapter One

Introduction

I have often wondered how and why people are in positions of authority in the K-12 education system. The most powerful positions within education may be that of superintendent, principal, or vice principal. This is where significant change often begins, as these individuals are involved with the hiring, firing, policy changes, and overall shaping of goals and objectives for the entire school district. These individuals are pillars in their communities because their philosophies and leadership skills directly determine the education provided to the children within the school or school district. So who are the individuals that lead our educational systems and make decisions that will influence our citizens of tomorrow?

Almost all superintendents come from the teaching profession (McCabe, 2001). In 2008, 78% of the nation's teachers were female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Based on this statistic, I would hypothesize most educational leaders are also women, as they have dominated the education field by sheer numbers since the late nineteenth century (Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995). After all, is education not traditionally a woman's field? However, this is an incorrect assumption. Even though women have dominated education for generations, they have never dominated positions of authority within education (Glass, 2000).

A historical perspective is imperative to understanding the inequities that exist with women in these roles, as it helps to identify that this is not a recent problem, but instead one that has long plagued education. Jackie Blount (1998) provided data documenting the percentage of local superintendents in the United States who were women. The data collection process commenced in 1910 and continued in twenty-year intervals. As a nation in 1910, approximately 9.83% of our superintendents were women. Dramatic decreases were observed from 1910 on through 1970

where a low of .55% was documented. However, 1990 saw an increase in the percentage of women in the superintendency, 4.66%, but not nearly as high as the original documented level. Blount notes: "Women have not enjoyed easy access to the local district superintendency" In 1910, women served in 327 out of 5,284 local school districts. In fact, by 1970, women superintended only 73 out of 10,431 local districts, producing a steady decline in representation from 6.19% to only .70%" (p. 183). One would think that as the number of local school districts increased, so would the proportion of women leading them. As Blount noted, this was not the case. During 1910 to 1970, the number of school districts more than doubled, while the number of female superintendents declined from the original 327.

Dan Domenech, the executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, recently stated, "there is a huge disparity here" in reference to the number of women in the superintendent role as compared to men (Domenech as cited in Holland, 2011, p. 1). He went on to note that this is an interesting phenomenon "as there are so many more women in education than men" (p. 1). The Oregon Department of Education (2012) documented that within the state of Oregon, women represented only 22% of the superintendents currently working in the school systems in 2011. In fact, out of 197 school districts in Oregon, only 44 of superintendents were females (22%) during the 2012-2013 school year. This trend corresponds to that found at a macro level within education. In the U.S. public schools alone, men occupy nearly all leadership positions (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Glass (2000) documented that only 14% of superintendents were female, 1,984 out of 13,728, within the United States. These statistics do not come as a surprise, as historic data going back as far as 1910 shows this disproportion of men to women at the superintendent level.

Breaking into the principalship has not been any easier for women than those attempting to reach the superintendency. Lunenburg and Ornstein (2004) reported that women make up 72% of the nation's teachers and 43% of the principals. The American Association of School Administrators in their decennial review of school leaders across the United States noted that 24.1% of their participants were women, which was an increase from the 13.2% documented in 2000 (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2010). Most of these women served as elementary school principals, curriculum directors, instructional assistants or coordinators (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). While the number of female superintendents is on the rise, at the current rate of change it will take more than three decades before women serve in this capacity at an equal ratio to men. This gender gap is even more pronounced when we consider the discrepancy of men to women in their current leadership roles (Kowalski et al., 2010).

Not only are the numbers of females out of balance with male superintendents, females in this role bring something unique to the position. While a slight growth has occurred over the past half century in the number of women serving in school or school district leadership positions, the percentage of women in superintendent roles has not (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). It is ironic that men make up a small percentage of the workforce in education (Brunner, 2000; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004, & Lynch, 1990). This brings up many questions for those within education and for individuals striving to reach the level of superintendent; it is starting to become a topic of choice when it comes to research.

In the past few decades, women's roles as educators, specifically in a leadership capacity, have started to draw attention from researchers and those within the field of education. Various books have been published on women in administration in order to document and understand a woman's experience within the school system, along with attempting to identify why females are

underrepresented in leadership positions (Bjork, 2000; Blount, 1998; Dahlvig & Longman, 2010; Grogan, 2005; Hyndman, 2009; Lynch, 1990). Perhaps through understanding woman leader's experiences, researchers can figure out why there are so few females in the role of superintendent. However, the majority of the research conducted has targeted women aspiring to the superintendency, rather than individuals that currently hold the position. The purpose of this research project was to investigate more deeply into the experiences of the female superintendent.

Investigating women in leadership at the superintendent level is a great start for understanding why there are a limited number of women at the superintendent level. Why does the pool of female leaders appear to be deep and wide, but few are able to make the "tough trip upstream" (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006, p. 83)? With over 65% of the educational workforce being women, one would infer that more than 14% would fill the positions of superintendent (Brunner, 2000); however, this is not the case as a nation or within the state of Oregon. These statistics are great indicators as to how our educational systems within Oregon and as a nation have welcomed women into leadership roles over the past twenty some years. While these statistics represent a number of qualitative improvements, it does not paint an accurate enough picture of the challenges or struggles women have to get to this leadership level, or what they encounter once they are there.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to explore the unique perspectives and experiences of female superintendents within the state of Oregon. I used personal interviews to examine the opportunities and challenges they encountered on their journey to become a superintendent and how their experiences influenced current roles and positions. The objective of the study was to document the opportunities and challenges from female superintendents who have successfully made it to one of the highest levels of educational leadership.

Research Questions

Through this qualitative study, I addressed three major research questions. The questions were intentionally broad in anticipation that specific issues and experiences would arise as I explored this topic.

1. What are the opportunities encountered by females when pursuing the position of school superintendent?
2. What are the challenges encountered by females when pursuing the position of school superintendent?
3. How do past challenges and opportunities experienced by female superintendents influence their current roles and positions?

Key Terms

Glass Ceiling: This term references the unofficial acknowledgment of an invisible barrier that bars women from advancing in a profession (Montz & Wanat, 2008).

Leaky or Leaking Pipeline: This term references the continuing loss of female talent, specifically the level of female participation in leadership roles (Gender Advisory Council, 2008).

Planting the Seed: This term references the moment when an individual in power, typically male, verbally acknowledged one's ability and spoke to their future within the organization in a leadership capacity (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010).

Sex Role Socialization: This term references the behavioral and social norms that are considered typical for males and females in a social or interpersonal situation (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000).

Sex Structuring: This term references how structuring of positions and roles within an organization is based around gender (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Superintendent: A person that directs and manages a school district, and holds the highest level of leadership within a K-12 education system.

Limitations and Delimitations

With any study there will always be limitations and delimitations involved in the process. This study involved interviewing current female superintendents through a qualitative approach. The interview questions were written strategically to generate a significant level of detail surrounding the superintendents' opportunities and challenges and how their experiences influenced their current positions. A limitation of the qualitative study was that the findings do not generalize to the entire population on either a state or national level. This is chiefly due to the fact data were collected from a non-probability sample. Nonetheless, the knowledge generated by this qualitative research project is significant in its own right as insights gained may be transferrable or applied to other female superintendents' experiences.

While a small sample size may be viewed as a limitation, this qualitative research approach was expected to generate an extensive amount of rich information from each of the participants through face-to-face interviews. This allowed for a more authentic and detailed picture of female superintendents with their opportunities and challenges. Fundamentally, this small sample size allowed the researcher to examine the situation at a more in-depth level, from a variety of perspectives, whereas a large sample size could be inconsequential.

Time also served as a limiting factor to this study as it took a great deal of time to personally interview participants. Some of them lived extreme distances from each other and me. Differences in location greatly increased the time involved in the research, data collection, and collaboration with the participants. In addition, we each serve in a leadership capacity within the school system and had significant professional obligations with meetings and work schedules. This

study must also contain a point in which the research, data collection, and writing ends. Had I studied female superintendents for years or even decades, the information and data collected would be extremely rich in nature, but the time restraints I had for completing my dissertation were not that flexible.

One of the major delimitation within this study was the applicant pool. By delimiting the participants to being female and currently working as a superintendent within the state of Oregon, the possible sample size was significantly limited. In addition, the number of participants chosen, six females out of the possible applicant pool of 44, continued to serve as a delimitation due to personal constraints.

As a result of the above time constraints, the major delimitation for this research investigation was that only six people were studied. While there are many individuals who could serve as participants, I purposely created a heterogeneous sample population that contained variance in distance from me, district size, years in their current position, race, and their age. By focusing the research investigation on a few specific female superintendents within the educational system and their specific opportunities and challenges as female superintendents, it served to focus the information and tell a story that is worth sharing. Using this approach provided an information-rich story where I could get a deep, broad perspective about numerous different experiences as female superintendents, depending upon the location, environment, and individuals they work with on a daily basis.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

There are few career fields in which women can claim dominance, but education is one of them. Women dominate the profession by filling approximately 70% of all teaching positions; however, women find themselves as a much smaller percentage of individuals who fill leadership positions within the educational system (Bjork, 2000). While the number of women leaders within education are slowly starting to increase, many questions remain unanswered: Why do so few women leaders in education make it to the top of their field? What influenced their journey, and what goes into achieving these positions? What opportunities did they experience during their journey? Were there challenges and barriers that altered their journeys and paths as they climbed their way to the top? Did this change their perspective of education, or does it influence how they interact in their current positions as superintendents? What shapes these few females who lead our educational systems? More specifically, I am interested in knowing how so few women leaders in education make it to the top, what influences their journeys, and what opportunities and challenges existed for them in the past and present.

While the study of leading women in the workplace is not a new topic, the focus on women in positions of leadership within the field of education is fairly new. In fact, the study of women in education emerged in the 1990s and has continued to draw attention since its *début* (Bjork, 2000). Even though many similarities exist between leading women in other professional fields and education, women in education are very different for the sheer fact that they have made up the bulk of the workforce within the educational system for the last hundred years (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008).

Many factors have been identified that influence women as they attempt to enter into positions of educational leadership (Hyndman, 2009). Some claim women are overlooked when it comes to choosing a leader likely to succeed (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Others point to the glass ceiling or the leaky pipeline, both frequently blamed in corporate business for the inequality that can also be found in educational leadership positions (Maca & Bauer, 2009). The "leaky pipeline" is a term coined to reference the number of women that leave the field as they move or attempt to move up within the system (Maca & Bauer, 2009).

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a description of the work previously conducted on women in leadership roles within the field of education. The literature review focuses on the impact of social history and women in leadership, the impact of personal history and women in leadership, the impact of social systems on women in leadership, and the impact of culture and social norms on women at the superintendent level.

Social History and Women in Leadership

Social history has significantly affected the way in which women interact and function within positions of leadership. Males have dominated both the business sector and the field of education when it comes to leadership positions. From 1890-1954, education was modeled after business ideas, and therefore most administrative progressives were male, white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestants (Hyndman, 2009). This was a time when all decisions and mandates were made from the top down, including the hiring and firing of staff. Therefore, the majority of leadership positions in education were made up of men (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010). When it came to positions within education, these actions and systems led to gender becoming a determining factor in the division of labor between men and women.

To understand the impact history played on women's role in educational leadership, one must understand the history of women in teaching. While teaching has commonly been defined as a female profession in the twenty first century, records indicate that until the late eighteenth century, men (Shakeshaft, 1989) did all the teaching. At the end of the Colonial period, the practice of utilizing women to train boys and girls between the ages of four and seven in an educational setting began. These women, commonly referred to as school dames, would assemble the local children in their homes where they would teach the alphabet and simple arithmetic. Having little formal training for teaching, the school dames were restricted to only teaching the youngest students during the summer. Their rate of pay during these times was much lower than males doing the same work.

Between 1820 and 1830, industry and business began to grow thus creating additional employment opportunities for male teachers as the population of immigrants increased. A male teacher shortage occurred with the increase in employment opportunities, industrialization, urbanization, and population. School boards began actively searching for male teachers with the desired background, middle class men that were literate. The few men that school boards did find used teaching as a stepping-stone to another career or a means to earn money for college during the summer months. Again, a shortage of teachers occurred. Women were first sought after for teaching because men were unavailable (Shakeshaft, 1989). Even with significantly lower pay, women flocked to the teaching profession. Many rationalized women's entrance into teaching by claiming it helped prepare them for the work in marriage and motherhood. With time, women started to be viewed as natural teachers because they could utilize their maternal instincts since it was an extension of the home to schoolroom.

In the early days of public schooling, the teachers did everything, including administration. However, as schooling became more complex and bureaucratization, the functions of a teacher and administrator became more distinct. The separation of teaching and administration had a significant impact on women. The hierarchy of roles within education was created as job descriptions, responsibilities, and role of the teacher and administrator were separated out; the work of the administrator was placed above the work of the teacher in a hierarchical standpoint. While the intent of restructuring was to allow for the work of schooling to be carried out more efficiently, it effectively kept women in the classroom and out of administration. Supporters of the bureaucratization and hierarchical restructuring argued that women should be teachers while men needed to be retained as principals and superintendents because of the belief in male dominance and women as natural followers (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Between 1820 and 1900, a small handful of women held administrative positions. While few managed public schools, the majority founded their own schools and served as chief administrators (Giddings, 1984; Solomon, 1985). From the 1900s to the 1930s, women started to emerge in positions of leadership within the field of education (Hyndman, 2009). Many of these positions were elementary principalships, county superintendencies, and other jobs in educational settings that consisted of an all-female staff. With this movement into leadership, women were often placed in areas less desired by men, and were on average, paid less than their male counterparts (Hyndman, 2009).

Sherman and Beaty (2010) claim that gender interacts with history and societal expectations throughout various time periods. They specifically point to the suffrage movement and war times to support their position. For example, the gains women made in administration

during the first three decades of the twentieth century were not maintained after 1930 (Shakeshaft, 1989). Once the suffrage movement ended, so did the focus on women.

Several factors worked against women and contributed to the decline in administrative positions after 1930. As the suffrage movement ended, the negative perspective of women and the role school boards had in hiring significantly impacted women. At this point, negative attitudes toward women continued to be a major barrier. People viewed women as being constitutionally incapable of discipline and order due to their size and supposed lack of strength. This perception of women did not help females secure positions within administration. School boards also played a substantial role in placing women in administrative positions through the hiring process and the qualifications they were looking for candidates to possess. For example, school boards did not want to invest their time and money in workers with short-term commitments, referencing women leaving the workforce for marriage or children. Boards also liked to hire those most like themselves, white middle-aged Protestant males (Shakeshaft, 1989). With the focus on something other than moving women into the workforce, specifically in the field of education, school boards became concerned, as many feared they would no longer be able to control the women. The concern and worry school boards began to harbor led to a decrease in the number of women they hired (Hyndman, 2009).

The number of women within the teaching pool was also greatly reduced during the 1930s because districts refused to hire married women or allow single women to continue teaching once they were married. According to Shakeshaft (1989), these arrangements were also known as marriage bans; the policies had a wide-ranging effect on the sex structuring of education, as women that stayed within the profession were unable to find a husband or refused to marry. The practice of marriage bans benefited men by downsizing the pool of experienced applicants for

administrative positions (Hyndman, 2009). Marriage bans on hiring were lifted during World War II, and women were able to experience a wide variety of occupations and positions once considered off limits to them (Grogan, 2005). However, when the men returned from war and all of the teaching positions were filled with women, school boards and superintendents found "new" administrative and coaching positions for the men that would separate themselves from the women in terms of power and salary (Grogan, 2005; Hyndman, 2009).

This cycle of deliberate or circumstantial blocking of women's attempts to enter leadership roles within education continued until the establishment of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which prohibited employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, and national origin (Hyndman, 2009). For instance, board members were advised to take careful note of the federal regulations surrounding women and minorities (Grogan, 1996). Even with Title VII in place, many schools did not necessarily grant females equal educational opportunities, specifically within school administration (Derrington & Sharratt, 2008). Instead, attention to the language used to refer to a superintendent was prompted by legal considerations rather than by desire to re-conceptualize the position. Therefore, the literature from this point on pays explicit attention to providing gender neutrality of the superintendent, implying that administrative leaders could be male or female (Grogan, 1996). Following Title VII, this was the only major change in educational leadership in regards to gender. One could claim that Title VII just made the discrimination process and barriers less explicit and more subtle.

Past inequalities in educational leadership opportunities have continued to this day. In 1993, Derrington and Sharratt (2008) conducted a study on the barriers women experienced as they worked towards the superintendency. This study was replicated by the original researchers 14 years later to identify if any changes had been made in regards to the barriers keeping women from

top administrative positions. Derrington and Sharratt's findings were powerful: the women surveyed were more likely to perceive barriers as institutionalized and rooted in societal discrimination practices, while the 2007 research indicated the barriers to be self-imposed. However, some barriers identified earlier, such as responsibilities at home, relocating for jobs, and balancing demands from various stakeholders remained the same. Overall, Derrington and Sharratt's study concluded that barriers facing women as they entered into administrative roles in education had not changed, but rather to the *emphasis* on which ones were most influential. According to their findings, women who have not been able to effectively integrate family obligations with the demands of the superintendency are still untapped resources. They believe women that have succeeded appear to be unusually resilient, flexible, and have accommodating family systems. Even younger women with school age children or older individuals with aging parents face the dual demands of home and work, which limit the pool of available resources and applicants (Derrington & Sharratt, 2008).

Personal History and Women in Leadership

While the history of women in the United States influences women leaders within education, the personal history of these women also play a role. Women leaders are most often changed by a single event within their personal history (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010). One study identified how women leaders in education could define the instant they decided to set their eyes upon leadership positions. Three overarching themes of these defining moments were identified by Dahlvig and Longman (2010): someone speaking to their potential, their vision of a leader was redefined, or they decided to stand up for a strong belief or challenge. Of these three themes, someone speaking to their potential was identified as the most empowering moment for a prospective woman leader. It was in this moment that an individual in power, typically male,

verbally acknowledged one's ability and spoke to their future within the organization in a leadership capacity. Frequently this experience "planted the seed" for educational leadership in the years to come (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010).

A woman's professional history or career path also plays a role in her ability to reach the superintendency (Cordie, 2013). An examination of literature shows differences exist between male and female career paths. Men often start their careers in education as a second option, rather than a first, which often results in men being less committed to education and teaching. Most women teachers have chosen education over other careers and frequently identify this career path at an early age (Shakeshaft, 1989). It has also been found that men move more quickly into graduate study programs while women take longer to complete their undergraduate work.

In the 2000 *Study of the American School Superintendency* (Glass, Bjork & Brunner), it was noted that the ranks of superintendents have been dominated by former high school teachers and principals. This could have possibly resulted in a disadvantage to women aspiring to be superintendents, since women typically dominate the elementary teaching positions. Therefore, fewer women would have opportunities to enter into "entry level" positions available at the secondary level. The typical route for men to the superintendency role is often secondary teacher, athletic director, assistant secondary principal, secondary principal, and then the superintendency. For women, the typical route involves moving from a secondary or elementary principal position, elementary school principal, director/coordinator, assistant superintendent, and finally the superintendent (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Montz & Wanat, 2008; Natale, 1992; Yong-Lyun & Brunner, 2009). Today, approximately 75% of elementary school teachers are female, yet 75% of the present superintendents worked as a secondary school teacher prior to working as a superintendent (Glass, 2000; Sharp et al., 2004). Yong-Lynn and Brunner (2009) note that most of

the present superintendents started at the secondary level and therefore had opportunities to participate in district wide initiatives, coaching duties, and advanced placement positions. Access to these opportunities in one's professional history greatly influences the number of women that apply and are then hired to the high school principalship, which is the primary position for which one ascends to the superintendency (Sharp et al., 2004). The movement between these positions is important to recognize as the majority of women teach at the elementary level and therefore have to go through more professional positions than men, in addition to not having as many opportunities provided to them, based on their past positions.

Compared to men, women usually spend longer in the classroom prior to taking an administrative position (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). Research indicates that nearly 40% of male superintendents spent five or less years in the classroom while 40% of women superintendents had over ten years. The difference of years in the classroom highlights how the professional background and history could result in women attending more closely than men to academic performance and curriculum. Other researchers have found that women on average teach ten years longer than men prior to entering into administration (Lunenberg & Ornstein, 1991; Riehl & Byrd, 1997; Shakeshaft, 1989). These statistics continue to vary when you compare educational experience. According to Bjork and Kowalski (2005), 58% of women superintendents majored in education during their undergraduate work while only 24 % of men did. Discrepancies continue when you look at continuing education, as more women have earned degrees in higher education over the past ten years in the area of education, 47% of women compared to 36% of men.

The history of women as educational leaders influences the women of today. These gender-related experiences and preparations throughout history, in addition to one's professional background, play a role in women accessing the superintendency. It helps to put today's

challenges and obstacles into perspective by understanding the progress and challenges faced by women in the past. Women did not get to where they are today through chance; it was a series of events and factors that led to their current position.

Social Systems and Women in Leadership

Not only does history affect the women in education today; the systems within the field of education also play a role in how leadership is determined and developed. In a study conducted by Grogan and Brunner (2005), the authors noted that unequal distribution of power resides in the systems, structures, and practices that have been unquestioned for years. In the field of education, these same systems, structures, and practices are used on a daily basis and control gender inequality when it comes to leadership positions (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Given that these systems are so powerful and grounded in tradition, Lord and Preston (2009) conducted a study on the impact on women. They identified the need for organizational and cultural change if gender equality is to be achieved within the field of education.

In order to survive, change, or adapt within a system, there is a need to understand the system in which you work or pursue work (Reed & Evans, 2008). Experience within the educational system, specifically when it comes to leadership, has been identified as masculine, gendered, and structured (Lord & Preston, 2009). Gender inequality is observed on a daily basis within our educational system, as many men within leadership positions are married and have children, whereas fewer women in these leadership positions have either. According to Hyndman (2009), many women in positions of leadership within education are single or do not have children. Research conducted by Lord and Preston (2009) supports Hyndman's (2009) hypothesis that systems need to focus on recruitment, networking, and mentoring of young leaders, specifically females. Drago-Severson, Cuban, and Dalzo (2009) argue educational leadership can be

developed within a system, unofficially or officially. It can emerge spontaneously, either through a collaborative process, or through the support of one another without formal supports.

The glass ceiling is an image representing obstacles that prevent women from advancing to the top of their careers and could serve as an explanation to the disproportionate amount of women superintendents. Although women have a full view of the top of the career ladder, the superintendency, they often are unable to reach this level due to an invisible shield of resistance. In a study discussed in *Women Leading in Education* by Dunlap and Schmuck (1995), 13 aspiring female superintendents were interviewed. While this study was small in nature, it found that the glass-ceiling phenomenon may be a partial explanation for the low percentages of women in the superintendency, but it does not appear to be an adequate one. The interview data instead pointed to the perception of the role and the challenges that come with it that prevent women from further pursuing the superintendent position. Many of the women in the study identified the position as being powerful, political, and public, which was frequently tied to a disadvantage of being a superintendent (Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995).

Other sources suggest the near absence of women in the superintendency may have less to do with their lack of training or availability than other factors related to the search and selection process (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000; Parent, 2004; Anderson, 2000). Systems used for the recruitment of leadership positions also play a role in the inequity of women in education. Convenience, expertise, and access to candidate pools are three reasons in boards' decisions to enlist the assistance of a consultant rather than conduct the search themselves (Tallerico, 2000). This process, either through a consulting company or with the board, can take an extensive amount of time and expertise, much of which school board members do not have. With the demanding and ongoing workloads of school board members and the life expectancy of a superintendent, it is often

viewed as practical to outsource the numerous tasks associated with orchestrating a successful superintendent search (Tallerico, 2000). These actions and decisions are even more practical considering that the search for a superintendent is rarely expected to lead to a permanent relationship, or until the superintendent retires. With leadership positions and administrative roles, specifically in the case of the superintendent, the school board and community decide to whom the job will be offered, which is in stark contrast to the process of hiring a classroom teacher. Therefore, search committees seek a match not only between a superintendent and the particular place, but also between the superintendent and the particular time. As times change, the needs for school leadership change (Johnson, 1996).

Since the superintendent's work is entwined with local government officials, hiring the right person for the position becomes unofficial business for municipal officials and community leaders. Mayors and other local officials often play key roles in the search process, identifying hiring criteria, interviewing candidates, and even assisting in the bargaining of agreements when requested by the hiring committee. Even if they are not directly involved in the process, their voices are often represented or considered during the hiring process (Johnson, 1996). However, consulting companies and search committees frequently used by districts when looking to hire a superintendent or building administrator have been found to disproportionately recommend men for leadership positions over women (Keedy, Björk, Winter, Rinehart, & Ricciardi, 2007). This has significant consequences for women seeking superintendent positions since these companies play a crucial role in the educational hiring system and recommend individuals for interviews. It is the consulting companies that eliminate anywhere between five to 100 applications before forwarding 10 to 12 onto the school board (Tallerico, 2000). A study conducted by Keedy et al. (2007) noted that consulting companies and search committees often omitted women from their

recommendation list, as the companies wanted to ensure they were providing a list of potential candidates that districts would actually hire or find as valuable assets within the district. They propose that from a business standpoint, the level in which the consulting companies can provide a reputable recommendation list, while also being able to recruit top quality candidates, is extremely important because it serves as a direct determinate of whether their services will be rendered by the district in the future. In other words, according to Tallerico (2000), their services should be good, and the people districts hire through these companies should be successful because the consulting companies rely on identifying and placing successful candidates into the workplace.

When considering women in leadership, it is vital to understand the role systems play in how leadership is developed and determined. America's educational systems directly influence how women function within the organization and determine how they are hired. The lack of awareness of this relationship could potentially lead to further struggles and battles for those involved within the educational system that are striving towards positions of leadership.

The Impact of Culture and Social Norms on Women in Leadership

Cultural and social norms also influence women in educational leadership. Reed and Evans (2008) identified the intersection of race, gender, and professional socialization as being influential in how leadership is defined and perceived. According to Reed and Evans, cultural expectations and critical life events influence leadership choices, styles, and the motivation to pursue leadership roles. Educational leadership is also formulated in the context of belief systems in addition to culture, ideologies, events, idiosyncrasies, national sub cultures, and the level of education (Shah, 2010; Smith & Reed, 2010). Societal discourse and media representation of women as educational leaders also add to America's vision of leadership (Wilkinson & Blackmore,

2008). Wilkinson and Blackmore conclude that leadership and one's perception of what makes a leader is informed by life experiences and exposure to leadership.

Currently, there is a lack of women in the superintendency, while K-12 education is a female-dominated profession. However, the people who fill the leadership roles are predominately men (Konnert & Augenstein, 1995). There has been speculation as to why this is the case and whether there will be an upward trend in the increase of female superintendents. Konnert and Augenstein (1995) along with Ceniga (2008) believe that the number of women holding the superintendency is impacted by culture and society, specifically with the barriers that women encounter, leadership styles, and job satisfaction. According to these authors, barriers exist, internal and external, and influence women achieving the superintendency. They identify internal barriers as family and career, internalization of socialized sex role and gender characteristics, and the absence of role models. External barriers to women achieving this upper level of leadership within a school district may include their exclusion from the "good old boys" club and continued sex discrimination in both practice and attitude (Edson, 1998; Pigot, & Tonnsen, 1993).

Researchers such as Grogan (1996) believe that an "old boy" network of mentors and sponsors have dominated the superintendency. For example, white males have often benefited from being sponsored by the "good old boys" network and they still constitute the vast majority of school superintendents (Hord & Estes, 1993, p. 321). Most recently in the *2000 Study of the American School Superintendency*, Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) documented that three-quarters of the female superintendents involved in their study noted that networking helps women get higher level leadership positions and that gender barriers exist because of the "good old boys."

Females that attempt to make it to the superintendency are impacted by social and cultural systems, specifically when it comes to families (Barbie, 2008). If men's work lives are interrupted

at all, which they seldom are, it is to satisfy military requirements or to attend higher education programs. Typically, men in administration have steady paths of upward movement that are uninterrupted (Shakeshaft, 1989). Women, however, have a different experience as many often leave their jobs to have and raise kids. Paddock (1980) found that the majority of women in administration took maternity leave at some point in their career or took extended leave, something that is not typically done by men. Largely, women are expected to care for children and therefore leave their school careers to attend to homemaking and childrearing.

Chase and Bell (1994), noted that key decision makers in superintendent selection processes are often prone to concentrating on individual qualities, while ignoring or not understanding external barriers faced by women and minorities. Similar to Chase and Bell, Shakeshaft (1999) observed that these qualifications and competence do not eradicate sexism or racism in society. Brunner in 1996 found that women differed in their perceptions of these barriers and the approach in how they deal with them. One way in which women approach barriers differently as they aspire to the superintendency is through the various career paths they take (Mertz & McNeely, 1988). Pavan noted this occurrence in 1988 and again in 1995 when it was documented through research that women often exhibited a greater range of strategies they make in seeking the position. For example, minorities and female candidates for the superintendency have been expected to be better educated and more experienced than the other candidates, which points them towards pursuing an advanced placement degree and to gain extensive experience in a wide variety of settings (Jackson & Shakeshaft, 2003). Shakeshaft (1989) found that by the end of the mid-1980s women accounted for 50% or more of the candidates enrolled in doctoral programs in educational administration throughout the country. Pavan (1985) also noticed an upward trend in

the number of superintendent certifications awarded to women between 1970 and 1984 in a Pennsylvania study.

Collectively, the prevalence of career barriers, strategies for dealing with them, alternative routes to the superintendency, and higher expectations related to qualifications demonstrates the need for career planning in the early stages of professional practice (Kowalski & Strouder, 1999). Studies demonstrate that although male teachers are sponsored more than females for administrative positions, of those teachers who finally become administrators, women receive slightly more sponsorship which indicates that men need fewer doors opened for them to achieve the same level of positions than women do (Picker, 1980). Career planning is of particular importance for helping women and minorities as it often involves mentoring, sponsorship, and networking. For both men and women, most administrative careers are unplanned, but proportionally more female than male career paths are planned. These mentors provide encouragement, help build confidence, demonstrate friendships, and provide advice related to career development (Pence, 1989). It is through these sponsorships and interactions that social and political systems and barriers can be overcome. For example, 77% of male superintendents and 83% of female superintendents reported having a mentor (Glass et al., 2000). Those seeking the superintendency without this support are at a great disadvantage because they have difficulty gaining access to influential networks that have historically been male dominated (Funk, 1986).

Age and prior experience have also been found to influence the number of women in the superintendency. Glassø (1992) research shows that women are generally appointed to their first administrative position later than men. Shakeshaft (1989) reported that women in educational administration tend to be in their mid to late 40s and that the older they are, the higher positions they tend to hold. Men, in comparison, begin their administrative career in their 20s and move to

the superintendency at a faster rate. One study by O'Connell and Talerico (1998), found that on average, women enter into the superintendency four years later than men. More specifically, twice as many females spend longer in the classrooms than their male counterparts do. Possible explanations for a late entry into administration could be connected to raising children and families during the earlier portions of their careers.

Even once a woman achieves the superintendency, these barriers, internal and external, may continue to exist, directly impacting professional satisfaction and success. Women are also faced with the same frustration and satisfaction their male counterparts experience (Konnert & Augenstein, 1995). It was noted that superintendents tended to have a higher level of job satisfaction with community/superintendent relationships, student/superintendent relationships, and staff/superintendent relationships. Frustration and low job satisfaction was expressed by both genders when it came to the way in which education was financed and the work of the state board of education. However, a difference did exist between genders concerning job satisfaction when dealing with job compensation, which could be a direct result of women often serving in smaller school districts that frequently pay at a lower daily rate (Konnert & Augenstein, 1995).

In a 1993 study by Talerico, Burstyn, and Poole, found that women typically leave the superintendency, even after their extensive journey and dedication to reaching this level, due to job dissatisfaction in addition to new job opportunities, childrearing concerns, and the strong negative effects of politics. Many of the women that participated in Talerico, Burstyn, and Poole's study identified that they left the job due to the dysfunction of school board politics, union influences, non-educational foci, and moral clashes (Konnert & Augenstein, 1995). In a similar study, but one more specific to career paths of women school district administrators in Wisconsin (Lundin, 1993),

women were noted as identifying how they have less tolerance for politics than men and they advised other women to develop a tolerance for the politics of the position.

In an array of previous studies, researchers have convincingly agreed that educational leadership is strongly influenced by culture and society, yet it still leaves us to wonder how much of it is influenced by gender (Reed & Evans, 2008; Shah, 2010; Smith & Reed, 2010; Wilkinson & Blackmore, 2008). There has been an ongoing debate as to whether males and females lead differently. There are those who contend that effective leadership is unrelated to gender, while others believe that, because of sex role socialization, men and women lead in different ways. In general, women tend to be more concerned with teachers and marginal students, more motivational, and value work with parents and the community (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000). Therefore, staff ratings tend to be higher for females than for male superintendents. According to Glass, Bjork, and Brunner, staffs within these districts were more productive and students had a higher morale than in districts with male superintendents. Mertz and McNeely (1998) argue that while gender does play a role in how one leads, it is more of a multidimensional model. Educational leadership is not a binary or combination model. Leadership is about culture, contextual, and gender influences.

Literature suggests women may lead in a style quite different from men due to the impact of socialization (Konnert & Augenstein, 1995). Due to society's influence, women may put a higher value on enabling and empowering, which is often described as horizontal or "web-like," rather than top-down and controlling (Auberdene & Naisbitt, 1992; Cantor & Bernay, 1992; Helgesen, 1990). Their research (1993) also indicated women tend to be transformational leaders and that through their relational style of leadership; they are able to bring themselves and others to new levels.

Differences in how men and women lead is particularly important against the background of school reform movements that started in the 1980s as interest grew in the relationship between instructional improvement and the superintendency (Grogan, 1996). Cuban (1988) claimed that in the past, the superintendent's instructional role was overridden by managing, but is now an intersection between the two, managing and instructional improvement. Conversely, there is evidence suggesting women use the power within educational leadership positions differently, consciously or unconsciously (Isaac, Behar-Horenstein, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2009). One of the many ways in which they differ is in the delegation, influence over power, multiplicity, and numerous leadership identities in various contexts. For example, Issac, et al. (2009) stated that women in leadership roles are more likely than men to delegate tasks and assignments to those around them, while men tend to hold on to power in order to exert a stronger level of influence over individuals. These actions carry over to how they approach responsibilities as a leader. Female superintendents view themselves as instructional leaders instead of managers, and therefore spend significantly more time visiting schools (Glass, 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Men, on the other hand, spend much of their time addressing budgets, fiscal management, and human resource issues, all of which are more managerial experiences that factor into how they view themselves, their leadership style, and the role they play within education (Glass, 2000; Logan, 2000).

Conclusions

The studies to date confirm that women in educational leadership are directly influenced by history, systems, and social and cultural norms. History is an important component of understanding women in educational leadership because the experiences and events all contribute to where women are today. These experiences directly influence future actions and decisions, as

does the influence of social and cultural norms. The past cannot be changed, but it can be studied so that present and future factors and influences can be understood in the current field of education.

Most of the studies cited within this literature review introduced some of the most salient factors surrounding women in educational leadership. While the study of women has been around since the turn of the century, its introduction into the educational field was just twenty years ago, whereas most research conducted on women in leadership was in the last ten years and does not provide historical or longitudinal data. Another weakness in the research conducted is related to the number of participants, which results in small sample sizes. The difficulty in finding female participants working to achieve positions of leadership within the educational field is directly correlated with the total number of women in the field.

Due to the lack of literature on this topic, it is crucial that a future study of women and leadership be done to examine how women in leadership roles have experienced the superintendency, as well as overcome barriers. Other topics of study not found in the literature include why women would not support other women in positions of power, the effects of mentoring women as they enter into the field, what is known about the way in which women lead, and ways to rethink the structure of systems to assist more women in choosing leadership roles. It is important to continue research on this topic for two reasons: to help promote equity within educational leadership roles, and to provide insight and guidance surrounding influential factors to those pursuing a leadership role within education.

Chapter 3

Methods

Introduction

While women have historically dominated education, the same does not hold true for women in educational leadership positions (Logan, 2000). Few women have made it to these upper ranks. The purpose of this study was to discover, document, and learn about the experiences of six female superintendents in Oregon, as well as how it influenced their current roles and positions. I used a qualitative format to collect and document the experiences of these important figures in Oregon educational history. The quest throughout the investigation was to gain understanding about experiences that have influenced their careers and contributions to their districts, which will directly inform us on the intersection of gender and educational leadership roles. Currently 22% of females hold the title of superintendent within Oregon, and far fewer of them have been asked to tell their story.

This exploratory study allowed me to learn more about the journey females take to reach the superintendency, as well as the experiences they have while in that role. Stebbins (2001) explained that qualitative studies allow the researcher to learn about a given subject through the personal experiences of people. The process allows for flexibility, open-mindedness, and for the experience of the researcher to be capitalized. Berg and Lune (2012) described the value of conducting a qualitative study. They spoke about how the qualitative procedures "provide a means of accessing unquantifiable knowledge about the actual people researchers observe and talk to or about, people represented by their personal traces" (p. 8). The qualitative process allowed me to explore the experiences, opportunities and challenges, of females that have successfully made it to one of the highest levels within educational leadership, the superintendency. For this qualitative

study, I investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the opportunities encountered by females when pursuing the position of school superintendent?
2. What are the challenges encountered by females when pursuing the position of school superintendent?
3. How do past challenges and opportunities experienced by female superintendents influence their current roles and positions?

The study included personal stories of six participants, providing rich information as to the opportunities and challenges of female superintendents. I used personal interviews to examine the experiences they encountered as they aspired to be a superintendent. Within this chapter, I describe the setting, participants, sampling strategy, research ethics, research design, guide questions, procedures for data collection, analytical procedures, role of the researcher, and potential contributions to current literature on women in the superintendent role.

Setting

The setting for this exploratory study was in a variety of school districts throughout Oregon. The six female participants came from a variety of demographics and locations within the state. Their school districts spanned from Eastern Oregon, to Southern Oregon, to the coastal region of Oregon, to Southern Oregon, Central Oregon, and finally to the metropolitan area. In size, each of the school districts ranged from serving 600 to 5,000 students in K-12 classrooms. The communities in which they resided served students from low-income households to those in the upper-income levels in Oregon with the majority of the districts landing in the middle, serving a combination of low and middle-income students.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to identify six female superintendents from the state of Oregon, based upon pre-established delimitations. The Oregon Department of Education (2012) provided a list of 44 female superintendents within Oregon out of a total of 197 school districts. I intentionally selected superintendents that varied in their general location within Oregon, size, income level of the district, approximate age of the participant, and the number of years of experience in education and administration to create a heterogeneous sample population. This diversity added value to the study by including a variety of experiences and perspectives to the data collected and the overall findings. Each of the participants were current school district superintendents.

I contacted the six participants by email, postal mail, and phone conversations in July, 2013 to schedule the personal interviews. Three of the participants were quick to respond while the remaining three took longer to respond to my requests. Their delayed response was possibly due to the implications of their July work schedule and prearranged vacations. However, once initial contacts were made, interviews were scheduled within a week's timeframe. All of the interviews were conducted in July, 2013, with the exception of one, which was conducted in September, 2013.

The participants for the study were six female superintendents who currently serve in this leadership capacity within Oregon, ranging in age from early 40s to 60s. Total years in the superintendency ranged from being in their third year to their thirteenth school year. Participants had a variety of professional experiences prior to entering into the superintendency. One superintendent had never served as a building principal, while others had spent the majority of their time at the middle or high school level. One superintendent spent her years prior to being a superintendent at the elementary level, while another worked in the capacity of a special education

director and elementary principal. I used pseudonyms for participants in order to maintain confidentiality. For clarity, Table 1 identifies the characteristics of the participants and their corresponding information.

Table 1: Participant Information

Participant	Age	Prior Leadership Experience	Prior Education	District Demographics
Superintendent 1 Donna	50s	Middle and High School Principal	Masters	3,000 students Grades K-12
Superintendent 2 Sarah	50s	High School Athletic Director, Curriculum Director, Assistant Superintendent	Masters Doctorate	2,800 students Grades K-12
Superintendent 3 Kristie	50s	Middle and High School Principal, Curriculum Director at the ESD	Masters	4,228 students Grades K-12
Superintendent 4 Becky	40s	Elementary School Principal	Masters	600 students Grades K-12
Superintendent 5 Necole	60s	Elementary and Middle School Principal, Special Education Director, Curriculum Director, Assistant Superintendent	Masters Doctorate	1,247 students Grades K-12
Superintendent 6 Jane	60s	High School Vice Principal, Middle and Elementary Principal, Curriculum Director, Curriculum and Federal Programs Director at the ESD	Masters	5,000 students Grades K-12

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I have a stake in the success of this project as it directly connects to my dissertation work and my future graduation from the EdD program at George Fox University. However, from a personal standpoint, I am vested in this research project due to my innate interest in pioneering women in educational leadership positions. My mother was an administrator at the elementary level for over 15 years, and I am just starting my journey into administration.

Therefore, I believe the stories of the pioneering women in this field can be valuable and informative to those in education, as well as to myself. In looking to the future, I personally strive to achieve the level of superintendent at some point in my career. Understanding the opportunities and challenges faced by current female superintendents will provide me with insight and advice on how to make my quest to the level of superintendent successful.

I was aware of my own personal and political background while conducting this research project so it would not influence the retelling of the stories. One way I addressed this was through collaboration, discussion, and verbal reflection with the participants as I worked to ensure my retelling of their story and my analysis was correct. From a researcher's perspective, I tried to keep in mind whose story this was to share, who can tell the story, and who can change it.

Research Ethics

Throughout the research process, it was vital to address and appropriately deal with research ethics. In June, 2013, George Fox University's Institutional Review Board granted me permission to begin my research and data collection (Appendix A). I then mailed the informed consent letter (Appendix B) to the participants' work addresses and waited for them to be signed and returned before I arranged any personal interviews. During my initial contact with them in July, 2013, I clearly conveyed to the participants that they were participating in a research study, explained the purpose of the study, and provided honesty and openness about the nature of the research.

Once the participants agreed, I worked with them to schedule personal interviews throughout July, 2013. The identities of the participants were kept confidential. This means that neither participant names nor identifying information were used. In order to ensure confidentiality throughout this process, all audio recordings collected during the data collection process will be

kept for five years and then destroyed. Field notes, reflections, and interview notes will be disposed of through a shredding process three years after the research is completed. In addition, all notes and work pertaining to this study were kept so that only I, the researcher, have access to the material. Overall, I stored all information in file folders and computer files, all of which are under lock and key, as well as password protection.

Research Design

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) discussed how qualitative studies are suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants. This approach implies an emphasis on exploration, discovery, and description (p. 518). In the case of research design, I investigated the participants' journey to the superintendency and the challenges and opportunities they encountered along the way.

This research investigation utilized a qualitative research approach, which allowed me the freedom to write in personal and literary form (Creswell, 2007). This structure was essential as it allowed me to tell the story of the participants with a beginning, middle, and end. The procedures of this qualitative study were characterized by my experience with the process as I collected and analyzed the data.

Data Collection

Data were collected during the summer and early fall of 2013 through personal interviews, field notes, and researcher's reflections on the interviews. While using a personal interview approach to this research topic, I interviewed each participant once in either July or September, but it did not follow a lock-step approach. Instead, the interview contained questions intentionally broad in nature, which allowed for additional open-ended follow-up questions based upon the participants' responses (see Appendix C). These questions helped me gain further clarity on their

experiences. They allowed my focus to be on gathering data and information that would lead to textural and structural descriptions of experiences, and provided me with an understanding of the common experiences of being a female superintendent within Oregon (Creswell, 2007). General interview questions included follow-up questions to help ensure that clarity was achieved as I worked to understand and follow their individual stories. Participant responses during interviews were recorded through researcher notes and digital recordings, which were later transcribed.

I interviewed each participant for approximately two hours about their experience as a female superintendent. The face-to-face interview session focused on the opportunities and challenges the superintendents experienced and how they influenced their current roles and positions. Follow up questions centered on how they overcame challenges or barriers they might have encountered and advice for future female superintendents. The time constraints limited the data I was able to gather from the participants; however, the interview protocol of guided questions developed (see Appendix C) ensured that the time was utilized to the fullest, thus gathering an extensive amount of narrative data.

As the researcher, I observed the participant and recorded field notes in a notebook as I digitally recorded their interviews. This included observations I made about body language, voice tone, emotion, environment, and other comments I had during the interviews. I noted what information or documents were handed to me and if the participant referenced any documents during the interview. Finally, I created researcher reflections after meeting with each participant. This allowed me to reflect on the interview experience, consider how it related to me currently and in the future, and add any questions or thoughts I had about the overall experience.

The entire research data collection process took place during the second half of 2013. Data collection occurred in July and September. Writing took place in August, September, and October,

while the revisions and editing followed in October and November. The completion time for the research project was the middle of November.

Data Analysis

During this research study, data were collected through personal interviews, field notes, and researcher's reflections on the interview experience. Personal interviews were the main source of information, while field notes and researcher's reflections provided insight to the data collected. I compared interview-to-interview, interviews to field notes, and interviews to researcher's reflections. The constant comparison between these three data sources was essential in determining the emerging themes and how they related to each other.

Once I gathered stories and data from the participants, I analyzed them for key elements and broke them up into themes. I used Creswell's (2007) coding strategy to identify themes common to the participants to aid in the organization and interpretation of my findings. The first stage in the process was *initial coding* where I read the transcripts and field notes from all participants in order to identify key ideas or patterns (Creswell, 2007). I recorded the key ideas from the interviews and tallied them to identify the dominating patterns.

Creswell's second stage was *focused coding*, where I refined the initial coding with the intent to identify emerging themes through the use of tallying and looking for repetition in the data. Colored markers and highlighters were utilized during this process. Creswell (2007) suggested reading and rereading the transcripts of the interviews several times. The process used to transcribe the interviews, while marking and highlighting emerging themes, helped accomplish the second stage of the data analysis. I read and reread the content of every interview multiple times to help me identify major themes and repeated patterns between interviews. In addition, I took notes

while reading the transcripts that were also part of the data analysis. I took into account the participant, the context of the statement, and information they used to support their statements.

Finally, Creswell's third stage was *thematic coding* where I attempted to analyze the data by looking for connections between themes. The detailed narrative description of the themes told the story within my qualitative data analysis, explaining the opportunities and challenges experienced by the six participants in the study. Creswell (2007) referred to this final step as the lessons learned. The narrative in chapter four illustrates the journey each of the six female superintendents experienced as they worked to reach the highest level of educational leadership within a school district, and their experiences once arriving in the position. The findings not only include the opportunities and challenges of these individuals, but also their stories of being a superintendent.

Potential Contributions of the Research

The topic of women in leadership positions within the field of education is highly researched. However, very little work has been completed on the journeys of women who have made it to the upper levels of educational leadership. My dissertation enhanced the existing body of research by providing a qualitative research study that documented some of the experiences, opportunities, and challenges, and how it influenced their current position as a woman at the school district superintendent level. In many ways, it provided a face and a story of the challenges, epiphanies, and experiences these women have endured to get to this level of leadership. From a practical standpoint, this work provided inspiration and insight into each participant's success as she effectively made it to the top of the career ladder.

Chapter 4

Findings

I pursued this research study in order to document and identify opportunities and challenges experienced by females during their journey to becoming a superintendent within the state of Oregon. Over the course of six weeks, I interviewed four superintendents at their place of employment and one superintendent in a location near to her district. The final participant was interviewed at her place of employment, approximately one month after the first five participants. In all, I spent an average of two hours with each research participant. Each of these six participants was selected and interviewed based upon her geographic location, district size, income of the district, and the number of years of experience in administration. These participants were purposefully chosen to create a heterogeneous sample population that varied in both experience and location.

During this research study, data were collected through personal interviews, field notes, and researcher reflections on the interview experience. Personal interviews were the main source of information, while field notes and researcher reflections provided further insight to the data collected. I compared interview to interview, and interviews to both field notes and researcher reflections. The constant comparison between these three data collection sources was essential in determining emerging themes and how the themes related. Once stories and data were gathered from the participants, I analyzed them for key elements and broke them up into themes. I used Creswell's (2007) three stages of coding in which I read the transcripts and field notes from all participants in order to identify key ideas or patterns. I then recorded the key ideas from the interviews and tallied them to identify the dominating patterns. After this, I refined the initial coding to identify emerging themes through the use of colored markers and highlighters. Finally, I

attempted to analyze the data by looking for connections between themes. The description of the emergent themes tells the story within my qualitative data analysis, including a description of the opportunities and challenges each of the six female superintendents faced and how they were influenced by these experiences.

This chapter presents the findings through the insights of my research participants and addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the opportunities encountered by females when pursuing the position of school superintendent? (2) What are the challenges encountered by females when pursuing the position of school superintendent? (3) How do past challenges and opportunities experienced by female superintendents influence their current roles and positions? Each of the six participants is introduced through personal profiles, which includes information about their context, opportunities, challenges, epiphanies, and advice for future female superintendents. In addition, I present the major findings of my study and conclude with a summary of the thematic claims that emerged from the research.

Participant Profiles

Superintendent one (Donna). Donna is in her 50s and is leading a district with an approximate K-12 enrollment of 3,000 students. She is currently serving in her first superintendency position, one that she has filled for the past two years. Donna described the focus of the first year of her superintendency in the district as learning about the job and the district, while the second year was spent asking her staff, specifically administrators, to change. Going into the third year, Donna stated she "will be working to enforce the change."

Prior to becoming a superintendent, she served in a variety of capacities in one district for seven years, including high school principal, middle school principal, and a high school vice principal. However, her first administrative job was with a charter school in alternative education

in a different region of Oregon. Preceding her administrative experience, Donna worked at the secondary level teaching science in another district.

During the years she served as a secondary science teacher, her assistant superintendent, a male, provided inspiration to her. He provided her with significant opportunities to develop professional skills and abilities, such as her appointment to being the district grant writer during her second year of teaching. In addition, the superintendent in her district provided a significant amount of inspiration by seeing her potential and providing leadership opportunities in which she could mature.

The opportunities people created for Donna centered on supporting her ability to learn and implement new ideas without the fear of failure or consequence. While this approach led to a lot of "on the job training," it also allowed her to focus on both jobs she was undertaking and develop her craft as an administrator and teacher without negative implications. Donna stated, "Because my assistant superintendent and superintendent both saw potential within me, they provided jobs and projects that allowed me to grow." These opportunities allowed her to gather a plethora of work experience and marketability. Through the combination of these opportunities, her record of hard work, and going beyond expectations, she was able to advance her career. One example of a systemic opportunity that Donna experienced was the involvement she had during her initial licensure programs for future administrators. "To go through an administrative program and have the classes taught by practicing superintendents was really helpful," Donna noted. This allowed her to grow through formal education in the area of administration. In addition, she was required to observe other teachers early in her career, which created a variety of informal mentoring relationships in the workplace.

Donna identified major challenges that were created by working together with other people: maintaining one's integrity during challenging times, and interactions with the school board. The biggest challenge during her journey in becoming a female superintendent centered on "maintaining the integrity of my values, both professional and personal, and not just taking a job because it was a job." Donna noted, "Instead I had to hold true to my integrity and what I felt was best for kids, which meant I had to find the "right fit" with a building or district." Additional examples she gave included how she looked to find the right "fit" in a district so she could ensure her vision was in alignment with the district's and school board's vision, and mastering new assigned job responsibilities as she advanced in her career.

Since taking the position as superintendent, Donna shared how she was unprepared and significantly challenged by working with a school board, something that educators typically do not experience except for those at the superintendent level. Donna noted, "My interactions with the board make me feel like I am playing politics within the educational system." Finally, working with others was challenging for her as she served as a teacher, administrator, and superintendent, particularly during times of change. As a teacher, Donna observed significant turnover among the teaching staff within her building and district; this created a challenge for her, as she grew tired of the high turnover and the impact it had on the students she was serving. Donna responded to this challenge by working with other teachers and serving as an informal mentor to them.

As an administrator, change was a challenge as Donna worked to get her staff, certified and classified, on board with initiatives and policies that were in the best interest of the students. Her experience at the administrative level, Donna stated, typically resulted in "finding that district or building practices were not serving all of the children, only a portion of them." Donna gave numerous examples of projects she championed and implemented in order to target specific

populations of students, such as students in poverty and English language learners, which focused on student achievement and growth in mathematics and reading. These students were often ignored and not taught at the level necessary for an exceptional educational experience, resulting in a lower-than-average academic performance. Donna noted, "It was important for these changes and initiatives to be successful, as it helped to create job experiences and a reputation for the work I accomplished as a leader within the district."

Donna experienced a number of challenges during her tenure as superintendent. Staff within her current district were having difficulty adjusting to the change she initiated. She had pushed her current district to approach education and instruction through a data-driven method where data were used to analyze past practice and future steps towards academic improvement.

As Donna shared the experiences she encountered as she pursued the superintendency, she noted how her background influenced her current position in three different areas. First, she shared that "when one demonstrates that they can take on more responsibility and perform at a high level, people will give them more duties and responsibility, as there are constantly gaps to fill in education." Furthermore, Donna claimed that "as you take on additional duties and responsibility, it helps to build who you become through your challenges, experiences, and successes." While these additional responsibilities can lead to valuable work experiences, they also create opportunities for an educator to prove herself to be an able and willing leader within a district. It is to these lessons and moments that she credits much of her growth, upward mobility, and current success.

The second way in which Donna's history impacted her current position was in the area of collaboration. Both in the classroom and at the individual school, collaboration with other educators was significantly important to Donna. However, when she reached the superintendency

level, she found that collaboration among the superintendents was rare because a deep sense of competition existed between the districts. For example, Donna noted that due to open enrollment for students, districts have to gain a competitive edge in student retention in order to discourage them from transferring to another neighboring district. Donna also commented on how "regional and statewide superintendent meetings are competitive as nobody wants to give away their secrets."

The third way in which Donna's history affected her current role was through her belief in the importance of curriculum, and knowing what good instruction looks like. Donna believes that her knowledge of teaching and the success she had in the classroom has enabled her to earn "street credit" with the teachers in her districts. She shared some examples of times she substituted for teachers within her district; the teaching staff admired how she handled problem students and large class sizes, as well as her ability to write engaging lessons in content areas that they preferred not to teach.

Finally, when it came to advice for aspiring superintendents, Donna shared that "while not taking job challenges or criticism personally," she would tell them to "set boundaries with their time, expectations, and what they are willing to compromise on." While these goals are incredibly hard for Donna to accomplish, she intends to work on improving and maintaining progress in these areas over the course of the current year.

Superintendent two (Sarah). Sarah is in her 50s and works in a suburban bedroom community with rural characteristics. She is in her thirteenth year as the superintendent. She started her employment with a district of approximately 2,800 students in the 1980s when she worked at the middle school level and eventually moved into administration. As Sarah journeyed from a middle school teacher, to vice principal at the high school, to curriculum director, and

eventually into the superintendency, she never once interviewed for a job. Each time the opportunity came open for possible advancement, her supervisors placed her there. In fact, Sarah identified, "the last time I interviewed for a job was in the 80s when I applied for my first teaching position within the district." In terms of professional development and continuing education in Sarah's career, she holds an undergraduate degree, a master's degree, and a doctorate.

Sarah's major inspiration throughout her career was her grandmother and a coach she worked with during her graduate studies. Sarah described her maternal grandmother as a "tough, pioneering woman;" she was extremely wise and a natural leader. A large portion of Sarah's childhood was spent with her maternal grandmother in a variety of settings, which allowed Sarah to come to know her grandmother and understand what makes her unique on a deeper level. Sarah's second major inspiration to her in her professional and personal life was a softball coach she had during her undergraduate years. This coach was one of the first women to be a head coach and an assistant athletic director. During her time with Sarah, she spoke actively about the importance of both a career and academics. Sarah noted how these words of wisdom inspired her at this stage in her life and she felt fortunate to be able to learn from her as an athlete and then in the classroom, as Sarah went on to enroll in various classes she taught. Later on, this coach became both a friend and a mentor to Sarah as she developed in her career and had a family.

Sarah discussed the opportunities she experienced throughout her professional life as "being in the right place at the right time." She provided numerous examples of the positive and effective leaders for whom she worked for and how they found potential within her as a fellow colleague. Sarah attributes part of being in the right place at the right time to her ability to work and how she "rolls her sleeves up and works harder than anyone else." She believes that because she was willing to take on the hard tasks at such an early stage in her career, and that she continued

this pattern of behavior as she grew professionally; she gained extensive exposure and admiration from those above her. When positions above her opened, she was placed into them -- no interviewing or job posting to the public needed.

In her journey to becoming a superintendent, Sarah encountered challenges. The major challenge she identified was the adjustment to having a different relationship with students. Her first administrative position and then her move to the district office were difficult for her, as she had to learn how to cope with the reduced amount of contact time with students. The primary method Sarah used to address this issue was "to deliberately schedule time in the schools and classrooms so she could get her kid fix."

Sarah's career advancement led to challenges for her own children that also attended school within the district. One of her children was very comfortable with the variety of positions she held, while the other one was much more timid and nervous about the power and influence she had over his teachers and district events. The feelings of her children factored into the challenges Sarah faced as a mom in administration, specifically the balancing act it required. Instead of conforming her personal and family needs to the system she worked in, she made the system conform to her needs as a mother in administration. Sarah noted that many women do not pursue these positions because they believe they cannot have it all and cannot ask for what they need in order to serve their family. For example, when she had her son, she worked to open up the nursery at the high school to staff members and their families, something that had not been done before. Another example Sarah provided was how she breastfed her children at work while serving in the capacity of an administrator. She noted this practice brought about some awkward moments in the workplace, but she needed to do so in order to balance work and family fairly. "I wasn't going to change, the system and folks around me were going to change" Sarah commented as she described

her attitude to the evolution of motherhood in the workplace. While Sarah identified that these actions were self-serving to her in many ways, she acknowledged that they also helped support other working moms in the district, allowing them to more effectively balance work and family by being close to their children, breastfeeding them on breaks, and actively being involved in their lives while holding down a career. From Sarah's perspective now, she believes that "the pushing I did for my needs as a mom and family helped make the district what it is today, family friendly." Sarah said that the district is heavily focused on family, balance, job sharing, and making the working environment family and kid friendly.

During her time in the position, Sarah identified her major challenge as working with the school board and the turnover within the board itself. Prior to entering into the superintendency, she had little exposure to working with boards. She entered into the position and the relationship with the board believing that she could approach it like a sports team. In her mind, she was going to build and cultivate a team. However, with the high turnover rate and the politics involved, this approach became increasingly difficult. The one area Sarah felt was positive for her when it came to her relationship with the board was her long-term reputation within the district. Sarah believed that "all the years I have been in the district have allowed people to really get to know me; they know what I am about and what I stand for." While she has not found an answer to building a perfect team with the school board, it is something that she still strives to work on and develop.

One way in which Sarah's background influenced her present position was her lack of knowledge with specific job responsibilities, specifically facilities, maintenance, and finances. These areas were challenges for Sarah as she never served as a school principal, but instead jumped to a district office position in the area of curriculum. Her leap from the assistant principal position to the district office left her with little experience in managing and creating a budget for a

building, department, or even a district. Again, Sarah found a way to address this. She spent a lot of time researching and learning about school finances as she strived to be "better and know more than her male colleagues." Her approach to finances, and her drive to improve and research areas in which she has little experience, influences all that Sarah does. Sarah stated throughout her interview that in order to be successful, especially if you were a woman, you had to "know more and be better than the men in the room." She found this to be true when it came to her athletic director responsibilities at the state level and at the district office in her current position, specifically with maintenance, finances, and budgets.

Sarah's epiphanies throughout her career centered upon the importance of relationship building. As a Type A personality, Sarah identified that she had to "constantly remember to slow down and take the time to build relationships with those around her" through conversations and consistency in her actions. She claimed she could "teach an administrator the technical skills involved with the position, but not how to build relationships." Her belief in the importance of relationship building can be found in both her hiring process and the staff she currently has on her administrative team.

"Being in administration cannot be just a job, it has to be one's life," Sarah noted. The work that is done within the educational system is so vital and essential for the health and wellbeing of students that administrators have to give it everything they have. Therefore, Sarah has learned that since most of her friends are in education and a lot of her time is spent at work, work has to be a place where folks work hard and take pleasure in the work they do.

Advice that Sarah would give an aspiring female superintendent focused on always being positive and upbeat. Sarah explained that "a person within the district looks up to the leaders and it is their [the administrator's] job to take care of everyone and remind them that everything will be

ok.ö In order to do this, Sarah found it vital to have a network of trusted colleagues that one could communicate frustration to in a manner that does not affect the organizations they work in.

Finally, Sarah said that women cannot be afraid to ask for help, clarification, or assistance in learning new tasks. Women need to be able to ask questions and know where and who to ask the questions of in order to be successful, as Sarah acknowledged that it is not possible to be a master at everything.

In Sarah's parting comments, she spoke about having balance with family, friends, and work. As an administrator, Sarah said, "this is incredibly hard to do" since many of their waking hours are spent at school events and advocating for students. On the other hand, Sarah acknowledged that some compromises are necessary since the position of an administrator is more like a lifestyle than a job. Nevertheless, Sarah stated that "our educational systems need to find a way to get more women into administrative positions, specifically at the superintendent level." She claimed that women need to start pursuing these positions, and if the job description or requirements do not fit their needs, they need to advocate for what they do need. Sarah adamantly believes that more women need to fill these positions, specifically the superintendency, as the educational community has thus far missed out on some of our finest educators and leaders.

Superintendent three (Kristie). Kristie was in her 50s and was entering her seventh year as a superintendent within her district that serves 4,228 students. This is Kristie's first job as a superintendent. Prior to entering the superintendency, she previously worked for an educational services district (ESD) in the area of curriculum after spending the majority of her administrative career leading a large high school and a feeder middle school as a building principal. Preceding administration, Kristie spent time as a high school teacher and guidance counselor. While she was strongly encouraged to enter into administration by those above her within her district, she was

greatly discouraged from applying and accepting her current position as superintendent by her friends, mentors, and fellow colleagues, due to the history of the district and the job itself.

Kristie's inspiration during her journey to the superintendency was her husband and fellow colleagues. She spent a lot of time talking about how her husband quietly pushed her behind the scenes to continue to reach and grow professionally. In fact, when Kristie was approached by the district office to accept a Dean of Students position within a local middle school near the end of her maternity leave, she gave it great thought, but it was ultimately her husband that inspired her to take the jump. Kristie described the experience she had:

I showed up to the meeting with the only dress that fit, secretly hoping a button didn't pop off, just to hear how they thought I should take the Dean of Students position. All I could think about was how I was supposed to still be on maternity leave, not in this stupid meeting, and how I hoped one of my buttons wouldn't hit one of them in the eye when it flew off.

During her interview, Kristie spoke about how she often doubted herself and therefore hesitated in applying and accepting other administrative positions that opened around her, all of which would have allowed her to grow professionally. Ultimately, it came down to her husband's encouragement, belief that she could do it, and support at home that made her take a chance. This support helped move her career forward since it allowed her to gain the confidence to take on new challenges that constantly pushed her to take her leadership to the next level. Professionally, Kristie noted there were "many colleagues that affected her journey and inspired her to reach great heights." Both colleagues at the district office and those she worked with in the building administrative team helped her along the way. Many of these individuals served as mentors and sounding boards for her as she faced various situations and challenges. Her main professional

inspiration was a human resources director and secondary director that consistently spoke about the importance of taking the time to learn the nuances of the job. Their advice is something that inspired and motivated Kristie as she continued to dive deep into research and educational practice in order to transform the schools in which she worked. Her inspiration and motivation to learn and improve can be observed in the two buildings, both the middle school and high school that she led, as they each have experienced a significant improvement in student achievement and staff morale under the guidance of her leadership. Kristie believed without a doubt that other mentors instilled the importance of teaching and learning within her and now feels that these values can be observed in her daily work.

Kristie talked about the various opportunities provided to her as she developed in her career. The recurring theme she mentioned when it came to opportunities, focused on the freedom she was given by her supervisors at the district office, central office staff, and the superintendent to build her team. She spoke to her ability to surround herself with the right people and how, under those circumstances, great things happen. These opportunities were further explained as she described the changes at the buildings she led. For example, when Kristie was a middle school principal, the opportunity to build her team and surround herself with the right people was done organically through retirements, hires, and staff transfers. Staff changes and my ability to put the right people in the right spots resulted in the middle school's student academic growth and academic gains hitting an unparalleled high.

When Kristie was asked to move to one of the local high schools from her middle school position, she made a list of demands. These demands were not related to money or working conditions but instead to the people I needed on my team in order to make the change happen. To accomplish this, she needed the support of the district office who granted her staffing requests.

“Again, positive change started to happen at the high school, and students began to display incredible gains and student growth in academics.” Kristie credits her success to the opportunities she has had, her ability to build teams, and find the right people for the right positions. In each of her principalships, she has academically turned around the schools and increased student achievement, as evidenced by statewide testing and standardized test scores.

The second major opportunity Kristie was given in her journey to become a superintendent pertains to mentors. She reiterated numerous times the influence that her mentors played in her career. While the majority of them were male, Kristie identified how each of them discovered characteristics and skills in her that she did not know existed. Each of them worked with her so she could reach her professional potential. In the course of working with Kristie, each of her mentors installed values and professional lessons that she still carries with her today and uses on a daily basis. One of the important lessons they taught her over the years was the significance of “knowing your job and doing it well.” Kristie discussed how individuals, both male and female, can get overly focused on climbing the career ladder and on the politics around them instead of what matters the most, their job and the influence they have on children. She said,

I have known a few individuals, one in particular that was too focused on climbing the ladder instead of learning the job. It is scary. This person is now in a position of power and doing incredible damage to a district, all because he did not take the time to learn the job. You have to learn the job and not focus on moving up.

When discussing the challenges she experienced along her path to the superintendency, Kristie identified the difficulty in finding balance within her professional and personal life. This challenge largely came from her time as a high school principal. Kristie claimed that “besides the superintendent role, the high school position was a job that required administrative accessibility 24

hours a day, 365 days a year and had a direct impact on students and their lives.ö In her personal and professional opinion, öthe high school principal position is the most intense, challenging, and labor-intensive job within education.ö The demands of the job led to many late nights at work as she supervised events and managed a building with over 75 teachers. One of the ways Kristie approached the challenge of balancing her personal and professional lives was through the coordination of supervision with the rest of her administrative staff. In essence, she made a plan that whenever her own kids had an event at the school she had to attend, she would take on the supervision role. This approach helped to reduce the number of events she needed to attend that were not related to her own children. While it did not completely fix the problem, it alleviated some of the imbalance. Kristie also noted that her husband was always understanding of the time obligations associated with her positions, which reiterates her earlier statements about his support and encouragement of her career advancement.

The major challenge Kristie encountered since assuming the superintendency has been the school board. Kristie identified how she initially thought working with a board would be like working with the other teams she has led in the past. öThey would collect data, talk about data, make decisions based on data, and lead the district in an instructional improvement process.ö This was not the case, which she quickly realized a few years into the job, particularly when the board changed after an intense election. During the election, two of the board members that were her strongest supporters were voted out of their positions by two challengers that did not view Kristie in a favorable light. In fact, their campaign in the election focused on getting Kristie out of the superintendency. With these two new individuals sitting on the board, positive movement forward or team building between the school district and the school board became incredibly difficult during these individuals' four-year term in office. During these past four years, Kristie

experienced numerous complaints and slander from the board members through various media sources and every state reporting agency. While Kristie noted all the decisions made in respect to complaints filed against her and the district came out in the district's favor, working with individuals that were blatantly out to get her was still an incredible challenge. The way in which Kristie handled these challenges was impressive. She did not cower to the board, but instead, she held her head up high and continued to do what was best for kids. This resolve could be observed during board meetings when the board members discussed things that were inaccurate or skewed. She would interject during these conversations and ask where they obtained their information and data. Kristie would go on to identify the facts, data, and information she was aware of so that the story could be set straight. In addition, during these four challenging years, the district's teachers went on strike, mainly driven by conversations and encouragement given by the two opposing school board members. At one point during our interview, Kristie identified the two board members as bullies and "the only way I know how to deal with bullies is to bop them in the nose." While Kristie admits she did not physically hit the board members on the nose, she did so metaphorically as she took on the bullies through "her professional actions and holding on to her integrity." At one point in the battle with the board, she felt extremely worn down and began to wonder if she should just leave. When she mentioned this to her administrative staff, they were appalled. They clearly communicated to her that it was the work of Kristie that helped protect them and allowed them to do great things with kids. Essentially, she was the buffer between the administrators and the board. Coming to understand this concept was extremely impactful and professionally moving for Kristie to hear. Through it all, Kristie coped with the challenges associated with the school board by continuing to be honorable and true with herself and the decisions she made, all of which were in alignment with what was right for kids.

Through her experiences, opportunities and challenges, Kristie reflected that they all helped reiterate the importance of still believing in the “good” staff and students. She noted that this could be hard in challenging times, especially when people look to attack personalities within the district during conflict and unhappiness. Kristie talked about a time in her life, specifically when she was going through challenges with the school board, that the view of staff and board members waivered. She started to doubt people’s intentions and motives, which saddened her as these directly influenced the students within her district. Through talks with her close friends and colleagues, as well as personal reflection over time, she was able to see that students, staff, and board members had “good” within each of them and were well-meaning, thus reviving her faith in the systems, process, and people in education.

Considering Kristie’s work ethic and her ability to take on challenges, her words of wisdom are not surprising. Kristie’s words of advice for aspiring female superintendents are to “pay your dues, know you are ready, and to put kids first.” With this, she advised that as a superintendent, a woman needs to surround herself with a great team and others that share the same vision for education and have high expectations for students. After all, “if you surround yourself with the right people, great things will happen”

Superintendent four (Becky). Becky is in her 40s and is in her fifth year as a superintendent. Her district serves approximately 600 students in grades K-12. She taught for fourteen years at the elementary and middle school level prior to moving into administration. Becky was recruited for an elementary school principal position on the first day of class in her initial administrative licensure program. Two faculty members approached Becky and told her she would be a great candidate for the elementary principal position in a small town to the north. Upon hearing this, Becky laughed, as she did not have a current administrative license and this was not a

job she imagined herself moving into immediately. Regardless of her hesitation, I attended the interview in a casual outfit, not thinking I was a serious candidate. I was shocked when I got the job! That fall, she started work as an elementary school principal with a temporary license while she worked on course work for her initial licensure program. However, she soon found herself pregnant, which added another challenge onto her first year as an administrator. After spending several years as an elementary school principal in this small school district and watching numerous superintendents come and go, she was approached by the school board to take on the role of superintendent. At first, Becky thought this was not what she wanted to do. She had a young family and Becky was very content with her current position as the elementary principal and the direction of her building with academic improvement and student growth. Yet, after a lot of prayer and crucial people approaching her and sharing with Becky their need for her to serve, she decided to accept the position. Since taking on the superintendency, she has also maintained her position as the elementary school principal, which is conveniently located on the same campus as the district office.

During her journey to the superintendency, Becky's inspiration has been her faith. She is very faith-based and driven by her purpose to serve in the way in which God intends. For her, each of the challenges and steps she has made have all been based upon God's calling for her. This has provided her with the inspiration, motivation, and support to take on these challenges, especially as a mom with young children and having to go to school at the same time.

In terms of the challenges, Becky faced during her journey, most of them centered on balancing her family with her professional career and the challenge of learning a new job. When she started in administration, she had not received any formal training and was just starting to wrap her mind around an administrative position and what it entailed when she became pregnant.

“Being pregnant and being a first year principal without a license was a joke. I am sure everyone wondered what the district was thinking when they hired me.” Working, let alone taking on a brand new position, Becky noted, was incredibly challenging considering all the time commitments and the fatigue. Becky identified that the way she made it through these months was to continually persevere and push forward. This work ethic and approach to challenges is what made her incredibly marketable and enticing to the school district when they were seeking a new superintendent. Once Becky made it through her pregnancy, she was constantly trying to find a balance between work and serving those within the educational realm, and those within her household: her children and husband. For a while, she would take her work home and work on emails in the evenings. With this approach, she still found she was not paying enough attention to her children during their waking hours. In order to make this tactic work, she had to modify it by only working on school related items, i.e., email and projects, once her children had gone to bed. This allowed her to maximize her time with her children while they were awake but still stay caught up on her professional responsibilities.

Learning a new job, both at the principal and superintendent level, has been a challenge for Becky. Considering that she works within a small school district, there were many roles she has taken on over the years. “This meant there weren’t any others in the district that I could ask for advice or how to approach a specific job, as nobody else in the district was qualified or had previous experience in these roles.” Therefore, Becky identified that “I had to master asking for help from individuals outside of the district, specifically those in the neighboring districts.” Becky was able to identify three different administrators at both the superintendent and principal levels that she frequently called for insight and advice. However,

It is funny to ask questions to the superintendents of the larger districts as they often don't know the answer, they just give me the name and phone number of the employee that can point me in the right direction. There is a disconnect with the superintendent and the daily operations of a district when it reaches a certain size.

Becky's experiences throughout her journey and experiences in education have made her realize the importance of a team and the "we" versus "I" within educational organizations. She talked about the barriers she has had to break down with other administrators and the district vision for students instead of just viewing a situation from one perspective. She talked about how this was extremely vital for the success of the district and building within her control because the decisions that Becky made have had an immediate and apparent impact on students within the community, as they were located within a small, close-knit society.

Advice Becky would give an aspiring female superintendent would be to "make sure you don't try to be good at everything." She shared that "women enter into jobs with specific skills, ones for which they were hired." Considering this, Becky believes that one has to "be true to herself and find a niche that works to your strengths." As a superintendent, if one tries to be someone she is not, she will find failure and frustration. Instead, superintendents need to play up their strengths and find others that can help make well-rounded teams. In closing, Becky said that one has to "make the position work for them and their needs as well as personality."

Superintendent five (Necole). Necole is in a small town of approximately 2,000 people with a student population of even less, 1,247 in grades K-12. She is in her 60s and going into her third year as the superintendent within her present district. However, she was recently the superintendent for 10 years in another district. Prior to becoming a superintendent, she served as an assistant superintendent for three years, a middle school principal, elementary school principal,

special education director, and a classroom teacher (special education). All of her prior positions were within her old district, where she worked for 22 years. In Necole's opinion, she believes the gateway to the superintendency for females is through special education, as that teaching position requires a vast amount of knowledge regarding law.

When Necole taught at the middle school level, her building principal was a major inspiration. She worked with him on a variety of projects within the building, but often admired him and his strategies from afar. The way in which he approached challenges and change within his position was something that Necole strived to replicate. "How would Jim handle that?" was often something Necole would ponder when confronted with a challenging situation or angry parent. Necole spoke highly of his integrity and abilities to defuse a possible volatile situation. While her inspiration no longer works in education, she does remain in contact with him and frequently runs into him at athletic events and social situations.

There were many opportunities provided to Necole when it came to career advancement. Necole noted that she rarely sought out positions, but was instead "begged" by those around her or in positions of power to apply or take the vacant positions. In fact, her first principalship was given to her when a school board member approached and asked her to fill an elementary school principal. At this time, Necole had not completed her initial administrative licensure program but she felt she could accelerate her course work over the spring and summer months, therefore completing her program in time for the upcoming school year.

When it came time to move to the district office, the current superintendent asked Necole to fill a central office vacancy. At first, Necole was not sure and therefore wanted time to consider her decision. A few months passed and the superintendent asked again; the question resulted in the same response. "Finally, the superintendent informed me that I didn't have a choice, I was being

moved to the district office. Within the next few years, the current superintendent decided he was ready to retire and approached Necole to see if she would be interested in taking the position of superintendent. This was something she was open to, but instead of just being named to the position, Necole requested, "that the position be open to the public so it was a fair and equal hiring process, particularly since it involved evaluating my peers and is a public position." When the position opened, Necole applied for the job, interviewed, and was selected for the position.

After ten years serving as the superintendent, Necole thought she was going to retire. She wanted to provide her old district a year's notice to allow them to adequately recruit and place someone in her position that was qualified for the job. As she transitioned out of her old district into possible retirement, her present district started to recruit her. At first, Necole was not interested; however, through time, the position began to appeal to her; she saw the district and circumstances surrounding the district as a professional challenge. The dysfunction and lack of leadership within the district was something I felt I could address. Therefore, she applied and interviewed.

On the day of the interview, Necole and her husband traveled together to the school district south of their current home. After the interview, when her husband asked how it had gone, she responded, "There is no chance I am going to get the job, let's just have our lunch and beverages and enjoy the ride home." Necole noted that she was extremely outspoken and blunt about the role of the board and their interaction with educational decisions. A terse response from one board member who challenged one of her statements played a significant role in her coming to this conclusion. To Necole's surprise, she was offered the job prior to her departure from town that afternoon. Based upon Necole's initial encounter with the board, she anticipated there would be struggles with the various school board members. With additional prompting, Necole said:

Since I have taken over the position, the board has been easy to work with and extremely pleased with the changes I have made within the district and the hard stance I have taken on a variety of items that needed to be addressed.

One of the biggest challenges Necole encountered as superintendent within her present district was handling money and budgets. When she took over the finances and budgets, they were in complete disarray. Part of this problem was attributed to the district's history of hiring and firing numerous superintendents within a short amount of time. This challenge was compounded by not having an acting superintendent in the position for six months prior to her arrival in the district. Therefore, little oversight or management of district monies occurred, as leadership was not present. Furthermore, the curriculum director, business manager, and some of the essential central office secretaries left prior to Necole's start date with the district. While their reason for departure was not known, Necole acknowledged how difficult it was to fix, address, or handle situations, as there were few individuals that could provide history or guidance to the circumstances of the district. Necole handled this by approaching her administrative staff in a meeting and brainstorming an approach. The collaborative approach resulted in the vacant positions being divided and assigned to the remaining administrators, all of which were at the building level. Money was therefore saved on the district's end by not filling these positions. Considering the deficits of the budget, this savings was a positive contribution to balancing the budget. "This allowed me to bring teachers back and keep the dollars closest to the kids," where Necole felt money needed to be.

In addition to the fiscal challenges, Necole experienced, working with staff and communicating her expectations was difficult. She found herself taking on staff that was continuously taking leave without pay. Necole approached this by writing a formal letter to all

staff informing them of their contractual rights, the law, and her expectations. To follow up the letter, Necole spent time educating staff about their contract, how it worked, and how leave could be accrued over the years. This helped the staff see her perspective while it also enabled Necole to save considerable amounts of money on substitute costs at the district level. While the leave without pay is just one example, Necole talked about how her present district was one in which the staff ran the show and were used to doing whatever they wanted. These were very hard challenges for the staff to handle and accept as Necole took her control back. As time went on, the culture and morale started to improve as staff began to accept the change and see how proactive Necole had been in reducing costs and serving students within her district.

One of the things that Necole found extremely refreshing about her current position was her ability to be blunt with the board and be true to her own values and professional integrity. "If the board doesn't like what I am doing, I am ok with that and I am fine with moving on to another position." The freedom she has of not being tied to her employment has allowed her to lead without hesitation and to make the hard decisions without fear of ramifications or consequences on her professional and personal life. In essence, Necole felt like "I have nothing to lose personally, so I am going to lead in the way I see fit."

Necole felt that challenges during her journey to become a superintendent were just a part of the process and that it was a normal component of the job. She noted, "If there were not challenges, the journey would not have been fun or as enjoyable," as it has been for her. In fact, it was the challenges of the job and the journey that drove her to be a superintendent. "If it was easy," Necole claimed, "I wouldn't have been motivated to continue."

Necole's professional experiences have influenced her current view of education by helping her realize that the politics and conflicts that exist in the community trickle down into the

classroom. This helped her recognize that she needs to help people understand how to cope with these cultural restraints and conflicts, especially when it starts affecting the students. She identified the challenges with poverty and Native Americans as being related to politics and influencing the students and classroom. In her mind, she needs to do the best possible job for the students and staff she serves in spite of barriers in the community that impact education.

Reflecting upon her professional past, the major epiphany Necole experienced in her journey was finding out that her direct communication strategy did not always work with people. For example, Necole noted that one has to try to approach things from another angle and work at tasks with a less confrontational approach. Necole gave a few examples of working with staff members and the bargaining unit. Instead of stating outright her thinking and ultimate goal, she had to break down the issue into its components. She also used this communication style, particularly varying it depending upon the circumstance, in her interaction with the board. Necole noted that it is more professionally acceptable for her to be outspoken and direct than younger professionals in their careers, where it can often be misconstrued as arrogant. Regardless, she has found that direct and hard conversations are not always effective; rather, taking a different angle and perspective can produce faster results.

When it came to advice for an aspiring female superintendent, Necole noted that women go far above the expectations men do just to prove their competence. Knowing this, Necole recommends, "remembering to slow down and let one's intelligence show through." She made the argument that "women need to find balance in their lives and remember that they do not have to be a "shining star" in all that they do." However, when asked to follow up on this advice and how it could impact a woman's professional career, specifically their marketability or lifetime in a specific position, Necole acknowledged that she had observed women take this approach and that

they were no longer in the superintendency. Therefore, at the end of the interview, Necole clarified that women should seek balance instead of working more.

Superintendent six (Jane). Jane has spent over thirty years in education. She is in her 60s and is currently serving a school district with approximately 5,000 students in K-12. Prior to her current position, Jane spent six years in a metropolitan area as a district superintendent. When describing her career positions that led up to the superintendency, Jane noted, "I never set out to be a superintendent. In fact, prior to putting my application in for a superintendent job, I wasn't even sure I wanted the position." However, about two months prior to the job being posted, Jane finally made the decision she was going to apply as she had been working with the district over the past few years through her present position and she believed she could provide assistance and direction in the district's areas of need. "Heck, I could do that! Why not throw my name in and see what happens."

Preceding her initial superintendency and spanning more than fifteen years, all of Jane's administrative work as a principal, district curriculum and federal programs director, and educational service district curriculum and federal programs director, has come from larger school districts within the northern region of the state. While working as a K-12 administrator, Jane spent eight years teaching school finance and budgeting classes in the administrative licensure program at a local university. While the majority of Jane's administrative experience in leading schools has been at the middle school and high school level, the majority of Jane's teaching experience was at the elementary and middle school level. Jane's primary inspiration during her journey to the superintendency was a female director within a large metropolitan school district. When they first met, they were both working within the same school district; Jane was an administrator within a school while her inspirational influence was at the district office. This

female director affected and inspired Jane by providing encouragement and challenging her to improve her practice and expand her knowledge base. Jane spoke of how this individual saw potential within her and how she helped her see possible career opportunities that Jane could be competitive and successful in pursuing. Her ability to see possibility in Jane was significant and instrumental in Jane's decision to leave the building level and enter into a position as curriculum director within the school district.

When asked about opportunities encountered along her journey to becoming a superintendent, Jane responded that she believes, "opportunities given to individuals are significantly impacted by how one prepares themselves." For example, "the opportunities and the work you do as you prepare for future jobs, such as a superintendent, are given to you by the hard work and preparation you do leading up to the position being open." Therefore, Jane noted, "if you prepare yourself, opportunities will be created for you that match what you are capable of doing." When asked to expand on this idea, Jane talked about how she picked up any training opportunities available to her throughout her career. When given a chance to learn new ideas and information, she took every opportunity and worked to prove herself. As time went on, she started to master these newly acquired skills and tasks. As soon as jobs opened around her, she was able to see how well prepared she was for these positions because she was knowledgeable and skillful in areas that the new job encompassed. Due to her experiences and the opportunities provided to her, she believes that "it is extremely valuable for districts to invest in their own staff and help train them for the jobs around and above them so options are available for them if they desire to pursue other positions in education." Her belief in training and investing in staff for jobs around and above them can be found in the district she is currently serving in as interim superintendent. There

she has provided building administrators with learning opportunities and training that involved district office tasks and skills.

The challenges Jane faced throughout her journey involved balancing time. Jane discussed how hard it was for her and other administrators to balance time when it came to their personal and professional lives. In support of this statement, Jane shared how even this past weekend, she knew she had to work on Sunday so she was prepared for her week ahead. Looking to the end of the week, her son was coming to town and therefore she needed to make sure she blocked out time to spend with her family instead of spending the time at work. Quite easily, Jane noted, "my entire day on both weekdays and weekends could be consumed by work if I let it." Therefore, she has learned to set boundaries on when and what she does with her time when it comes to her personal and professional life. Even with boundaries in place, Jane spoke about how "it's vital to take care of yourself on a personal level, especially when it comes to stress." She acknowledged that some take care of themselves by shopping and spending time with friends, having personal time to sit quietly and reflect, while others work out to help manage stress. "Whatever one has to do to keep balance in their lives and to keep stress at a manageable level, it must be done," Jane claims.

Jane's main challenge since assuming the position of superintendent has been working with the school board and unions. Jane identified how these groups can be particularly challenging, as there are frequent misunderstandings and miscommunication. Often "this is the result of the board or union not being clear on their defined roles and responsibilities to the teachers, classified employees, or the community." When prompted to describe how she dealt with these situations, Jane responded, "I start off by defining the role of the district, the superintendent, and the other organization, either the school board or the unions." Jane believed that "by defining the roles and

including the responsibilities of each party, it allows them to be accountable for their own area and therefore take ownership over things that come into contact with them in this area.ö

Jane said, öOften the challenges and miscommunications with the school board and union come from misunderstanding roles and responsibilities, but also in the lack of following a process.ö She furthered her train of thought by explaining,

If you don't follow a process or ensure those around you follow the process, but instead just respond to the needs of everyone coming through your door, you end up being a jack in the box, always responding to others and their needs instead of going through the proper channels.

Jane gave examples of the board wanting immediate changes in school district policy without having a public school board meeting, wanting a transportation problem fixed by the superintendent without having gone to the local building principal first, and starting an investigation on an incident that occurred at school without having the parent go back and talk to the teacher first and resolve the problem at the lowest level.

In order to be proactive with these challenges, Jane has had to be very upfront with the board and unions about how she will respond to these situations if they arise, as well as her professional expectation for all parties involved. To combine her conversations with these groups, Jane also brings in outside agencies to provide training and support for the union and school board. By bringing in someone from the outside, it provides an alternative perspective for those within the organization on how things can be accomplished; this is often less threatening than listening to someone within the organization tell you what to do.

Significant epiphanies Jane experienced throughout her journey to the superintendency have centered on being passionate and doing the work for the right reasons. Jane claims:

In order to be successful at any job within education, but mostly at the higher levels where the stress is more and the time involved is significantly higher, it is imperative that one does the work because it is good for education, not because of the title or money.

Fundamentally, serving in positions of power in education has to be about the work and passion for serving students. “If it isn’t, then those individuals are in the wrong positions and good things won’t come of it,” Jane said. Other epiphanies Jane identified were how students can sometimes surprise us. For example, Jane shared how there were students she thought would not make it to graduation. However, years later on graduation day, these same students were able to participate in graduation with the rest of their class. It was incredible and inspiring for Jane to watch them walk across the stage to receive their diploma. These events also helped Jane realize the real reason she perseveres through challenges and day to day issues is the kids.

Jane’s words of advice for aspiring female superintendents spoke to how to approach challenging and difficult situations. She advised that when faced with a challenging decision, either at the district office level or even as an administrator within the building, one’s decision must be best for kids. “Clean the slate of all that is involved and think what is best for kids,” which is when one will know the best decision for the situation, Jane claimed. “Be true to yourself and your values; always put kids first with any decision you make.”

Summary

While the geographic location, district size, income of the district, and the number of years of experience in administration varied amongst the participants in this study, they still had a lot in common when it came to challenges and barriers experienced during their journey to the superintendency. Consistently amongst the participants, they identified their work ethic and hard

work as one of the major reasons they were given the opportunities they received throughout their superintendency journey. All of the participants identified individuals that provided them inspiration and mentoring throughout their professional career. The majority of the participants acknowledged that this person was a male in either their personal or professional life. When discussing challenges, participants frequently mentioned that working with school boards and balancing professional and personal lives was a challenge. Even though they acknowledged these as challenges, each of the participants found ways to cope and address these barriers. Finally, in terms of advice for aspiring superintendents, the majority of the superintendents encouraged females to continue their journey and to embrace the challenges as it helps develop the skills and abilities that are required once you reach the superintendency.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative study focused on the journey of female superintendents, specifically the opportunities and challenges they encountered as they strived to reach the highest level of educational leadership within a district. In this process, I employed semi-structured interviews to obtain data regarding their experiences. The personal interviews provided an opportunity for the six female superintendents to reflect on the opportunities and challenges they encountered on their journey to their current position.

Participants of this study were female superintendents within the state of Oregon. In order to learn more about their journey to the superintendency, three research questions were created to guide my work:

Research Question #1

What are the opportunities encountered by females when pursuing the position of school superintendent?

Research Question #2

What are the challenges encountered by females when pursuing the position of school superintendent?

Research Question #3

How do past challenges and opportunities experienced by female superintendents influence their current roles and positions?

In preparation for the interviews with my six participants, I created an interview protocol that involved a series of guided questions. Each interview lasted approximately two hours, some longer, depending upon the level of detail provided by the participant. The participants in their

responses to the interview questions addressed all three research questions. As the interviews proceeded, I asked clarifying questions or follow up questions to better understand the experiences the participants referenced.

In this chapter, I apply the data assembled from the participants to the three research questions that have guided this study. I will answer each research question with the themes that emerged from the data. In addition, I will share my reflections regarding the personal interviews. Writing the reflections was important as it provided me with insight and knowledge about different approaches and experiences a female goes through to reach the superintendency. Following this section, I conclude what I have specifically learned through this qualitative study and project areas for future study. Finally, I discuss the potential implications for action and further research based upon the findings.

Discussion

Research question one. *What are the opportunities encountered by females when pursuing the position of school superintendent?* Overall, the major themes for research question one were working hard by taking on additional roles and responsibilities, and having someone that inspired or supported them to pursue upward professional movement in their earlier years. Research in the literature did not indicate that hard work or a record of professional accomplishment impacted a female's ability to reach the superintendency. However, each of the superintendents noted that through their hard work and proven record of accomplishment, it helped encourage their supervisors to trust them with additional tasks and jobs. By providing each of the participants with additional roles and responsibilities outside the scope of their traditional job, it allowed them to branch out with their knowledge and skill base, thus making them more prepared and competitive for future job openings higher in the organization.

Donna, a superintendent entering her third year in the position, spoke about how she worked hard to prove herself and that opportunities were given to her as she proved she was able to take on more. Her willingness and drive to learn and improve systems around her opened doors and allowed her to gain additional leadership experience, thus being marketable for higher-level positions when they opened.

Along the same lines, Sarah believed that the opportunities provided to her were in the form of positions. Since her initial teaching interview twenty-some years ago, Sarah had not interviewed or applied to any of the positions she held, including those that were above her and involved in upward movement. When prompted as to why she was given these opportunities in the form of professional advancement, Sarah believed it had to do with her work ethic and ability to pull up her sleeves and get the work done. In each of the positions Sarah held, she strived to be the best within her field and to outperform any male counterparts. Through her hard work and what she stood for in terms of advocating for children, Sarah believes she was able to prove that she was capable of taking on the positions above her, even though she never served in the capacity of a building principal.

Jane spoke about how her opportunities involved the ability to work and learn the jobs above and around her. She gave examples of how she was trained up for the positions above her without even realizing it. After a while, Jane noted, she realized that jobs she once viewed as out of reach were now more easily within grasp because she was doing the majority of the job in her present position. When prompted to expand on this more, Jane identified how she was not initially interested in administration but how her principal frequently asked her to fill in at the office. It started with one day and it quickly led to more until she realized that she could perhaps do the job on her own. Jane's realization of her ability helped her see that she was ready for the next step in

her career, applying for an administrative position. While Jane identified the internal training and support she received as an opportunity, she did note that these opportunities were given to her because she demonstrated a high level of competence and she proved herself in each of her positions; therefore, people wanted to invest in her and her skills by providing internal training and give opportunities to her.

Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) documented that three-quarters of the female superintendents involved in their study noted that networking and relationships helped them reach higher level leadership positions. In all six cases studied here, as their supervisors delegated and trained the participants, the female superintendents noted that it often resulted in the creation of a relationship where they felt encouraged or supported by these individuals in their quest to grow and challenge themselves. Similar to what Dahlvig and Longman (2010) identified, all of the participants identified someone in their professional and personal life that encouraged them to the next level of leadership within the organization. Oftentimes, this next level of leadership was not what the participants had in mind or felt ready to encounter. However, with the encouragement and guidance in professional training and career planning from those around them, they gained courage and took the leap to apply and interview for superintendent positions, which is a similar process reflected in existing research (Glass et al., 2000; Ceniga, 2008).

Many of the participants in this study noted that one of the major opportunities available to them throughout their journey to the superintendency was the influence of a mentor or individual that provided inspiration, guidance, and motivation to reach new heights with their leadership career in education. These findings are consistent with Bjork and Kowalski's (2005) work where the majority of the women studied in 2003 were mentored into the position. Mentoring and having a motivational support network is vital for all aspirants to a position in order to gain insider

information and to learn from the experiences of others that have gone before, in addition to persevering and working hard to make a positive difference in education.

Opportunities that Kristie, a superintendent in her seventh year in the district, encountered focused on the mentoring and support she received from those around her. Throughout her leadership career in education, there were always individuals that supported her growth and saw potential within her. By having these people help and support Kristie, she was able to work on developing areas she did not see in herself. Through the development of her leadership abilities and having direct support from those above her, she was able to prove to those within the district what she was truly capable of achieving.

Research question two. *What are the challenges encountered by females when pursuing the position of school superintendent?* The themes that emerged as challenges were around balancing family and work, as well as working with the school board. The most frequent challenge brought up by each of the participants was the issue of time. Time was not a surprise when it came to challenges the participants faced, as Darrington and Sharratt (2008) discussed the impact family systems play on females pursuing administrative positions. In fact, the women superintendents Barbie (2004) studied described how their professional lives dominated their personal lives. Shakeshaft (1989) and Ceniga (2008) identified that women often have different experiences in administration or in their journey to the superintendency as they typically hold the primary responsibility for raising kids. Each superintendent identified how it was an incredible challenge to balance home and work life when working towards the position of superintendent, as well as the time it took once they were in the position itself. The number of meetings and events in the evenings, along with the stress involved, took a heavy toll on the family and outside work obligations. Time and balance was significantly harder for those with young children or ones still

in the K-12 system. The participants felt it was hard to be active in their children's lives by attending events and activities when their schedule was full of afternoon and evening meetings.

A common theme in how the participants addressed the challenge of balancing personal and professional obligations was through the idea of time management. Each of them maintained a detailed calendar that prioritized personal and professional obligations. For example, Jane remembered a time when her son was coming into town to visit and she knew she was going to need to leave work earlier than 6:00 p.m., so she planned and blocked out the time she wanted to spend with her son. Through this approach, she was able to prioritize her time and move other meetings and job responsibilities to another time or day. On the other hand, Donna utilized an approach that helped her organize and manage her time by addressing items that need completed today, others that are approaching with deadlines, and then planning for those that do not need immediate attention.

Each of the participants brought up the challenge of family and finding balance with work and home as a major influencing factor when working towards the superintendency, as well as once they reached the position. All of the participants had significant others and children at home that required time and energy as they worked their way from being a teacher to a superintendent. The issue of time became an incredible challenge for those participants serving at the high school or middle school level because there was an increase in work hours due to afterschool activities and events requiring supervision. This theme was not surprising as Parent (2004), Ceniga (2008), and Barbie (2004) noted it as a challenge in existing literature.

Becky, even though she was not serving as a middle or high school principal, found that being pregnant with her second child during her first year as an elementary principal was incredibly difficult. At the time, she had another small child at home and was working on her

initial administrative credential, all while trying to make it through her first year as a pregnant principal. When reflecting on how she found balance with family and work, it was something she had to keep working on and tweaking as she discovered what did and did not work. Kristie was another superintendent that entered administration right after the birth of one of her children. While her building administrative experience was at the middle and high school level, she found that balance was incredibly challenging and that it would not have been possible without the support and help of her husband.

Kristie, as well as Sarah, identified how much easier it was to serve in an administrative capacity where her children also went to school. For example, both Kristie and Sarah took on supervision roles that were required when their children were participating in an activity. By doing so, these women were able to be involved in their children's lives, but also play the role of a school administrator.

Glass's (2000) research showed that women are generally appointed to their first administration position later than men. Women that enter into the superintendency, on average, tend to be in their late 40s with older children (Shakeshaft, 1999). The findings within this research study is in alignment with existing literature as some of the participants noted they waited to enter the superintendency until their children were older and out of the home to help ease the challenge of balancing family and careers. Even though Donna's, Necole's, and Jane's kids were out of the house, finding balance when they entered the superintendency was still a challenge. Participants indicated that the amount of time and energy required for the position was incredible; all participants noted how the job does not have a day off, as they were standing and ready to serve every day of the year, twenty-four hours a day. Jane identified how the responsibility and time commitment of the job can impact home life and the overall well-being of individuals, which can

be extremely damaging and often results in a high turnover or burnout rate. Jane's experiences are in alignment with a 1993 study by Talerico, Burstyn, and Poole in which women were found to leave the superintendency due to challenges involved with the job, childrearing concerns, and the strong negative effects of politics.

Besides balancing time, the participants identified working with the school board and navigating the politics of education as challenges. The concept of the school board being a challenge to the participants was a new concept, as it was not referenced in the existing literature. However, the challenge of navigating and managing the politics involved with the position of superintendent was identified. Lundin (1993) stated that women have less of a tolerance for politics than men and therefore advised women to develop their ability to function within a political position, such as the superintendency. As a baseline, none of the participants had previous exposure to working with school boards or politics. Kristie thought she would approach it similar to how she would any other group or team that she had worked with in the past. However, she noted this was not always the case and was not always effective as school boards are often made up entirely of males and they tend to hire individuals like themselves, thus making this task increasingly difficult (Parent, 2004; Anderson, 2000). While Donna and Becky did not identify specific challenges they currently had with their school board, they noted that they did not have a lot of experience dealing with educational politics. Through participants' interviews, it was documented that the superintendent had a much easier time working with the school board and engaging in political responsibilities with the same board that hired them for the position. Yet, if the board changed during subsequent elections, the chances of them struggling with the school board and being unsuccessful with educational politics, was greater. Kristie and Jane noted that they believed this to be true because the current board that hired them had a personal investment in

making sure they were successful. For example, Donna who did not have documented challenges with her board, just a lack of experience, stated in her interview “I love my school board. They have been fabulous and extremely supportive even though they did all hire me.”

Kristie and Sarah noted they thought working with a board was going to be easy as they were used to working in teams. However, many of the participants were surprised to find that politics and the lack of understanding in regards to what the board was responsible for doing, posed a significant challenge to the work they did on a daily basis. Donna mentioned in her interview how she spends a considerable amount of time meeting and discussing things with board members, which is sometimes hard for her, as she would prefer to be in buildings more or working on projects that directly impact student learning.

In an attempt to overcome the challenge of working with a school board, the participants responded in a variety of ways. Donna tried to overcome her challenges with the board by meeting with them on a weekly basis. She also brought in trainers from the State to work with the board members on how to review data and therefore make data driven decisions, in addition to reviewing the roles and responsibilities of the board in its entirety. Necole and Jane both brought in trainers from outside the school district to help set rules, policy, and expectations of each board member and the role they play in governing the district. Necole noted that their job was to evaluate the superintendent in how she carried out their vision and mission, not to tell her how to do it. “Understanding the roles and responsibility is hard for many board members as they enter into these positions, thinking they have a considerable amount of power when they really don’t,” Jane noted.

While working with the school board and engaging in educational politics was a challenge for the participants, there were a small variety of suggestions offered to others with the same

challenges. Donna, Jane, and Necole recommended bringing in the Oregon School Board Association to train and work with the school board as a way to address dysfunction and politics. By hearing the rules and regulations they were held to by an outside governing party, it made working together to fix things easier for the board members and the participants. If they only heard these rules and regulations from the superintendent, it often resulted in the message being lost and not heard by the board members.

Research question three. *How do past challenges and opportunities experienced by female superintendents influence their current roles and positions?* Given that the guiding questions were open ended and specifically tied to research question three; I was able to learn about their experiences through asking follow-up questions and by allowing them to continue explaining the opportunities and challenges they experience in their present setting. The common theme to research question three centered on the importance of their past and the significant role it plays on their current position.

The major epiphany that affected the participants' current position was about the realization that one needed to remain true to themselves and their values. All participants identified situations and examples that required them to search deeply within themselves for what they thought was best for kids and education as a whole. These can be incredibly difficult and trying situations for people to experience, but they help to orientate a person to their values. Jane provided the advice that "when everything going on around you is crazy, quiet your head, and ask yourself what is best for kids. It is during this moment that you will receive clarity and a vision about what you should do."

Earlier research by Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) showed that women superintendents have different experiences as they journey to the highest level of leadership within education. In

line with their results, I found that the challenges and opportunities experienced by female superintendents had an impact on their current roles and positions. For women, the typical route to the superintendency involves moving from a secondary or elementary principal position, director/coordinator, assistant superintendent, and finally the superintendent (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Montz & Wanat, 2008; Natale, 1992; Yong-Lyun & Brunner, 2009). One participant in this study never served as a building principal, and none of them had served in a capacity where they managed finances, facilities, or personnel prior to arriving at the superintendency. Brunner and Kim (2010) suggested that women often fill curriculum related positions instead of ones specifically dealing with human resources or fiscal management. Not serving in these positions influenced their current roles by providing a steeper learning curve and additional challenges once they reached the superintendency, as these were skills they had to learn quickly. Two of the six participants had served as a high school principal, which is traditionally thought of as a gateway position to the superintendency. The two women that served in this capacity appeared to be stronger in nature, both professionally and personally. These career paths are different from what a male will generally follow as they ascend to the position: from teacher to principal to superintendent, or from teacher to principal to central office to superintendent (Natale, 1992).

One way in which women approach barriers differently as they aspire to the superintendency is through the various career paths they take (Mertz & McNeely, 1988; Anderson, 2000). Even with differing experiences, the one common response to how the challenges and opportunities influenced their current work as a superintendent, centered on how their work ethic and experiences made them who they are today. Without the challenges and the opportunities given to them, they would be different people and not able to do what they are presented with today. Each of the participants noted that they felt the challenges and opportunities they

experienced were part of the normal process of career advancement in education, which directly tied into the research conducted by Barbie (2004). Necole and Jane noted that if there were not challenges and opportunities along the way, they would not have found the position desirable, as it was the "adventure" that made it worthwhile.

Each female superintendent who was interviewed offered advice for aspiring female superintendents because they said the journey to the position was a challenge. The major theme that came out of the interviews regarding advice focused on an encouragement to continue on the path and journey to gain the position. Sarah noted, "We just need more women at the superintendency level!" They all believed that being a female superintendent is a hard road and a hard job, so one needs to make sure they are prepared and ready for the challenge. Therefore, each participant encouraged women to strive for this position and to keep their sights on it as they worked to master their current positions and take on additional roles and responsibilities. All of the participants believed a female superintendent needed to know more and be better than her male counterparts. They said that in order to succeed in the superintendency, a female had to master the jobs around them, take the time to learn and received feedback, and vary their leadership and communication style.

Future Research

If I had the opportunity to conduct another study on the subject of female superintendents, I would construct a quantitative study that focused on a large sample population so I could draw larger scaled conclusions about the challenges and opportunities female superintendents face in their journey and in their present positions. After having examined and explored this topic on a micro-level, I would like to add to the depth of knowledge on a national level with larger studies. Studies that could be conducted, but not in follow-up to my present research, would be to compare

and contrast the experiences of female superintendents that assume the position in their 40s verses those in their 50s or 60s. It would also be worth researching how family has impacted the younger superintendents and if barriers still exist when it comes to families, as more women are choosing to not have children or marry.

Reflections and Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the opportunities and challenges females face as they journey into the role of a superintendent within the K-12 educational system. It was my hope that by understanding the experiences of female superintendents, it would help inform me why there are so few and how the successful ones have made it to the level of superintendent. Through the data collection process and data analysis, I have gained an incredible amount of insight into the process, procedures, and experiences women face as they pursue the superintendency position, as well as what happens after they get there. Some of their experiences were expected while others were ones I did not anticipate. The findings and personal connections I made to myself were impactful and valuable.

From this research, I have gained new insight into the experiences females have as they move throughout their career, including the opportunities and challenges they encounter. In addition, I better understand what it takes to reach the highest level of educational leadership as a female. Creswell (2007) referred to the reflective aspect of a qualitative study as the lessons learned. My lessons learned include the importance of working hard and learning the job one currently has, developing as much knowledge and skill as possible, and that one needs to be able to vary their leadership or communication style, depending upon the circumstances given.

I have frequently observed other professionals attempting to move up the career ladder as quickly as possible while others are placed into positions of power that are not yet ready for their

newly acquired skill set or responsibility. Observing these movements have made me wonder how long one should stay in their current position and how quickly is too quickly to move up in the field of education. Based upon the findings of this research project, it became readily apparent that working hard and taking the time to learn the job is a vital component of being a successful superintendent. If I push myself too fast and take a job that is not the right fit or am simply not ready for the next level, I run a high risk of ruining my career, as my decisions and actions will influence my marketability in future years. On a personal level, by hearing each of the superintendents talk about the importance of working hard and being good at their job inspired me to embrace the challenges my job brings each day and to see them as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Similar to the first lesson learned, I found that I have to develop my knowledge base and skill set as much as possible while in my current position. Their advice speaks to taking on additional responsibilities when possible and taking an interest in everything going on in the field of education. Often opportunities are given to individuals so they can gain additional experience and be better prepared for higher positions when they open. The message behind this lesson resonated with me strongly as I am constantly looking for ways to develop myself professionally, through additional job responsibilities or experiences. Over the past two years, I have taken on numerous additional roles and responsibilities within and outside of my present positions. The insight gained through this research showed me that through embracing these experiences, they are professional opportunities that will pay off later in my career. Once I paused and reflected on where the participants were coming from with their advice, it made me realize that I am now better qualified and prepared for the position above me than if I had not been given the opportunity to take on additional jobs. In essence, this lesson allowed me to see learning opportunities for what

they really are for me in a professional, marketability, growing standpoint. Therefore, my attitude and outlook on these additional job responsibilities is extremely positive.

Finally, the third lesson I learned through this research project is one that I understand but is hard for me to implement, to vary your leadership and communication style. Many of the female superintendents acknowledged they, by nature, were direct communicators. While some of this behavior could be attributed to working with men for much of their career, others were predisposed to it by their personality. Regardless, I found myself nodding in agreement that I too was a direct and upfront communicator and leader when it came to working with staff. However, it was interesting to hear that this style is not always effective in leading a building or district. In fact, multiple superintendents noted they had to vary their approach and style, depending upon the circumstances. Working with the board and dealing with staffing issues were both areas that required variety in leadership and communication styles. Looking back on how this impacts me, it informs me that I need to continue to develop and refine my leadership and communication style so that I am skilled in reading a situation and varying it when needed.

Finally, I would like to note that none of the participants expressed frustration or anger about the opportunities and challenges they experienced throughout their journey or once they assumed the position of superintendent. None of the participants blamed males or the social systems they navigated through to get to the level of superintendent. All of the challenges each of the participants brought up were embraced and accepted by the superintendents. In fact, the majority of the participants felt these experiences were instrumental in making them who they were today. Their reaction surprised me as a significant amount of literature exists that would indicate the opposite to be true, that women would be frustrated or angry about the challenges they encounter while pursuing this position of superintendent.

I was greatly impressed with each of the participants I interviewed. I left each interview with a clearer vision about what it takes to get to the superintendency level. As an aspiring superintendent, my goal is to embrace the extra leadership tasks the district office delegates to me as it provides me with opportunities to learn the job above me. I now see and understand that through embracing these challenges and opportunities, the experience and knowledge will help me in the future as I learn and grow as an educational leader.

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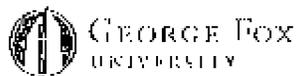
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Appendices

Appendix A



School of Education
 111 N. Meridian Ave., VHS, Seattle, OR 97122
 503.535.8485 Fax: 503.551.0688 | www.georgefox.edu

June 27, 2013

Ms. Rachel Huish
 Ed.D. Candidate
 George Fox University

Dear Ms. Huish:

This letter is to inform you that as a representative of the GPU Institutional Review Board I have reviewed your proposal for research investigation entitled "Examining the Journey of Females who Become Oregon School Superintendents." The proposed study meets all ethical requirements for research with human participants. The proposal is approved.

Best wishes as you complete your research investigation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Terry Huffman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Terry Huffman, Ph.D.
 Professor of Education
 Human Subjects Research Committee
 George Fox University
 (503) 554-2856

Appendix B

June 25, 2013

Dear Professional Educator,

My name is Rachael Huish and I am a doctoral student at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. As part of the requirement for completing my doctoral degree, I am conducting research regarding female superintendents. You are invited to engage in one face-to-face interview session for approximately an hour. During this time, you will be asked a series of questions regarding your experience as a female superintendent in Oregon, as well as some of the challenges and opportunities you have encountered along the way.

Personal interviews will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. After transcribing each interview, the content will be added to the comments of other female superintendents to identify themes and trends about their experiences as women in school leadership roles. It is my hope that the study will help guide, inform, and provide inspiration to aspiring female leaders in education.

The risks associated with this research are minimal. The personal interview questions are general and should not create any distress. Nevertheless, please be aware that your participation in this study is voluntary and you may decline to continue at any time or decline to answer any of the questions at your discretion.

The results of this study will only be used for research purposes. Information will be analyzed and presented in a confidential manner and no individual will be personally identified. I affirm to keep all personal information and identities confidential.

All research materials (i.e. audio recordings, transcripts, and signed consent forms) will be locked in a separate, secure location for a period of no less than five years. I will be the only individual who will have access to these materials. After five years, I will personally destroy all relevant materials and delete the audio recordings.

Thank you for your time and for considering this project. If you choose to participate, please know that you are contributing to educational research. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at (541) 520-9116. If you have any additional questions, you may contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Ginny Birky at (503) 554-2854.

If you understand the use of this research and agree to participate, please sign below.

Participant signature: _____

Researcher signature: _____

Appendix C

Interview Guide Questions

Examining the Journey of Females who Become Oregon School Superintendents

Face-to-Face Interviews

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself (professional background, how long in this position, where before, etc.).
2. Was there anyone that provided you with inspiration to serve at this leadership level?
3. What are the opportunities you encountered in your journey to become a superintendent?
 - a. If so, what were/are some of them?
 - b. How did you approach these opportunities?
 - c. What kind of opportunities did people create?
 - d. What kinds of opportunities were created systemically?
 - e. Are there opportunities you have encountered since becoming a superintendent?
4. What are the challenges you encountered in your journey to become a superintendent?
 - a. If so, what were/are some of them?
 - b. How did you/do you approach them?
 - c. What kind of barriers/challenges did people create?
 - d. What kinds of barriers/challenges were created systemically?
 - e. Are there barriers or roadblocks you have encountered since becoming superintendent, but were/are able to overcome?
5. How have your experiences as a female superintendent, particularly the opportunities and challenges, affected your current role as superintendent?
 - a. How have they affected your view of education?
 - b. How have they affected your actions in your current job?
 - c. Did you experience any significant epiphanies?
6. What advice would you give to an aspiring female superintendent?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me?