AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF BARRIERS AND SUPPORTS FACED BY WOMEN
SUPERINTENDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

EMILY Y. SHAW. An Exploratory Study of Barriers and Supports Faced by Women Superintendents. (Under the direction of DR. WALTER HART.)

The significance of this study was to give an active voice to the experiences of women superintendents. By giving voice to the lived experiences of women superintendents, the study sought to further understand the phenomenon of women dominating the teaching profession and other entry-level positions in education yet having a noticeably limited presence in the superintendency. More specifically, studying the barriers and supports women superintendents encounter could lead to significant opportunities to narrow the gender gap of women in the superintendency. Bringing awareness to the barriers and supports women superintendents experience could also foster more equitable workplaces.

This qualitative, exploratory study aimed to identify barriers and supports faced by women school district superintendents as they ascended into the role and while they serve in the role. In this basic qualitative study, the researcher's data sources involved semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with women superintendents.

Results of the study indicate that participants felt that advancement factors were multifaceted and systematic, and employment pathways impacted options. In addition, personal obstacles acted as a barrier to reaching the superintendency. Also, gender discrimination was present while ascending to the superintendency and while serving in the role. Results also concluded that women superintendents credited their ongoing success to mentors and professional development. Implications included the need for awareness of leadership development opportunities for women in education, elimination of the glass ceiling, and additional research from women who aspire to be superintendents.

DEDICATION

This research reflects the last four years of my professional growth, my love for learning, and my commitment to making educational leadership opportunities equitable for women. My commitment to this doctoral process was made possible through the support of my family and friends. To my husband, Steven, thank you for allowing me to pursue my dream and respecting the value I see in education. You were patient with me as I had to work on schoolwork instead of spending time with family. You have been my rock and my voice of reason when I wanted to give up. To my sons, Carson and Carter, this is for you. I want you to understand that you can do anything that you put your mind to and never let anyone or anything stand in your way. Always remember that I am your biggest fan and love you so much. I hope that as you have seen me work tirelessly through this process, you have learned that hard work is rewarding and that if you persevere the result will come.

To my parents, this achievement is possible because of you. You instilled in me the work ethic of a horse and the determination that I can do anything I set out to accomplish. I have strived to be the best I can be, and I hope I have made you proud.

Lastly, to my best friend Jennifer. You are a great friend, colleague, and sounding board. Thank you for always listening, and providing encouragement, funny stories, and memes to get me to the finish line.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SBM   School Board Member

MSBM   Male School Board Member

FSBM   Female School Board Member

FRL   Free Reduced Lunch

FDA   Food and Drug Administration

RQ1   Research Question 1

RQ2   Research Question 2

RQ3   Research Question 3

RQ4   Research Question 4

DPI   Department of Instruction

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

While women have been an integral part of the workforce for over a hundred years, it has been within the turn of the century that women have entered managerial ranks of the U.S. workplace at the same rate as men. From 1972 to 2002, the percentage of managerial jobs held by women increased from 20% to 46% percent (Grupton, 2009). Although women hold managerial positions, they are still underrepresented in advanced leadership positions. Catalyst (2022), a global nonprofit that helps build workplaces that work for women, reported that women continue to only hold approximately 45% of management occupations but only 29% percent of chief executive positions and advanced leadership roles. Furthermore, in 2022 women only represent 6% percent of the CEO positions on the S&P 500 list.

This limited presence of women in top leadership roles also holds true in education. Women have always had a strong presence in the teaching profession and other entry-level leadership positions in education, but their representation decreases in superintendencies and other higher-ranking roles. While the number of women in educational leadership positions has increasingly grown over the last few decades, there still are discrepancies between the number of women in education and the number of women represented in educational leadership roles, specifically the superintendency. Even with the evolution of women in educational leadership positions and numerous attempts to address gender equity, women still represented 76% of the teachers in the United States and 71% of the teachers in North Carolina but had limited presence in the top-ranking position in school districts (Gordon, 2020). Despite comprising an overwhelming majority of the teacher workforce, women held only 26.7% of superintendent positions across the United States and only 26% of superintendent positions in North Carolina (Hart et al., 2022). While the presence of women in the superintendency in 2020 had increased

from only 13.2% in 2000, they still represented a small percentage of all superintendents (Tienken, 2021).

Brunner (2000a) reported a lack of research on why there are so few women superintendents. In a study completed by Grogan and Brunner (2005), they challenged people to investigate why there are so few women in the superintendent position when most educators are women. Research promotes that qualified women educators can seek and obtain the superintendent role. However, barriers prevent women from obtaining the role at the same rate as men (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Previous research suggests that women superintendents face several gender-based barriers leading to the superintendency and while serving in the role (Glass, 2000). These barriers include balancing career and home life, women not being seen as financial managers, and gender discrimination (Connell et al., 2015). Also, research found that women leaders in education often occupy elementary school principalships, a role that often does not lead to the superintendency. By contrast, men were more likely to serve as secondary school principals, a role associated with ascension to the superintendency (Maranto et al., 2017). Additionally, women superintendents reported barriers while serving in the role that included being dismissed during professional communication. They also experienced challenges related to norms about gender roles and organizational power (Brunner, 2000b).

Research further suggests that women who became superintendents acknowledged the support they received from various mentors, including professional colleagues or groups, educational institutions or programs, and family and friends (Clark & Johnson, 2017). Mentors have been able to give solid advice to ensure success and longevity (Sampson, 2018). Also,

family and friends are cited as supporting aspiring women superintendents by serving as a sounding board (Reed & Patterson, 2007).

Giving voice to the experiences of women superintendents is relevant and is warranted for doctoral-level research because it is important to ensure that women are represented in the superintendent role. Studying the barriers and supports women superintendents encounter could lead to significant opportunities to narrow the gender gap of women in the superintendency. Bringing awareness to the barriers and supports women superintendents experience could also foster more equitable workplaces. Research states that women have a stronger background in curriculum and lead with an instructional focus, whereas men have a stronger background in operations and are more task-oriented (Brunner & Kim, 2010). This detail may better qualify women to hold the role of superintendent, which heightens the importance of closing the gender gap for women ascending to the superintendency.

Problem Statement

According to the American Association of School Administrations 2020 decennial study of American superintendents, the percentage of women in the role of school district superintendent increased significantly from 13.2% in 2000 to 26.7% in 2020 (Tienken, 2021). While progress has been made, women still represent a small percentage of superintendents (Tienken, 2021).

This lack of representation from women in the superintendency has prompted researchers to examine the reasons why there are not more women superintendents (Glass, 2000; Grupton, 2009). Studies have revealed that in addition to gender-based discrimination, the underrepresentation is due to a lack of training or experience needed to hold the position, physical and mental demands of the job, and low recruitment of women for the superintendent

position (Brunner, 2000b; Connell et al., 2015). While studies have examined the profiles of women superintendents, their selected career paths, barriers faced, and their experiences, there are gaps in the literature. Specifically, there is a need to understand women superintendents' lived experiences more fully to identify and address actions that can promote gender equity in the position (Clark & Johnson, 2017; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Therefore, this study sought to examine barriers and supports that women superintendents face as they ascend into the role and while serving in the role.

Theoretical Framework

Two frameworks guided this study. Both the Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Gatekeeper Theory shaped this study because they emphasize the marginalization of women. These theoretical perspectives helped shape the research questions and provided the lens through which the data were analyzed.

Nancy Hartsock's (1980) Feminist Standpoint Theory was used to frame this study and analyze the barriers and supports encountered by women superintendents. The core concepts and research that guided this study were based on a feminist perspective and how power imbalances relate to today's superintendency (Harding, 2004). Just as Feminist Standpoint Theory highlights disparate, gender-based rights, data about women in the superintendency reveal inequitable, gender-based opportunities for district-level leadership. This disparate gender-based outcome is illuminated by the overwhelming presence of women in the lower levels of school district hierarchies and the preponderance of men at the highest levels.

The Gatekeeper Theory, developed by Kurt Lewin, was also a fundamental part of this research that investigates how school boards and other entities act as gates that keep women from securing superintendent positions (Roberts, 2005). Comparably, in the search for a

superintendent, school board members, search committees, and other influential people act as

gatekeepers. They control the selection and interview process methods, thereby shaping the

outcome. Gender-based inequities arise as the pathway of the woman leader is often blocked by

gatekeepers that men do not encounter (Connell et al., 2015).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was to identify barriers and

supports faced by women school district superintendents as they ascended into the role and while

they serve in the role. By giving voice to the lived experiences of women superintendents, the

researcher hoped to describe the phenomenon of women dominating the teaching profession and

other entry-level positions in education yet having a noticeably limited presence in the

superintendency.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative study.

1. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that obstructed their advancement into the role of superintendent?

2. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that supported their advancement into the role of superintendent?

3. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that inhibit their success while in the role of superintendent?

4. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that support their success while the role of superintendent?

Overview of Research Methodology

This qualitative, exploratory case study sought to identify barriers and supports faced by women school district superintendents by interviewing four practicing women superintendents and one retired woman superintendent in North Carolina. The semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions that focused on barriers that women superintendents were forced to overcome and supports in place to encourage their advancement. Using a primarily open-ended data-gathering protocol allowed participants to reflect and respond in their own words while building trustworthiness, as the researcher did not dictate or interpret those responses based on possible bias (Taylor-Powell, 1998). After completing the interviews, the researcher classified the interview data into patterns through multiple rounds of manual coding. This analysis also examined attitudes, feelings, and behaviors as the researcher sought to sort and categorize data based on common themes.

Significance of the Study

Leadership is promoted as the sharing of a common vision of values and beliefs that join students, parents, teachers, staff, principals, and other stakeholders in schools (Sergiovanni, 2005). Examining the barriers and supports women superintendents encounter is an important topic because women possess leadership qualities and should have equal access to leadership roles and the supports available to guide the process (Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009).

Previous studies have found that women encounter internal and external barriers while ascending the superintendency and while in the role of superintendent (Kelsey et al., 2014; Shakeshaft, 1989; Smiley et al., 2021). Internal barriers that prevent women from becoming superintendents include women having low self-image, lack of confidence, or lack of motivation and aspiration (Gresham & Sampson, 2019). Research also consistently identified external

barriers that can be condensed into the following categories: (a) personal relationships, (b) women not preparing themselves for the superintendency, (c) women not being seen as financial managers, and (d) gender bias (Connell et al., 2015; Glass, 2000).

There remains a need to understand and study what practicing women superintendents perceive as barriers and supports to the superintendency. Limited research exists on this important topic, particularly concerning the existing supports. Understanding these barriers and supports will better enable aspiring women to become superintendents and thrive in the role. This research had practical applications because it can help to inform policies and practices that create more equitable workplaces. This research had empirical importance because it will add to an existing but limited body of research. This research had theoretical implications because it may further illustrate the basic tenets of the Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Gatekeeper Theory (Reed & Patterson, 2007).

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Delimitations

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There were several delimitations associated with this proposed study. First, because this study focused on barriers and supports women superintendents face, the participants must be women. Specifically, this research focused on participants located in North Carolina. While the goal was for all participants to be practicing or recently retired superintendents, the low representation of women superintendents and their demanding schedules could have hindered the proposed pool. The limited number of potential participants also means that there could not be an attempt to limit the sample by years of experience or other factors. Lastly, the research will take place in the spring of 2023.

Assumptions

There were several assumptions within this study. The first assumption was that all participants would accurately reflect their honest opinions when answering the interview questions. It was also assumed that the participants could remember details of relevant events that occurred earlier in their careers, particularly if they were veteran educators. To encourage participants to be forthright in their responses, they were informed that their participation was voluntary and that all data collected would remain confidential and de-identifiable. Lastly, it was assumed that the sample size would provide sufficient data for the study.

Definitions of Terms

barrier. Barriers are obstacles that prevent movement or access (Connell et at., (2015).

gate keeper. A gate keeper is an individual or group that has the power to make decisions
      between what is in or out (Roberts, 2005).

glass ceiling. A glass ceiling is an artificial barrier that prevents, restricts, or delays an
      individual's mobility within an organization or career pursuit (Weyer, 2007).

good ole boys club. The term is described as a cultural norm that males help other males to
      obtain higher-level positions while preventing women from entering identical positions
      (DiCanio et al., 2016).

mentor. A mentor is an individual that is viewed as a professional that is skilled and
      knowledgeable that provides guidance and support to an individual that is less skilled and
      knowledgeable (Bin Tareef, 2013).

nontraditional pathway. Nontraditional is defined as not adhering to established traditions. In

reference to this study, a nontraditional pathway is defined as anything other than going

through the logical progression of advancement in the educational roles of teacher,

administration, central office director, then superintendent (Glass, 2000).

school superintendent. A superintendent is hired by the school board as the school district's

executive leader in charge of administrative affairs and curriculum and instruction of the

district (Glass, 1992).

support. Support is defined as giving assistance or help (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

traditional pathway. Traditional is defined as adhering to established traditions. In reference to

this study, a traditional pathway is defined as going through the logical progression of

advancement in the educational roles of teacher, administration, central office director,

then superintendent (Glass, 2000).

Organization of the Study

While studies acknowledge that the number of women in educational leadership positions

has increased, there is still a gap between the number of women in education compared to the

number of women represented in educational leadership, specifically the superintendent role

(Gordon, 2020). Therefore, it is important to bring awareness to the barriers and supports faced

by women superintendents to assist with closing the gender gap.

This chapter introduced the proposed study and presented the relevant problem statement

surrounding the research. The theoretical framework, an overview of the purpose statement, and

relevant research questions were discussed. Finally, the study's methodology was revealed, and

the significance of the study along with delimitations and assumptions was stated. Definitions of

key terms were also provided to provide clarity.

The remainder of the study is organized into four additional chapters. Chapter Two outlines the existing scholarly literature surrounding the superintendent position, legal movements affecting women in the workplace, and barriers and supports women superintendents face. Chapter Three describes the methodology and research design that will be used. Chapter Four will reveal the findings extracted from the data and discuss the thematic interpretations uncovered. Chapter Five provides implications and considerations for further research. Finally, references and appendices are located behind Chapter Five of the study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Women dominate the teaching profession and other entry-level leadership positions in education, but their representation decreases in superintendencies and other higher-ranking roles. In 2020, women comprised 76% of the teachers in the United States and 71% of the teachers in North Carolina (Gordon, 2020). Despite comprising an overwhelming majority of the teacher workforce, only 26.7% of superintendent positions across the United States were held by women in 2020 (Tienken, 2021). While the presence of women in the superintendency in 2020 had increased from only 13.2% in 2000, they still represent a small percentage of all superintendents (Tienken, 2021).

This review is intended to examine existing literature and provide context through which this study's findings can be understood and interpreted. As this study focuses on perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that obstructed or supported their advancement into the role of superintendent and the factors that support or hinder their success in the role, it is important to investigate literature related to these topics. First, this review will examine the historical background of superintendents and the duties of superintendents. Next, this chapter will explore legal movements that paved the way for more gender equity in the workplace, specifically in leadership roles in the school setting. Additionally, existing studies on the experiences of women superintendents will be examined, focusing on barriers and supports encountered by women superintendents while ascending to the superintendency and while serving in the role. Finally, this chapter will describe the overarching theoretical framework for this study, including an overview of the Feminist Standpoint Theory and The Gatekeeper Theory. The topics addressed in this literature review are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Sections of Identified Literature

Category	Sources
History of the Superintendent Position	School Master/Board Clerk (Brunner et al., 2002; Kowalski, 1999; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Tienken, 2021; Carter & Cunningham, 1997)
	Beginning of the Superintendency (Bjork et al., 2014; Candoli, 1995; Kowalski, 1999; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Tienken, 2021)
	The First Superintendents and Oliver Gray Steele (Tienken, 2021)
Evolving Roles of the Superintendent	Conceptions of Superintendents (Bjork et al., 2014; Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Bracey, 2003; Brunner et al., 2002; Callahan, 1962; Callahan, 1966; Fusarelli, 2008; Fusarelli and Fusarelli, 2003; Getzels, 1977; Howlett, 1993; Kowalski, 1999; Kowalski, 2006; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Manheimer & Manning, 1995; Petersen & Barnett, 2005; Spring, 1994; Tyack & Hansot, 1982)
	Expectations and Responsibilities for Current Superintendents (Bjork et al., 2014; Brunner et al., 2002; Candoli, 1991; Candoli, 1995; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2006; Kowalski, 1999; Tienken, 2021)
	National School Boards Association (NSBA) and American Association of School Administrators (AASA) (Bjork, 1996; Bjork et al., 2014; Hoyle, 1993; Hoyle, et at., 2005; Kowalski,1999)
	North Carolina Standards for Superintendents (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006)

Table 1

Sections of Identified Literature (Cont.)

Legal Movements	Title VII (Catalyst, 2022; Little, 2016; Vaas, 1966)
	Title IX (Alexander, 2018; Miller, 2020; Sandler, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)
	Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins (Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins, 1989)
Women in the Superintendency	The History of Women in Education (Blunt, 1998; Glass, 1992; Glass et al., 2000; Gordon, 2020; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Hodgkinson & Montenergo, 1999; Knezevich, 1971; Maranto et al., 2017; Shakeshaft et al., 1991; Webb & McCarthy, 1998)
	Barriers Encountered While Ascending to the Role of Superintendent (Burke & Karambayya, 2004) Clark & Johnson, 2017; Coleman, 2005; Connell et al., 2015; Dobie & Hummel, 2006; Glass, 2000; Gordon, 2020; Gresham & Sampson, 2019; Gross & Trask, 1976; Harris, 2007; Johns, 2013; Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Sampson, et.al, 2015; Shakeshaft, 1989; Siegel, 1999; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015; The U.S. Department of Labor, 1991; Weyer, 2007; Wiggens & Coggins, 1986)
	Supports Encountered While Ascending the Role of Superintendent (Clark & Johnson, 2017; Reed & Patterson, 2007; Sharp et.al, 2004)
	Barriers Encountered While in the Role of Superintendent (Brunner, 2000b; Sharpe et al., 2014; Statham, 1987, Tannen, 1994)
	Supports Encountered While in the Role of Superintendent (Clark & Johnson, 2017;

Table 1

Sections of Identified Literature (Cont.)

	Reed & Patterson, 2007; Sampson & Austin, 2018; Smiley, et al., 2021)
Theoretical Framework	Feminist Standpoint Theory (Harding, 2004; Wallace, 2015; Wood, 2009)
	Gatekeeper Theory (Connell et al., 2015; Derrington & Sharatt, 2009; DiCanio et al., 2016; Roberts, 2005;)

History of the Superintendent Position

School Master/Board Clerk

The creation of the superintendent role can be traced as far back as the 1600s with the first established school in colonial Boston (Tienken, 2021). In April of 1635, Boston Latin School was established and considered the first public school in the United States. The school operated out of the home of the appointed schoolmaster, Philemon Pormort (Tienken, 2021). The career pathway that led Pormort to be selected as the schoolmaster is unknown; however, town officials that appointed him must have known he had managerial and teaching skills (Tienken, 2021). While Pormort did not have the official title of superintendent, historical records indicate that his roles and responsibilities aligned with the duties of current superintendents. Pormort was responsible for the facility, curriculum, instruction, supervision and management of staff, funding, scheduling, community outreach, and keeping the town officials informed of school progress (Tienken, 2021).

The success of Boston Latin School prompted the colony of Massachusetts to pass the Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647. This law required all towns with 50 or more families to establish a school and hire a schoolmaster to teach children. The initial job description of the schoolmaster included being responsible for teaching, nurturing children, and other duties like those carried out by Pormort (Tienken, 2021).

As schools evolved and became more visible across the United States, the structure of schools changed. Specifically, state and local officials became more involved. School boards and common committees were also established to govern schools. Larger city school boards were compelled to hire someone to lead schools in the cities even though the school boards did not want to give up any power (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Thus, the introduction of the position of superintendent.

The earliest formal superintendents did not have a well-defined job description (Brunner et al., 2002). Fearful of relinquishing power, forceful community members, board members, and committee members exerted influence to ensure that the first superintendents were not granted real authority and were only doing trivial tasks. These influential members ensured that superintendents' work was reduced to clerical assignments rather than leadership duties (Kowalski, 1999). As such, those hired as superintendents previously served as teachers. They had no specific leadership training and would perform duties associated with the role of a school board clerk (Carter & Cunningham, 1997).

Beginning of the Superintendency

Before school districts were formally structured with state intervention, local communities determined the scope of education for students. While local control was perceived to fit the philosophy of democracy, state officials quickly realized that having local communities

maintain total control over schools would result in inadequate schools and inequities for students (Kowalski, 1999). However, state officials also understood that too much state involvement would be distasteful to local communities. Therefore, they created a compromise to balance state and local control by establishing local school districts and modern superintendents (Kowalski, 1999).

Records indicate that the first district superintendent was appointed in Buffalo, New York (Bjork et al., 2014). The position of superintendent was created in 1837 as a response to a concern the residents in Buffalo had with the existing schools. Buffalo was quickly growing, and the residents saw the importance of a system of schools rather than having numerous schools acting independently (Tienken, 2021). Town leaders, working with state officials to create a systematic approach to educating children, recognized the need for a central leader (Tienken, 2021). Louisville, Kentucky followed Buffalo with the creation of the second superintendent, and by 1900 most urban school districts had appointed superintendents to lead a system of schools (Bjork et al., 2014).

As the twentieth century approached and with the invention of motor vehicles, people could travel and move around more easily. Rural areas started to see an increase in population and traffic. With people having easier access to schools, school enrollment increased. As schools grew, cities opted to follow the model of school systems instead of the single-room approach. In time, rural districts saw the benefits of consolidated school districts (Candoli, 1995). The increase in school districts led to the consistent presence of a superintendent. As the position of superintendent became more widespread, the roles and duties became more defined to meet social, economic, and political changes (Bjork et al., 2014).

With the formation of local school districts, growth in school populations, and increased guidance from the state governments, the duties of superintendent transformed from when the role was first created in the mid-1800s when only thirteen urban districts employed a person in this role (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). By 1910, the superintendent position shifted to address the development of larger city school districts, the consolidation of rural districts, a growing curriculum, the implementation of compulsory attendance laws, increased accountability, and efficiency expectations (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

The First Superintendents and Oliver Gray Steele

In 1837, the Buffalo Common Committee Council appointed R.W. Haskins as the first superintendent of Buffalo City Schools. Haskins resigned shortly after he started due to his frustration with the structure of the position and the lack of flexibility given to lead the system of schools. The committee then selected N.B. Sprague to serve as superintendent. However, he shared the same concerns as Mr. Haskins had only served as superintendent for a short period (Tienken, 2021). Haskins and Sprague suggested that the committee give the superintendent more decision-making autonomy. The committee took those recommendations and reconfigured the role allowing the superintendent flexibility to make decisions for the system of schools (Tienken, 2021).

Oliver Gray Steele was the first to formally hold the official title of Superintendent in the United States. He was appointed the superintendent of the Buffalo School District in 1838 (Tienken, 2021). He was first appointed the president of the board of trustees for Buffalo Normal School. In this position, he was a very active community member and assisted in creating organizational structures that brought free and public education to all students. He was later

appointed superintendent due to his stellar civic work in the community. While in the superintendent role, his work paved the pathway for future superintendents (Tienken, 2021).

<div align="center">**Evolving Roles of the Superintendent**</div>

Conceptions of Superintendents

Kowalski (1999) stated that the superintendent position is recognized as the most influential position in the public school system since its creation in the 1800s. To fully understand the modern function of the superintendent, one must understand the history of the role (Brunner et al., 2002). The role of the superintendent has evolved immensely since its inception, and researchers agree that the demands of the superintendent have changed because of social, economic, and political trends in society (Petersen & Barnett, 2005).

The following sections describe the historical and current roles and expectations of school superintendents. Specifically, Callahan's (1966) four role conceptualizations for superintendents, each aligned to a specific period, are described. Also, Kowalski's (2006) later addition of a fifth role is outlined. Finally, an overview of current national and North Carolina superintendent standards is depicted.

Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar

Callahan (1966) defined the first role of superintendent as that of teacher-scholar. In this role, which Bjork et al. (2014) said lasted from 1837 until the early 1900s, the superintendent was known for having content knowledge and was the master teacher. Superintendents were labeled master teachers because they were expected to provide instructional support, teach best practices, and implement curriculum (Callahan, 1966). In addition, they devoted most of their time to implementing and supervising instruction while ensuring consistency within the taught curriculum (Spring, 1994).

Prior to the early 1900s, teaching and school administration were not viewed as separate duties. Superintendents were proud to be teachers and provided visionary leadership to enhance academic outcomes and student achievement (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Superintendents often wrote pedagogical, philosophical, and historical journal articles (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). The role of superintendent as teacher-scholar began to shift in the early 1900s, but the concept remained irrelevant and helped to shape the duties of current superintendents (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

Superintendent as Manager

The industrialization of America at the beginning of the 20th century led to economic, social, and political changes that markedly changed public education (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Industrialization led to urbanization, creating large cities and the need for larger schools. School districts were being compared to factories and were thought to need managers to improve operations by focusing on time and management (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Callahan's (1966) second depiction of the role of superintendent was that of organizational manager. This role was the norm from approximately 1900-1930. Like factory managers, the superintendent was expected to increase operational efficiency during this period. During this time, superintendents' primary roles included creating and overseeing the budget, facility management, personnel management, and daily operations (Bjork et al., 2014).

During this second phase, prominent superintendents from larger districts made it known that their work was separate from and more important than teaching (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). This emphasis resulted in top educational scholars joining with political elites to advocate for school administrators to learn scientific management (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). This push

resulted in universities offering courses in school management (Callahan, 1962). While many scholars embraced the transformation, many mayors, city council members, and other political figures feared that allowing superintendents to act as managers would increase the influence and power of this position (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). During this time, superintendents paid little attention to teaching and learning (Callahan, 1962).

The business approach to school leadership was criticized and started to transition after the stock market crash of 1929. Local school districts objected to the decrease in democratic localism, and progressive educators argued that implementing business values into school leadership contradicted democratic values (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). The conceptualization of the superintendent as an organizational manager was marginalized around 1930. However, it was widely accepted that a need for superintendents to engage with operational duties and resources was necessary (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

Superintendent as Democratic Leader

The role of democratic leader, also known as "political statesman," emerged in 1930 after examining superintendents' involvement with local communities, their school boards, and state departments of education (Bjork et al., 2014). This conceptualization of the superintendent as a democratic leader consisted of political realities and philosophical dispositions with ideas that can be traced back to Plato and Alexander Hamilton (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). A superintendent's political success was measured by their ability to win the support and trust of school board members, citizens, parents, and employees of the school while handling the demands of other stakeholders and special interest groups (Howlett, 1993). Meeting the demands of special interest groups was imperative because they often attempted to influence school board

decisions (Bjork et al., 2014). Kowalski (1999), noted that it was important for public school leaders, including superintendents, to practice and model democracy and develop relationships.

By the mid-1950s, the role of democratic leader was declining as people began to argue that the concept was too idealistic and insufficiently attentive to the realities of what was required of a superintendent (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Critics of this role argued that superintendents needed to be more engaged with these concerns in a scholarly manner and to be in tune with academics and instructional practices (Fusarelli, 2008).

Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist

The superintendent as an applied social scientist constituted Callahan's (1966) fourth and final depiction of the role. This role lasted from 1955 to the early 1970s. Researchers argued this was a stage in which economic and political realities required superintendents to comprehend and apply social science principles in school administration (Kowalski, 1999). Prior to the 1950s, school administration had focused on internal operations, but with the introduction of systems theory, it became clear how external legal, political, social, and economic factors affected organizations (Getzels, 1977). As a result, superintendents would have to use research and tacit knowledge to make important decisions regarding the education of children (Callahan, 1966).

With the growing frustrations regarding democratic leadership after World War II, social sciences were quickly gaining popularity (Callahan, 1966). During the 1950s, support from the Kellogg Foundation provided more than $7 million dollars in grants to universities for research of social sciences in school administration (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). This resulted in professors recognizing that future superintendents would be expected to apply scientific inquiry to the problems and decisions that occupied their practice (Kowalski, 2006).

During this stage, resources were dwindling for schools as well as public support for school systems. Superintendents were expected to do more with less, including eliminating programs that were no longer working and to begin using data to drive decisions to enhance educational opportunities for students (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2003). An emphasis on data-driven decisions also contributed to the notion of the superintendent as a social scientist because they were expected to have the knowledge base to research deficiencies and create policies and practices to decrease deficits (Kowalski, 2006). As social scientists, superintendents were expected to apply research-based strategies to problem solving (Manheimer & Manning, 1995).

While the emphasis on social sciences dwindled in the late 1960s, research and theories from this era had already become a part of a superintendent's knowledge base. Superintendents were still expected to have the ability to identify deficiencies and recommend strategies and policies to eliminate shortfalls (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005).

Superintendent as Communicator

The role conceptualizations identified by Callahan helped shape much of the literature about the role of the superintendent. However, Callahan (1966) did not include communicator as a standalone role. Instead, he recognized the role of communicator as a normative behavior integrated into aspects of the other four roles (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). Communication in school administration was treated as a skill and something one was expected to do well when assuming the role. By contrast, Kowalski (2006) thought skills were role-specific and communication should not be seen as a variable skill, but a pervasive role characterization.

The role of superintendent as communicator was added by Kowalski to describe the superintendent role from the mid-1970s to the present day to address America's transition from a manufacturing society to an information-based society (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). The landmark

report, *A Nation at Risk,* was released in 1983, bringing attention to the fact that America's public schools were not performance-driven regarding preparing students to be successful in a global economy. Schools always had the expectation to be efficient institutions, and with the invention of the computer came the expectation that technology would increase efficiencies and decrease deficits. Media comparisons with international institutions reported that America's schools had neither become more efficient nor more productive (Bracey, 2003).

Educational reforms created in the early 1980s, along with America's transition from a manufacturing society, produced the need for superintendents to communicate with a variety of stakeholders and engage them in decision-making processes to enhance the performance of schools in all capacities and to create a vision for the school district (Kowalski, 2006). Historically, school systems had been identified as being closed cultures that promoted employees to work in isolation to protect themselves from interference and distraction from parents and community members (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). With the uprise of reforms and the call for changes within schools, superintendents were expected to lead reform efforts that required collaboration with principals, teachers, parents, students, and community members to create a vision that would address deficiencies within the school district (Bjork et al., 2014). Kowalski (2006) found that the most important role played by a superintendent was to be an effective communicator.

Expectations and Responsibilities of Current Superintendents

Unlike many other countries, the United States does not practice a unified system of education (Bjork et al., 2014). The Tenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives individual states all powers not given to the federal government or prohibited by the Constitution. Public education is distributed to the states under this reserve clause (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2006). As a

result, state legislatures have created statutes, regulations, and policies that steer state-level

boards of education, but a distinctive feature of education in the United States is the idea of local

control of education (Bjork et al., 2014). Local school districts, which are statutory creations of

states, must obey federal and state laws and policies. Still, local school boards have the flexibility

to implement their own policies to reflect individual districts' vision and goals (Bjork et al.,

2014). Policies and expectations differ across states and within states, including the work of

superintendents.

Regardless of the location or size of the school district, job descriptions and expectations

for superintendents are long and exhausting. These include managerial duties, instructional

responsibilities, and analytical tasks (Kowalski, 1999). The school superintendent is the school

system's chief executive officer appointed by and directly responsible for carrying out the vision

of the board of education (Candoli, 1995). The superintendent must oversee the administration of

the entire school system while acting in accordance with the policies, rules, and regulations

established by the board and the laws and regulations of the state and federal government

(Brunner et al., 2002). The accepted role of the superintendent is to be the school district's leader

while being responsible for all that goes on in the system from day-to-day operations to

supporting student achievement and providing professional development for all school

personnel. The superintendent must do so while understanding diversity and meeting the multi-

faceted needs of children (Tienken, 2021).

While various lists and job descriptions outline the role of the superintendents, state and

local flexibility creates variability in expectations. However, Candoli (1991) identified a set of

seven commonly accepted functions of superintendents. These functions include: (a) the

planning function, (b) the delivery function, (c) the evaluation function, (d) the business

management function, (e) the communications function, (f) the instructional support function, and (g) the noninstructional support function. While all superintendents are charged with carrying out functions like those identified by Candoli, the modern superintendent must also embrace the importance of conducting and implementing current research practices into district initiatives (Brunner et al., 2002).

National School Boards Association and American Association of School Administrators

A Nation at Risk, published in 1983, was one of the first educational reforms that accused public schools of failing students and, therefore responsible for the nation's economic decline (Bjork et al., 2014). Other waves of reforms followed including Making the Grade, Action for Excellence, Educating Americans for the 21st Century, and No Child Left Behind. National commissions and task forces were created to examine the condition of the released reports (Hoyle et at., 2005). The reforms called for schools to be held accountable for student test scores and outcomes, increase high school graduation requirements, lengthen the school day and school year, and increase the rigor of teaching licensure requirements (Bjork, 1996). States worked quickly to incorporate strategies and recommendations into legislative initiatives that school districts would have to address in this time of high-stakes accountability (Bjork et al., 2014).

These task force commissions impacted the role of school superintendents. They summarized numerous research-based conclusions about leadership, and reports from the task forces also described major expansions and reconceptualization of superintendents' roles (Hoyle et al., 2005). These findings led to the formation of a joint committee consisting of representatives from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the National School Board Association (NSBA) to identify specific duties that superintendents would need to be responsible for to meet increasing legislative initiatives to address high stakes

accountability (Kowalski, 1999). The generated list was intended to cover all superintendencies; therefore, it was generic. Some of the duties included on the list were to oversee the management of the district's day-to-day operations, ensure the school system provides equal opportunities for all students, keep board members informed about school operations and programs, and propose and institute a process for long-range and strategic planning to ensure the success of the school system. Job descriptions approved at the state and local level may be more specific but often contain broadly worded phrases that deem the superintendent responsible for all phases of the school district's operations (Kowalski, 1999).

In the early nineties, the NSBA and the AASA worked from the list of job responsibilities and created eight professional standards for superintendents that are still used today (Hoyle et at., 2005). The AASA published *Professional Standards for the Superintendency* (2007), a description of standards to guide improvement and professional preparedness for current superintendents and those aspiring to the superintendent role (Hoyle, 1993). The standards that were developed to drive the work of a superintendent included: (a) leadership and district culture, (b) policy and governance, (c) communications and community relations, (d) organizational management, (e) curriculum planning and development, (f) instructional management, (g) human resource management, and (h) values and ethics of leadership (Kowalski, 1999). Today, these standards provide a solid framework that allows individual states to create their own standards for the evaluation of superintendents. Once state standards are addressed, local school boards can narrow duties to meet the needs of individual districts (Hoyle et al., 2005).

North Carolina Standards for Superintendents

Individual states started creating their own standards for superintendents using the framework from AASA and NSBA. The North Carolina State Board of Education approved the North Carolina Standards for Superintendents in December 2007 (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007). These standards, which are still used today, were developed as a guide for superintendents across North Carolina to continually reflect on and improve their effectiveness in the different capacities in which they serve. While many different components influence superintendents' day-to-day duties, these standards can serve as a tool to aid in the improvement of school districts and address growing concerns that surfaced from the numerous reforms (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007).

The North Carolina Standards for Superintendents are aligned with the 2006 work of the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) and its publication *School District Leadership that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement.* The standards are: (a) Strategic Leadership, (b) Instructional Leadership, (c) Cultural Leadership, (d) Human Resource Leadership, (e) Managerial Leadership, (f) External Development Leadership, and (g) Micropolitical Leadership (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Each standard is listed as a broad category of knowledge and skill followed by a summary that fully describes the content and the rationale of the standard that a superintendent needs to encompass. Following the summary is a list of practices. These practices consist of statements that describe actions superintendents should engage in consistently. Lastly, examples of artifacts are provided as ways to collect documentation to support the superintendent's work in each standard (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007).

A list of competencies is provided to illustrate the knowledge and skills superintendents need in order to implement the practices and to successfully meet each standard. It is the responsibility of the superintendent to ensure that these competencies are applied to practices to ensure success and work toward the guiding mission that every public-school student will graduate high school, globally competitive for work and postsecondary education and prepared for life in the 21st Century (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007).

Legal Movements

Title VII

For more than 50 years, federal laws and policies have been implemented to promote equity and to prevent workplace discrimination. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 comprises several sections designed to improve the overall status of marginalized individuals, with the most popular being Title VII (Little, 2016). Title VII was created to establish equity in the workplace by prohibiting discrimination, and it makes it unlawful to discriminate against someone based on race, color, national origin, sex, or religion. It also prohibits an employer from retaliating against someone who has filed a discrimination complaint or participated in a discrimination lawsuit or investigation (Vaas, 1966). Because Title VII applied to all employers, unions, and employment agencies, new opportunities became available for everyone (Little, 2016). With laws and advocates protecting women in the workplace and supporting advancement, more leadership and managerial opportunities for women arose (Catalyst, 2022).

Title IX

Even with the creation of anti-discrimination laws, employees and institutions continuously found loopholes around providing equal opportunities. Women were still being

turned away from advancement but were becoming more vocal about the injustice and demanding equity.

Bernice Sandler, known as the Godmother of Title IX, fought for women's rights in education and the workplace after being denied equal access to full-time teaching positions at the University of Maryland (Alexander, 2018). When describing her experiences with workplace discrimination, Sandler (2007) stated that she had just finished her doctorate and was working part-time at the University of Maryland. There were seven openings in her department, and she was not considered for any of the full-time positions. When Sandler inquired about why she was not considered for the roles, coworkers told her she came on too strong for a woman. At the time, Sandler did not realize that she was the victim of sex discrimination. Instead, she initially blamed herself for being too vocal at staff meetings and when discussing professional issues with colleagues. Later, Sandler pursued legal action after being rejected for another job because she was told she was nothing more than a housewife who returned to school.

Sandler joined the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL), an organization dedicated to battling discrimination through legislative action. She followed the advice of the director of WEAL, Vincent Macaluso. She filed a formal complaint citing discrimination and composed a report that exposed the gender imbalance in the faculty at The University of Maryland. WEAL used this information to file its first class-action complaint against every college receiving federal funding (Miller, 2020).

Edith Green, a United States House of Representatives member and advocate for women's equality, became concerned about the large number of charges against colleges and universities stemming from Sadler's claims. Representative Green introduced a bill and held the first congressional hearings on women's employment in higher education in June 1970 (Sandler,

2007). After two years, the bill became Title IX and amended the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by prohibiting sex discrimination in federally funded institutions. President Richard Nixon signed Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 into law, not knowing the impact that Title IX would have on breaking barriers for women (Miller, 2020).

Just as Title VII is designed to prevent workplace discrimination, Title IX would protect against gender-based discrimination in schools. To comply with Title IX, educational institutions must operate their educational programs or activities without discrimination based on sex, including sexual orientation and gender identity. Title IX applies to schools, local and state educational agencies, and other institutions that receive federal financial assistance. These recipients include approximately 17,600 local school districts, over 5,000 postsecondary institutions, charter schools, for-profit schools, libraries, and museums (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Bernice Sandler's actions, along with other feminist movements, resulted in advances in career equality for women and continue to break down discrimination barriers using Title IX. Not only did Title IX make age-old practices illegal, but it also changed how young women viewed their future. Previously, women were restricted to menial careers, but Title IX awarded women the confidence to control their fate, as now federally funded institutions are mandated to treat them equally (Miller, 2020).

Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins

Regardless of the movements and laws established to create career equality for women, many employers were still preventing women from obtaining leadership roles based on sex. *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins* (1989), a pivotal US Supreme Court case related to gender equity, continued to illuminate this issue.

Ann Hopkins was an employee of the financial company Price Waterhouse. During her employment, she secured a $25 million dollar government contract and was viewed as a valued employee. As a result of her success, Hopkins proposed a partnership. The board decided to put her partnership on hold for a year. When Hopkins met with her supervisor and asked why she was denied and what she needed to do to ensure the partnership was granted the following year, he advised her to act more feminine and to wear makeup and jewelry (*Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, 1989).

The next year, Hopkins submitted her proposal for partnership again but was refused. Following the refusal, Hopkins sued under Title VII for sex discrimination. The district and federal courts ruled in favor of Hopkins despite noting that Hopkins' poor interpersonal skills and inability to get along with the office staff also prevented the partnership (*Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, 1989). This action meant that the sex-based discrimination experienced by Hopkins was illegal even if other work-related factors were a part of the employer's decision. Even though employers continued to discriminate based on sex, women were taking a stand and holding employers accountable for their actions to support the advancement of women in leadership roles.

Women in the Superintendency

The History of Women in Education

During the colonial era, the growth in population combined with some states passing laws requiring parents to ensure their children received an education increased the demand for schooling. The quick expansion required a pool of qualified schoolmasters, but teachers were not readily available. Initially, men took on these duties. Communities refrained from hiring women

for school teaching duties because they were viewed as less intelligent than men and were seen as housewives with minimal education (Blunt, 1998).

A surge in women's opportunities for formal education occurred from 1790 to 1850 as the demands for education continued to increase. During those years, institutions began offering young women studies that would prepare them to become teachers. Women who took advantage of the formal studies began teaching their children and would offer instruction to neighboring children as well, also referred to as dame schools. As a result, single and married women began to work as teachers by the early nineteenth century (Blunt, 1998). Simultaneously, growth in industry and business from 1820-1830 generated a variety of jobs for men. With men having other career opportunities, more teaching opportunities opened for women. In addition, a surge in immigration resulted in the need for more teachers. Consequently, the number of women teachers grew throughout the nineteenth century. However, administrative positions were awarded to men (Shakeshaft et al., 1991).

With the turn of the twentieth century, women became more visible in administrative roles. Shakeshaft et al. (1991) refer to the period from 1900-1930 as the "golden age" for women in administration. The first woman superintendent, Ella Flagg Young, was hired in Chicago during this time. Young was appointed superintendent in 1909 after serving in many different capacities with the district ranging from teacher to principal (Webb & McCarthy, 1998). Young had devoted her life to teaching and the improvement of public schools. Her goals as superintendent included improving teacher training, recognizing teaching as a profession, broadening teacher responsibility, and improving students' quality of education. Blunt (1998) described Young as very vocal in supporting democracy in education. However, her concerns about a spelling book that she thought was inadequate and too expensive led to a conflict with

the board, ultimately resulting in her resignation in 1913. The controversy was eventually

resolved, and she was reinstated as superintendent. She retired two years later, citing constant

struggles with the board (Webb & McCarthy, 1998).

As Young was trying to blaze a trail for women in administrative roles, women

represented 9% of all superintendents in the United States by 1920 (Blunt, 1998). However, the

onset of the Great Depression in 1930 and men returning from World War II combined to

significantly decrease the number of women in advanced leadership roles. Specifically, only

1.3% of all superintendent positions were held by women after World War II (Knezevich, 1971).

As men returned from war, many were granted training and administrative jobs in education as

compensation for their commitment during the war (Shakeshaft et al., 1991).

The presence of women in educational leadership roles continued to dwindle with the

panic created by the onset of the cold war. Americans were concerned with students' learning

capability and preparation for a possible war. Men dominating representation in leadership roles

would continue to increase throughout the years, causing a disproportion even as the presence of

women teachers continued to increase (Shakeshaft et al., 1991). While the representation of

women superintendents climbed to 7% in the 1990s, it remained lower than the percentages

experienced decades before (Glass, 1992).

Even though significant advances have been made and women hold more administrative

positions than in the past, they are still underrepresented when compared to the number of

women teachers. In 2011-2012, women comprised 90% of all elementary teachers, but only 66%

of elementary principals were women. The gap is more drastic at the secondary level, with

women making up 63% of the teachers while only representing 48% of secondary principals

(Maranto et al., 2017).

While representation of women in all areas of educational administration continues to grow, certain positions continue to be dominated by men and the gap continues to widen in more advanced leadership positions. These positions include high school principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent (Hodgkinson & Montenergo, 1999). Further studies show that 13.2% of superintendents in 2000 were women; by 2003, that number had increased to 18.2% (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). The latest research by AASA reports that 26.7% of U.S. superintendents in 2020 were women (Gordon, 2020). While this percentage has continued to increase, women are considerably underrepresented since over half of all students enrolled in educational leadership programs are women (Glass et al., 2000). In addition, women comprised 76% of the teachers in the United States and 71% of North Carolina's teachers in 2020. (Gordon, 2020). While women dominate teaching, their presence remains scarce in other leadership roles.

Barriers Encountered While Ascending to the Role of Superintendent

As previously stated, women have a strong presence in education. The gap that exists between women as teachers and women as superintendents can be explained by barriers researchers have discovered that women encounter while ascending to the role of superintendent. Identifying these barriers is the first step in creating strategies to increase the number of women in leadership roles (Connell et al., 2015). Shakeshaft (1989) argued that the barriers women faced while ascending to the superintendency could be classified as internal or external.

Internal barriers that prevent women from becoming superintendents include women having low self-image, lack of confidence, or lack of motivation and aspiration. Women display low self-efficacy and often question their capacity to do the job of superintendent (Gresham & Sampson, 2019). Usually, women have more experience with curriculum and instruction than finance and management, leading to them questioning their ability to lead school districts

(Sampson et al., 2015). Dobie & Hummel (2006) stated that women often question their competency since they are already referred to as women superintendents rather than simply superintendents. These findings were echoed by earlier studies that identify women as being their own biggest barrier in keeping them from advanced leadership roles (Clark & Johnson, 2017). However, feelings of leadership inferiority created in women are most likely a result of the gender inequities that have existed in the workforce for centuries (Gross & Trask, 1976).

More often, literature turns up an array of external barriers. Previous research suggests that women superintendents face several external barriers leading to the superintendency and while serving in the role (Glass, 2000). Research consistently identified external barriers that can be condensed into the following categories: (a) personal relationships, (b) women being poorly positioned for the job, (c) women not being seen as financial managers, and (d) gender bias (Connell et al., 2015; Glass, 2000).

Family obligations and duties often prevent women from applying for the superintendent position. Women often find it difficult to find an appropriate balance between work and home (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Women tend to feel the need to provide consistency and comfort for their families, often leading to an unwillingness to relocate for a superintendent position (Connell et al., 2015). Women find it difficult to uproot their families to serve in a district outside of their current location (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). In addition, women are often expected to follow men if they move from position to position, but it is not the same for a woman. It is commonly viewed as the woman's job to keep the family together, leading them to often turn down promotions and superintendencies (Lemasters & Roach, 2012).

Burke and Karambayya (2004) also described some of the family hurdles women face that act as barriers. They stated that day-to-day home and family responsibilities often become a

second job as women are often the primary caregiver for children and act as the household manager. The exhaustive and demanding lifestyle pace of being a housewife contributes to many women not having the time or energy to pursue superintendent positions (Burke & Karambayya, 2004).

Another common barrier to women ascending to the superintendency is that women are often poorly positioned in education jobs. The pathway to the superintendency is important for advancement, and women are often not in career paths in education that traditionally lead to the superintendency (Glass, 2000). Specifically, women comprise the bulk of the workforce in elementary schools, yet previous experience in high schools is more associated with serving as superintendent. For example, Gordon (2020) reported that approximately 75% of elementary classroom teachers were women. However, Gordon (2020) also indicated that nearly 75% of all superintendents did not teach elementary grades prior to being a district office employee or superintendent. Additionally, most superintendents previously worked as secondary principals while most women worked as elementary school principals. However, the path to the superintendency generally begins at the secondary level (Wiggens & Coggins, 1986).

Glass (2000) found that another barrier women face is a gender-based stereotype in which they are often not seen as strong financial managers. This stereotype is particularly damaging because being able to manage finances is seen as an important duty of the superintendent and boards of education place a high degree of emphasis on budget and financial qualifications when seeking candidates for the position. Therefore, this perception of a lack of financial management ability can lead to school boards not viewing women as strong managers. While women tend to have experience in the central office in the area of curriculum, limited experience in fiscal management is not desirable for many boards (Glass, 2000). Despite having

leadership experience, credentials, and advanced degrees, the lack of financial experience can be a barrier (Glass, 2000).

Even though efforts have been made through the years to eliminate discrimination and norming of gender roles, gender bias is also a common barrier experienced by women ascending to the superintendency. Women are often disadvantaged when applying for superintendent roles because of their gender (Siegel, 1999). In a study completed by Connell et al. (2015), women reported experiencing gender bias in either blatant or concealed acts from entities involved in the recruiting and hiring of superintendents. Similarly, Shakeshaft (1989) reported that school boards tend to select men over women applicants, even though women are typically stronger in curriculum and instruction. Gender has become a barrier for women ascending the superintendent position even as relevant factors such as experience, references, and credentials have not influenced school boards' decisions (Siegel, 1999). While gender bias is still seen as a barrier, more recent research suggests that in the past decade, gender bias has been more subtle (Connell et al., 2015). Ironically, research suggests that actually serving as a successful woman superintendent is less taxing than securing the role (Harris, 2007).

Similar to gender bias is the glass ceiling barrier. The term glass ceiling was introduced in 1986 in the *Wall Street Journal.* The metaphor describes invisible barriers that keep women from obtaining top-level management positions (Weyer, 2007). The U.S. Department of Labor (1991) recognizes the existence of the glass barrier and agrees that there are artificial barriers based on attitude and organizational bias that prevents qualified women from advancing into leadership roles. Glass (2000) found that stereotypes related to societal barriers create an invisible ceiling that prevents women from leadership roles. This is explained by women being associated with domestic duties while men are linked to the workplace (Coleman, 2005).

Similarly, a common barrier associated with the glass ceiling is the lack of recruitment of women for leadership roles by organizations. Most companies recruit within the organization. Therefore, they are not actively recruiting women to add to their pool of qualified candidates to interview and select for leadership roles (Johns, 2013). If women overcome the recruitment barrier, they are often victims of climate barriers, such as differing gender communication styles, behaviors, and ways of socializing (Johns, 2013). Other barriers linked to the glass ceiling are a lack of mentoring, different duty expectations for women, and poor networking opportunities for women (Johns, 2013).

Supports Encountered While Ascending to the Role of Superintendent

While the literature identifies barriers that stop or hinder the process of women becoming superintendents, there are also supports that women encounter while ascending to the role of superintendent. These supports are commonly found as interpersonal supports, professional organizations, and personal empowerment. These are described in the remainder of this section.

Family and friends are cited as being a support to women aspiring the superintendency. In many instances, friends not linked to the education field helped support the journey through active listening. Despite not understanding of specific details related to education, friends and family members have been able to be a companion and support when aspiring women superintendents felt isolated (Reed & Patterson, 2007).

Women superintendents also reported receiving assistance from professional organizations while ascending to the superintendency. For example, professional organizations often provided professional development to aspiring women superintendents to assist with capturing the full picture of what it was like to be a superintendent. These organizations were also described as being especially helpful with the interview process. Through attending

professional development opportunities, many potential women candidates became acquainted with mentors who continued to help them once the workshop concluded. These mentors acted as coaches to assist with the hiring process (Sharp et al., 2004).

Self-empowerment is a support noted by women aspiring to become superintendents. Women empower themselves by intentionally choosing to oversee their own destiny. As women create the confidence needed to apply for a superintendent role, they must nurture and embrace the confidence to put themselves forward and believe that they can make a positive change (Clark & Johnson, 2017). This self-empowerment is aided by verbal encouragement from others. For example, people in established advanced leadership roles will often encourage or suggest to a woman colleague to move forward with the superintendent process. By the person believing in them and pushing them forward, women capture the self-empowerment support needed to ascend the superintendency (Clark & Johnson, 2017).

Barriers Encountered While in the Role of Superintendent

The literature suggests that women who obtain the superintendent role are met with barriers that interfere with their assigned duties. These barriers often included being dismissed during professional communication. They also experienced challenges related to norms about gender roles and organizational power.

Brunner (2000b) found that women superintendents are commonly met with silence. Women superintendents reported that board members did not always listen to them while presenting information or engage with them in open discussions. These women often felt that the board members had already decided on an issue before it was presented. Aside from the board, research also supports that when women superintendents are in meetings, male colleagues dominate the conversation and often interrupt women as they attempt to speak (Brunner, 2000b).

Norms surrounding organizational power also create a barrier and a conundrum for women superintendents. This power dynamic is particularly notable because the superintendent is regarded as the most powerful position in the school system (Sharpe et al., 2004). Yet, women are not viewed as the gender with power nor is the demonstration of power seen as a positive characteristic for a woman (Brunner, 2000b). This dynamic is heightened by the fact that most women talk about power as a collaborative, inclusive, consensus-building model standing equal with others rather than from a position of authority over others. While women leaders view their practice of downplaying their authority as an act of treating others with respect, doing so can be misinterpreted as a sign of weakness and a low self-confidence (Tannen, 1994). Similarly, Statham (1987) also found that most women did not claim their leadership style as authoritarian. While this non-authoritarian style made women superintendents more nurturing, being unable to find a balance resulted in some stakeholders not taking them seriously or viewing them as incompetent leaders (Brunner, 2000b).

Supports Encountered While in the Role of Superintendent

Literature discussing supports that women superintendents experience is limited. The few existing studies reinforce that colleagues and mentors are the most influential supports available to women superintendents. Mentors provide support to assist with facing adversity and act as a sounding board for ideas (Reed & Patterson, 2007). In some cases, mentors to women superintendents have been assigned by the school board, and some sought them out on their own. In most cases, mentors were current, seated superintendents in neighboring districts, retired superintendents, and board attorneys (Reed & Patterson, 2007). Mentors have been able to give sound advice to ensure success and longevity. The most common advice was not to make changes to the district as soon as they started the role and to practice self-reflection (Sampson &

Austin, 2018). Clark and Johnson (2017) reported that women who received helpful mentoring when they first became superintendents feel it is crucial to pay it forward by empowering more women to become superintendents and by acting as mentors.

Formal mentoring programs and leadership academies have been found to assist women in building their social networks, social skills, and leadership skills that are crucial while serving in leadership roles. University and private entities host high-profile programs to enhance leadership skills. Women are more likely to apply for these programs that specialize in academic leadership and mentoring (Smiley et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Standpoint Theory

The Feminist Standpoint Theory is used to frame this study and view the topic of barriers and supports encountered by women superintendents more acutely. As such, the core concepts and research that guide this study are based on a feminist perspective. This feminist ideology will serve as a lens through which the study is shaped, and data are analyzed.

Feminist Standpoint Theory was introduced in the 1980s as a critical theory to explore relationships between the production of knowledge and practices of power (Harding, 2004). Feminist Standpoint Theory was designed to empower oppressed groups while valuing their experiences. The theory insists that feminist concerns not be restricted to only social and political issues, and more importantly, feminist issues cannot be ignored (Wallace, 2015). The focus of this theory is to distinguish the cultural values of women, explore the power dynamic related to the servitude of women and girls, and bring attention to activities and behaviors that are assigned to women (Wood, 2009). According to the Feminist Standpoint Theory, men and women inherit

different rights which allow them to live structurally and systematically different lives (Wood, 2009).

Feminist Standpoint Theory was selected as a framework for this study because the power imbalances it explores relate to today's superintendency. Just as Feminist Standpoint Theory highlights disparate, gender-based rights, data about women in the superintendency reveal inequitable, gender-based opportunities for district-level leadership. This disparate outcome is illuminated by the overwhelming presence of women in the lower levels of school district hierarchies and the preponderance of men at the highest levels.

Gatekeeper Theory

The Gatekeeper Theory is also a fundamental part of this research. This theory investigates how school boards and other entities act as gates that keep females from securing superintendent positions. The Gatekeeper Theory was developed by Kurt Lewin from a study he completed using field theory, group dynamics, and the way people act as influenced by their organization (Roberts, 2005). Lewin started his investigation by looking at why people eat the foods they eat and rationalized that people eat the foods that are available to them as determined by the person who prepares the meals. Commonly, he found that housewives made those decisions and were, therefore, the gatekeepers of food choices for their households (Roberts, 2005).

Comparably, in the search for a superintendent, school board members, search committees, and other influential people act as gatekeepers. These gatekeepers can also include highly respected retired administrators, interest groups, and community advocates. They shape the outcome by controlling the methods of the selection and interview process. Gender-based

inequities arise as the pathway of the woman leader is often blocked by gatekeepers that men do not encounter (Connell et al., 2015).

The *good ole boys club* acts as a gatekeeper in many instances because women are not usually associated with this networking opportunity. The term is described as a cultural norm in which males help other males to obtain higher-level positions while preventing women from entering identical positions (DiCanio et al., 2016). The participants in the good ole boys circle often recommend one of their own to hold superintendent and upper leadership roles (Connell et al., 2015). This practice of sex discrimination results from networking and connections that benefit men but not women (Derrington & Sharatt, 2009).

Summary

This literature review has analyzed existing literature about the historical background of superintendents, the duties of superintendents, and legal movements that paved the way for more gender equity in the workplace. Research has been discussed to shed light on the barriers that have impeded women ascending the superintendent role as well as supports that are in place to promote the advancement of women into superintendent roles. Barriers and supports women encountered while in the position were also discussed. This chapter also describes the overarching theoretical framework for this study. Specifically, an overview of the gatekeeper and glass ceiling effect is included. The following chapter describes the methodology involved with the research to explore barriers and supports women face while ascending to the superintendency and while serving in the role.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

While the number of women in educational leadership positions has increasingly grown over the last few decades, there still are discrepancies between the number of women in education and the number of women represented in educational leadership roles, specifically the superintendency (Gordon, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative study was to identify barriers and supports faced by women school district superintendents. In addition to adding to the existing literature, knowledge gained from examining the barriers and supports women superintendents encounter will bring awareness to providing equal access to women seeking leadership roles and the supports available to guide the process (Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009). Understanding these barriers and supports will better enable aspiring women to become superintendents and thrive in the role. The methodology for identifying barriers and the supports faced by women school district superintendents is outlined in the following sections.

Research Design

Qualitative research is broadly defined as research that uses interpretative research methods as a set of tools to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in contextualized ways that reflect how people make meaning of and interpret their own experiences, themselves, each other, and the social world (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Qualitative research begins with an interest, problem, or question that seeks to cover an array of interpretative techniques that seek to describe, decode, translate, and come to terms with phenomena in the social world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This study was a basic qualitative interpretative study. Qualitative research is designed and utilized by researchers to better understand how participants: (a) interact with their experiences, (b) construct the world around them, and (c) attribute meaning to those experiences

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that the most common type of qualitative research includes generic or basic interpretive qualitative studies which are often used to better understand how participants interact with their experiences and then construct meaning around those experiences. When applied to this study, basic interpretive qualitative research allowed the women superintendents participating in the research study to express how they interact with their experiences, construct the world around them, and attribute meaning to those experiences as related to their perceptions of supports and barriers they have encountered.

Research Questions

Well-chosen research questions are vital to the success of qualitative research and are the center of the research design. Qualitative research questions often evolve over the course of the study, but it is imperative that these questions are specific to the context and focus on individuals' perspectives and experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This study focused on the phenomenon of women dominating teaching roles and other entry-level positions in education yet having a disparate presence in the role of superintendent.

Four research questions guided the design and implementation of this qualitative, exploratory study of experiences that women superintendents encountered. These research questions included:

1. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that obstructed their advancement into the role of superintendent?

2. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that supported their advancement into the role of superintendent?

3. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that inhibit their success while in the role of superintendent?

4. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that support their success while the role of superintendent?

Setting

The setting for this study was the state of North Carolina. The researcher included participants from numerous educational regions within the state. However, specific regions were not identified to protect the identity of the participants.

North Carolina was selected as the research site for several reasons. First, North Carolina currently employs an appropriate number of women superintendents needed for this study. Second, the women superintendents selected for this study represented North Carolina school districts of varying sizes. The school district sizes that were represented serve between approximately 1,500 to 25,000 students. Having women superintendents from different size districts will showcase different perspectives. In addition to size, the selected participants in North Carolina represented different ethnicities. It was important to capture all aspects of barriers and supports faced. Therefore, it was important to select a setting that can provide participants representing various ethnic groups. Additionally, North Carolina was selected because of the researcher's established connections with potential participants. As a practicing district administrator, the researcher had professional relationships with women superintendents that increased the likelihood of participation. Additionally, participants may have been more forthright in their answers because they already have a trusting relationship with the researcher. This trust added validity to the study. Lastly, North Carolina was selected for the setting because

of its convenience. All the districts that were selected are within driving distance for the researcher, enabling face-to-face interviews at sites that were convenient to participants.

Participants

Ravitch & Carl (2021) stated that it is important for the researcher to carefully consider the participants that are included in the study. Selection of the participant group requires the researcher to have a clear understanding of the goals, research questions, and context of the study. Ravitch & Carl (2021) also recommend several factors to consider when determining which participants to select. First, the researcher needs to consider the reasons and purposes for the inclusion of specific participants. Second, the researcher needs to ensure that participants are particularly knowledgeable about what the researcher is seeking to gain from the study. Third, the researcher must consider the specific experiences, roles, perspectives, and occupations that the researcher sought to explore.

The proposed study involved four practicing women superintendents and one retired woman superintendent. The retired participant had served in the superintendent capacity within the last ten years. This number of participants was selected because it represents an appropriate percentage of the practicing women superintendents in North Carolina and did not exceed the resources or time available to the researcher. Participants were selected from different geographic locations, educational backgrounds, and racial groups to broaden the experiences documented. All participants served in the superintendent position for at least two years or longer. To add to the validity of the study, four of the participants received multiple contracts from the seated board. This action displayed the confidence that the board had in their ability to lead the district. The participants were adults who were given the option to participate or not. All

participants remained anonymous and only generalized descriptors were used to help categorize the data.

After approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher sought assistance from her current superintendent to secure participation. The researcher asked him to contact women superintendent colleagues that he knew through professional encounters. Seven women superintendents were identified and contacted. In a casual, introductory email (Appendix A), he introduced the researcher and stated the purpose of the study. The introductory email was used to gain the trust of the participants and gauge interest. Based on the responses from the introductory email, the researcher contacted the potential participants to begin the study.

Purposeful sampling was used in this study. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to purposefully choose who participated in the research. The participants may be selected because they have had a certain experience, have knowledge of a certain phenomenon, reside in a specific location, or for other reasons (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to select women superintendents that assisted with getting the information needed to answer the research questions. Once the women superintendents responded to the superintendent's introductory email and expressed interest in the study, the researcher sent a strategic recruitment email (Appendix B) to four participants from that list that offered a variety of experiences to the study. The researcher also sent the strategic recruitment email to one retired superintendent. The recruitment email to the participants also contained the Interview Protocol (Appendix D) and the Informed Consent to Participate in a Study (Appendix E). These forms included information about the structure, procedures, and interview questions for the participants to review. The form also reiterated the study's confidentiality and the right for the participant to stop at any time.

The sample size is not the most important component of qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Roberts & Hyatt (2019) state the importance of quality over quantity in terms of the researcher being able to seek out participants that can offer deep, thoughtful answers to research questions based on lived experiences and perception. The researcher in this study was looking for participants that represented different size school districts, different ethnic groups, and different years of experience that offered a variety of experiences based on their lived experiences.

Data Collection

Interviews are at the center of many qualitative studies because they provide deep, rich, individualized, and contextualized data that enhance the research. Interviews also allow the researcher to gain insight into the individuals' lived experiences, understand how the participants make sense of and are related to the phenomenon, and explore how the individuals' experiences and perspectives relate to other study participants on similar topics (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Weiss (1994) highlighted six key reasons that interviews should be the major data source for qualitative research. Weiss argued that interviews allow the researcher to (a) develop full detailed descriptions of experiences and perspectives, (b) understand and integrate multiple individual perspectives, (c) describe processes and experiences in depth, (d) develop holistic descriptions of perspectives, realities, experiences, and phenomena, (e) learn how participants interpret events and experiences, and (f) bridge connections between researcher and participant. Interviews in qualitative research also assist researchers with understanding the world from participants' points of view, thereby enabling the researcher to establish common themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

While interviews are viewed by many experts to be the center of qualitative research, the researcher is also seen as a crucial instrument in data collection. Ravitch & Carl (2021) explained that the researcher's positionality and social identity are imperative to understanding each stage of the research process. The researcher must understand their role and identity in relation to the context and setting of the research. This understanding will help the researcher to form a relationship with the participants, in return gaining more authentic responses (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Data in this study was collected through interviews by the researcher.

The data for this study was gathered over one month in the spring of 2023. The format for collecting data was semi-structured, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with participants. A semi-structured interview was used as the instrument because it allowed the researcher to organize and guide the interview but also included appropriate follow-up questions throughout the interview. Follow-up questions allow the researcher to dig deeper into responses and add depth to experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The interview process began once the participant responded to the recruitment email (Appendix B) from the researcher that introduced themselves, discussed the purpose of the study, and explained the collection process. Once the researcher received confirmation that they would like to participate in the study, a post-recruitment, pre-interview email (Appendix C) was sent thanking the participant. It explained the next steps which included setting up the date, time, and location, and informing the participant of the demographic survey that will be sent prior to the interview. The researcher again attached a copy of the Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study form (Appendix E) for the participant to review. After the post-recruitment email was sent, the researcher worked individually with participants to establish a time, date, and location for the face-to-face interview that lasted approximately 45 minutes. The researcher

traveled to a location that was convenient to the participants to make them feel more comfortable in a familiar setting. After the initial introductions and protocols were communicated, the researcher provided a paper copy of the Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study Form to the participants for them to sign (Appendix E). The participants had already reviewed the contents of the form because the researcher attached it to previous emails.

Approximately one week prior to their interview, the researcher emailed participants a 5-item demographic questionnaire (Appendix F). This questionnaire helped the researcher gather specific background information about the participants' professional experiences. These questions also helped establish a relationship between the participants and the researcher because it allowed the researcher to be more personable.

The researcher used a semi-structured interview tool that consisted of open-ended questions that aligned with the research questions. Using a primarily open-ended interview allows participants to reflect and respond in their own words, building trustworthiness as the researcher is not dictating or interpreting those responses based on possible bias (Taylor-Powell, 1998). The interview questions were grouped into four categories based on and aligned with existing research questions: (a) warm-up/introduction, (b) process related to the superintendency, (c) barriers encountered, and (d) supports encountered. The purpose of the categories was to gain greater clarity and insight into the participants' journey to the superintendency and to organize the supports and barriers they encountered when ascending to the superintendency as well as when they are active in the role. The first category served as an introduction that provided background information and established trust. The remaining categories aligned directly with the research questions that were previously stated. The purpose of the questions selected was for the researcher to be able to explore supports and barriers that women superintendents encounter.

After asking each question, the researcher must demonstrate the necessary interview skills of listening, showing interest, and demonstrating respect for what the participant says (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

In addition, the researcher audio recorded the interviews and took notes as each question was answered. Taking notes allowed the researcher to generate and ask follow-up questions to probe for a more in-depth response. The semi-structured process was beneficial to the researcher in this study because it allowed for the development of relational and conversational comfort with participants as well as the ability to ask follow-up questions or provide clarification opportunities as necessary. From the semi-structured process, the researcher hoped that this study would uncover new themes and ideas to support the study. At the end of the interview, the researcher shared the main points captured, asked the participant if the points captured were accurate, see if there were additional comments, and thanked them for their time and input to this research study. The researcher then explained to the participants that the interviews would be transcribed by the researcher and coded manually to look for emergent themes.

Approximately one week after the face-to-face interview, the researcher emailed a Google Form with additional follow-up questions to each participant. These Interview Follow-Up Prompts (Appendix G) allowed participants to add to their answers after having time to process the interview. These prompts also added to the study's validity because the researcher was trying to collect as much data as possible to examine the supports and barriers women superintendents face. In addition, giving the participants a chance to provide a written response was helpful to participants that could not fully articulate an answer during the in-person interview.

To assist with determining the appropriateness of questions and the fidelity of the study, a pilot interview was completed with one individual that met the criteria for the study but was not selected to participate. Piloting will help the researcher practice interviewing skills and gauge appropriate interactions with participants after questions are asked (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Sampson (2004) communicated that piloting is a key aspect central to the design and refinement of any research instrument. The use of a piloted interview also helped the researcher in terms of vetting the protocol. Vetting includes sharing multiple drafts of the data collection instrument with others who are aware of the process and then giving appropriate feedback (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This vetting process and the exchange of multiple drafts were shared with the dissertation chair and peers to help refine the process prior to the interviews.

After the pilot interview was conducted and consultation with the department chair occurred to discuss progress and the quality of the questions it was determined that the questions were appropriate, and no modifications needed to be made to the interview process or wording of questions.

Data Analysis

Participants were made aware that the information shared would be used for a study being conducted by the interviewer prior to starting the interviews. To ensure the quality of the data analysis, the interviewer personally conducted, recorded, and listened to each interview in its entirety after completion. A qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses was then conducted. Specifically, the researcher used manual coding to assign meaning to the data while seeking emerging themes and patterns found in the participants' words (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Rossi et al. (2019) claimed that the analysis of qualitative data can be more systematic while looking for occurrences of key words and themes.

The researcher manually transcribed each interview using the recording and notes. To assist with trustworthiness, the researcher made any necessary changes to the transcripts once the participants had the opportunity to review them utilizing the Member Checking Protocol (Appendix H). Once the researcher finalized the transcriptions, data analysis procedures began with precoding or initial coding. Precoding is a process of reading, questioning, and engaging with data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Precoding involves the researcher reading through the transcripts multiple times to ensure no words have been overlooked and to familiarize themselves with the data so that preliminary codes can be developed (Roberts & Hyatt, 2018). The researcher did this process manually. This process included circling, highlighting, and underlining key words that stuck out in the transcript. The researcher looked for as many words as possible that aligned with the research questions and generated a list of words that resonated with the research questions. The researcher made tallies of how many times each word or phrase was stated, so the researcher could start to see patterns develop. Ravitch & Carl (2021) made it clear that precoding is a crucial analytical step that must occur before continuing the data analysis to identify themes.

After precoding was complete, the researcher started reducing data and developing codes which are known as open codes. Open codes are tags or labels that researchers use to organize data into manageable units (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this study, descriptive, open coding was performed manually. Descriptive coding is the development of codes that seek to classify or name a particular phenomenon being studied and arranging the data extracted into expressions, phrases, or words. The open codes were created manually by placing the raw words that are associated with each other together in words or short phrases. The open codes created began to establish patterns and the researcher was able to see relationships.

Axial codes, also called categories, were created after the open codes were established. Creating axial codes is the process of going from coding chunks of data to seeing how the data comes together (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The researcher continued to reduce the data manually into abstract and conceptual concepts that assisted in identifying patterns. The axial codes were created by studying the open codes and determining how the words are related. Once the researcher identified a relationship among the open codes, an axial code was created. The axial codes acted as an umbrella for the open codes, meaning each open code was then placed under the appropriate axial code. There were a few outliers that did not fit into the assigned axial codes.

Lastly, themes, also called selective codes, emerged. The researcher created themes in the following constructs. First, the theme may be an elevated axial code that speaks to the research question, or it is a newly formed pattern seen in previous levels (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As the researcher worked to create themes, it is important to make sure the codes make sense and are related to the theme. In addition, the raw words need to relate to the theme. Once the researcher developed a common theme from the interviews, an explanation of the emerging theme was provided.

The researcher constructed an Excel spreadsheet that housed the precoding, codes/open codes, axial codes, and themes. This spreadsheet allowed the researcher to add and delete words as needed while adding color to columns to assist with the progression of deducing data into themes. This spreadsheet allowed for easy sorting the manipulation of the data for the researcher. The researcher transcribed everything manually by listening to the audio recordings numerous times. The researcher did not use audio transcription software.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness involves carrying out the study in a manner that enhances the credibility of findings while the researcher establishes that their work is worthy of attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln & Guba (1985) state that trustworthiness involves the following components: (a) credibility, (b) dependability, (c) confirmability, and (d) transferability. Through these components, the researcher can establish trustworthiness and maintain quality in qualitative interpretative studies.

The researcher followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) interpretation of trustworthiness throughout the study and implemented the following strategies to ensure the overall trustworthiness of data collection and analysis. First, a subjectivity statement is included later in this chapter to acknowledge and be transparent about potential researcher bias. The researcher also worked to minimize bias because the words used in the analysis were the words of the participants. All efforts were made by the researcher to limit bias.

Next, the researcher had a predetermined list of semi-structured interview questions during the formal one-on-one, face-to-face interviews. This organization of the questions facilitated a more personable conversation. Semi-structured interviews also ensure the consistency of asking the same questions but allow for deeper probing that can result in a more personable conversation (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

To further promote trustworthiness, the researcher provided participants with the option to complete a Member Checking Protocol (Appendix H). This process allowed participants to review the transcript, make changes, and offer feedback. Allowing participants the opportunity to engage with the interview transcripts and offer feedback created participant validation (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). All participants were provided with a Member Checking Protocol (Appendix H)

approximately one month after the completion of their interviews and were given the opportunity to provide additional feedback and insight on emerging themes.

Finally, the researcher used peer debriefing to assist with the design, implementation, and analysis of data. The peer debriefing guidance was provided by the dissertation committee and other experienced researchers through formal and informal conversations to better understand the dissertation process and research methods that will be utilized.

Ethical Considerations

Ravitch and Carl (2021) discuss the importance of ethical considerations within the study, noting that qualitative researchers must be sensitive to protecting their participants. With that directive in mind, this study posed minimal risks for participants. The intent of the study, time commitment, voluntary nature of participation, and ability to withdraw at any time was explained in writing to the potential participants during the recruitment process. No penalties were applied if a participant elected to withdraw from the study. Though participants shared personal thoughts and experiences, interview questions centered on barriers and supports of superintendents did not ask anything sensitive in nature. Additionally, the only person that had access to the data produced from the interviews and analysis was the researcher. While the data does not contain sensitive information, all responses were kept confidential. Prior to sharing the findings, the names of all people and places in the study have been replaced with pseudonyms. In addition, this study was in full compliance with the ethical and professional guidelines established by UNC Charlotte and was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

Subjectivity Statement

I am a White middle-class woman who grew up in a working-class family. My parents' expectation was for my brother and me to attend school and do our best. Both of my parents

were active and supportive of school activities and were involved in extracurricular events, but they never pushed us to be overachievers. My parents were both hard working and graduated from a technical school with a trade. Their message to us growing up was more centered on learning a skill that could be taken to the workforce rather than attending a university. Despite this context, I decided to pursue higher education.

I earned a bachelor's degree in Middle Grades Education from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I went on to teach various middle school grades and subjects for the next few years. I loved teaching, especially building relationships with students and helping other teachers. This positive experience inspired me to get my master's degree in Educational Leadership from Wingate University. After ten years in the classroom, I transitioned into school administration where I would spend the next six years serving in three different schools covering ages kindergarten through twelfth grade. As a building principal, I enjoyed helping other principals. I did not consider myself a veteran principal, but I was an approachable person that loved to help administrators find ways to enhance instruction to increase student engagement and achievement. After serving as a principal, I transitioned to the Director of Career and Technical Education (CTE) and Secondary Schools. This position allowed me to provide instructional coaching to teachers and principals. In addition, I made sure that high school CTE teachers were preparing students with a skill set that can be utilized following graduation. The skills students learn in CTE classes help prepare them for specific careers or for college classes if they opt to further their education.

Currently, I am employed as the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources in a small, rural school district in North Carolina. In this position, I offer support to parents, students,

teachers, and principals. This job allows me to go into schools and provide instructional coaching to principals, monitor observations, and oversee the management of personnel matters.

My childhood influenced this study because I did not want to settle for just learning a trade and entering the workforce. I wanted to find a career that would involve helping as many people as possible. As my love for teaching and leadership grew, I began to aspire to become a superintendent. Therefore, I enrolled in a doctoral program and intend to make my goal of becoming a superintendent a reality.

As I have advanced through different positions in education, it has always puzzled me as to why there is a lack of women in leadership roles. The disproportion has made me interested in the barriers and supports that women superintendents encounter. Thus, the purpose of this study. I am including this section about my background to fully disclose to the reader my rationale for choosing this study. I acknowledge that this background could potentially influence the way in which I interpret the experiences of the participants.

Conclusion

This chapter explained the methodology carried out by the researcher to address the research questions of this study. The goal of this study was to examine the barriers and supports faced by women superintendents. The nature of the study and the research design was explained, along with a description of the setting, participant selection process, and data collection and analysis techniques. In addition, the researcher explained strategies for ensuring quality. Ethical considerations were also explained to ensure that risks to the participants were minimal. The last section of this chapter included a subjectivity statement in which the researcher provides an explanation of where they fit into the research and any influences that could potentially occur because of prior events. The following chapter contains the results of the study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to gain insight into the barriers and supports faced by women superintendents while ascending to and in the role of superintendent that would help explain the gender gap present in upper school leadership roles. This study attempted to reveal further information and understanding concerning why there is a large percentage of women teachers but a very limited number of women superintendents. Specifically, the goal of this qualitative research study was to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that obstructed their advancement into the role of superintendent?

2. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that supported their advancement into the role of superintendent?

3. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that inhibit their success while in the role of superintendent?

4. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that support their success while the role of superintendent?

In this chapter, a summary of the participants is provided, along with a description of the procedure by which the study was conducted. In addition, themes and findings from the research question are extracted, and the chapter ends with a summary and transition to Chapter 5.

Participant Summary

The participants in this research were four practicing women superintendents and one retired woman superintendent. The retired participant served as a superintendent within the last ten years. This number of participants was selected because it represents an appropriate

percentage of the practicing women superintendents in North Carolina and did not exceed the resources or time available to the researcher. Participants were selected from different geographic locations in North Carolina, educational backgrounds, and racial groups to broaden the experiences documented. All participants served in the superintendent position for at least two years or longer. To add to the validity to the study, four of the participants received multiple contracts from the seated board. This action displayed the confidence that the board had in their ability to lead the district. The participants were adults who were given the option to participate or not. All participants remained anonymous to all except the researcher, and only generalized descriptors were used to help categorize the data.

To promote transparency and to support the diversity of the participants, a demographic survey was administered prior to the interview through a questionnaire that was sent to each participant's personal email. The information extracted from the demographic survey was relevant to this research study and important to examining barriers and supports faced by women superintendents as they ascended into the role and while they served in the role.

Table 2 shows personal statistics gathered from the demographic survey. While the years in education were very consistent, the age ranges of those that participated in the study varied. A pool of experienced, veteran individuals (80%) invested in the state of North Carolina's education system with more than 25 years of experience participated in the study. Only one participant (20%) has been in public education in North Carolina for less than ten years. Participants' ages ranged over four age brackets with the majority in the over 60 (40%) category. The remaining participants were in the age brackets of 40-44 (20%), 50-54 (20%), and 55-59 (20%). Regarding race, Caucasians represented 80% of the sample, and African Americans represented 20 %. Of the participants 100% selected "married" as their marital status.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Survey Statistical Data

	Frequency	Percentage
Years in public education in NC		
Less than 10	1	20
10-15 Years	0	0
16-25 Years	0	0
More than 25 Years	4	80
Age Range (Years)		
20-24	0	0
25-29	0	0
20-34	0	0
35-39	0	0
40-44	1	20
45-49	0	0
50-54	1	20
55-59	1	20
Over 60	2	40
Highest Level of Education (Years)		
Bachelor's Degree	0	0
Master's Degree	0	0
Doctorate Degree	5	100

Table 2

Participant Demographic Survey Statistical Data (Cont.)

Race

Caucasian	4	80
African American	1	1
Hispanic	0	0
Asian American	0	0
American Indian	0	0
Other	0	0
Choose not to disclose	0	0

Marital Status

Single	0	0
Married	5	100
Chose not to disclose	0	0

Undergraduate Major

Human Development Learning	1	20
Elementary Education	1	20
Speech/Language	1	20
Music Education	1	20
Secondary Education	1	20

Highest Level of Education (Mother)

HS Diploma	5	100
Associate degree	0	0

Table 2

Participant Demographic Survey Statistical Data (Cont.)

Bachelor's Degree	0	0
Master's Degree	0	0
Doctorate Degree	0	0
Did not graduate	0	0
Highest Level of Education (Father)		
HS Diploma	4	80
Associate degree	0	0
Bachelor's Degree	0	0
Master's Degree	0	0
Doctorate Degree	0	0
Did not graduate	1	1

Table 2 also illustrates the participant's highest educational level achieved. While all participants held doctorate degrees, their area of study in their undergraduate majors varied and included human development learning (20%), elementary education (20%), speech/language education (20%), music education (20%), and secondary education (20%). Table 2 also illustrates that the parental highest education level was consistent. Participants' mothers' education level included "high school diploma" (100%) and participants' fathers' education level included "high school diploma" (80%) and "did not graduate" (20%).

Tables 3 and 4 illustrate individual data gathered about each participant's school district. This data includes the school board composite when the participant was hired, the school board composite at the time of the interview, and the school district demographics. Each participant's school board ranged from five to seven participants, and the male-to-female ratio varied in all instances. Each school board's ethnic makeup was primarily Caucasian with low African American representation. As noted in the tables below, the district demographics showcase a wide range of ethnic makeup, and the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch (FRL) ranges from 16.6% to 100%.

Table 3

Participants' Individual School District Data When Hired

Participant	# of School Board Members	#of Male School Board Members	#of Female School Board Members	School Board Ethnic Makeup	District Demographics
Ann	7	5	2	7 Caucasian	Ethnicity 70% Caucasian 20% African American 10% Other FRL- ~ 40%
Betty	7	2	5	3 African American 4 Caucasian	Ethnicity 65% Caucasian 40% African American <5% Other FRL- 100% (FDA Grant)

Table 3

Participants' Individual School District Data When Hired (Cont.)

Cindy	7	2	5	3 African American	Ethnicity 50% Caucasian
				4 Caucasian	11% African American
					13% Asian
					17% Hispanic
					<10% Other
					FRL- ~ 16.6%
Dana	7	4	3	7 Caucasian	Ethnicity 60% Caucasian
					10% African American
					24% Hispanic
					<10% Other
					FRL- ~ 60%
Emma	5	4	1	5 Caucasian	Ethnicity 92 % Caucasian
					<10% Other
					FRL- ~ 40%

Table 4

Participants' Individual School District Data at the Time of Interview

Participant	# of School Board Members	#of Male School Board Members	#of Female School Board Members	School Board Ethnic Makeup	District Demographics
Ann	7	4	3	1 African American	Ethnicity 60% Caucasian
				6 Caucasian	25% African American
					15% Other
					FRL- ~ 55%
Betty	7	2	5	3 African American	Ethnicity 65% Caucasian
				4 Caucasian	40% African American
					<5% Other
					FRL- 100% (FDA Grant)
Cindy	7	4	3	3 African American	Ethnicity 50% Caucasian
				4 Caucasian	11% African American
					13% Asian
					17% Hispanic
					<10% Other
					FRL- ~ 16.6%

Table 4

Participants' Individual School District Data at the Time of Interview (Cont.)

					Ethnicity
Dana	7	5	2	7 Caucasian	60% Caucasian
					10% African American
					24% Hispanic
					<10% Other
					FRL- ~ 60%
Emma	5	2	3	5 Caucasian	Ethnicity
					92 % Caucasian
					<10% Other
					FRL- ~ 40%

Note. Data for Ann reflects the board composition at the time of her retirement.

In addition to the cumulative data, individualized descriptions of each participant are included. These descriptions provide additional details that describe the background of each participant as well as the demographics of the school board and the district. Participant data can be cross-referenced in Tables 2-6.

The first participant, Ann, was over 60 years of age, had worked in the North Carolina public education system for more than 25 years, and identified as married and Caucasian. She had an undergraduate degree in human development learning and later earned her doctorate. This participant's mother had a high school diploma, and her father did not complete high school. The school board consisted of seven members when Ann was hired and included five males and two

females. All seven members were Caucasian. At the time of her retirement, the school board consisted of seven members and included four males and three females. The ethnicity changed to six Caucasians and one African American. The demographic makeup of the district's student population did not change during her superintendency. It consisted of 60 % Caucasian, 25 % African American, and 15% other. The FRL was approximately 55%.

The second participant, Betty, was over 60 years old, had worked in the North Carolina public education system for more than 25 years, and identified as married and Caucasian. She had an undergraduate degree in elementary education and later earned her doctorate. Both parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma. The school board consisted of seven members when Betty was hired and included two males and five females. The members consisted of four Caucasians and three African Americans. At the time of the interview, the school board consisted of seven members and included two males and five females. The ethnicity of the members stayed the same. The demographic makeup of the district's student population did not change during her superintendency. It consisted of 65 % Caucasian, 40 % African American, and <5% Other. The FRL percentage was 100% because of a grant received from the Food and Drug Administration.

The third participant, Cindy, was between 40-44 years old and had worked in the North Carolina public education system for less than 10 years. Cindy identified as married and African American. She had an undergraduate degree in speech and language and later earned her doctorate. Both parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma. The school board consisted of seven members when Cindy was hired and included two males and five females. The members consisted of four Caucasians and three African Americans. At the time of the interview, the school board consisted of seven members and included four males and three

females. During Cindy's tenure, the ethnicity of the members reversed to three African American and four Caucasian members. The demographic makeup of the district's student population did not change during her superintendency. It consisted of 50% Caucasian, 11% African American, 13% Asian, 17% Hispanic, and <5% Other. The FRL was 16.6%.

The fourth participant, Dana, was between 50-54 years old, had been in the North Carolina public education system for more than 25 years, and identified as married and Caucasian. She had an undergraduate degree in music education and later earned her doctorate. Both parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma. The school board consisted of 7 members when Dana was hired and included 4 males and 3 females. The members were all Caucasian. At the time of the interview, the school board consisted of 7 members and included 5 males and 2 females. All 7 members were Caucasian. The demographic makeup of the district's student population did not change during her superintendency. It consisted of 60 % Caucasian, 10 % African American, 24% Hispanic, and <10% Other. The FRL percentage was 60.

The fifth participant, Emma, was between 55-59 years old, had been in the North Carolina public education system for more than 25 years, and identified as married and Caucasian. She had an undergraduate degree in secondary education and later earned her doctorate. Both parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma. The school board consisted of 5 members when Emma was hired and included 4 males and 1 female. All members were Caucasian. At the time of the interview, the school board consisted of 5 members and included 2 males and 3 females. All 5 members were Caucasian. The demographic makeup of the district's student population did not change during her superintendency. It consisted of 92% Caucasian and <10% other. The FRL was 42%.

Table 5

Participant Demographic Survey Individual Data: Age, Race, Teaching Experience in NC

Participant	Age (years)	Race	Teaching experience in NC
Ann	Over 60	Caucasian	>25 years
Betty	Over 60	Caucasian	>25 years
Cindy	40-44	African American	<10 Years
Dana	50-54	Caucasian	>25 years
Emma	55-59	Caucasian	>25 years

Table 6

Participant Demographic Survey Individual Data: Undergraduate Major, Highest Level of

Education, and Highest Level of Education Achieved by Parents

Participant	Undergraduate Major	Highest Level of Education	Highest Level of Education Achieved by Parents
Ann	Human Development Learning	Doctorate	Mother- HS Diploma Father- Did not graduate
Betty	Elementary Education	Doctorate	Both – HS Diploma
Cindy	Speech/Language	Doctorate	Both – HS Diploma
Dana	Music Education	Doctorate	Both – HS Diploma
Emma	Secondary Education	Doctorate	Both – HS Diploma

Themes/Findings by Research Question

Participants' experiences with the existence of barriers and supports as they ascended to

the superintendent role and while they were in the superintendent role varied from participant to

participant. The same was true when discussing information about the impact of the barriers and

supports when making career decisions. Still, data extracted from the interviews, starting with

the warmup questions, created several themes related to each research question. The themes are

described in the section below. They are outlined in Table 7.

Table 7

Themes and Subthemes Extracted from Data

Research Question	Theme/Subtheme

RQ1: Perceptions about factors that obstructed advancement into a superintendent role	Individual Experiences Influenced Obstruction Factors
	    Family Dynamics
	    Lack of Confidence
	    Gender Inequities

RQ2: Perceptions about factors that supported advancement into a superintendent role	Advancement Factors Are Multifaceted and Systematic
	    Traditional Career Pathway
	    Nontraditional Career Pathway
	    Professional Development
	    Mentors

RQ3: Perceptions about factors that inhibit success while in the superintendent role	Individual Experiences Influenced Obstruction Factors
	    Gender Discrimination (Glass Ceiling)
	    School Board/Politics
	    Time Commitment

RQ4: Perceptions about factors that support success while in the superintendent role	Support Systems In Place to Ensure Success
	    Networking with Colleagues/Mentors/Other Professionals
	    Principal Experience

Warm-Up Questions Summary/Findings

The first category of interview questions served as an introduction that provided

background information and established trust. More specifically, the warm-up questions were

used to gain an understanding of the participants' background in education and feelings about the superintendency. Table 8 summarizes their years of experience as a superintendent in their most recent district and in any district. It is followed by a detailed narrative about each participant that later led to emergent themes when more specific questions were asked that correlated with the research questions.

Table 8

Participant Data Specific to Service as Superintendent

Participant	Years as Superintendent in Most Recent District	Years as Superintendent in any District
Ann	4	4
Betty	7	7
Cindy	2	2
Dana	6	6
Emma	5	5

Ann was led to education as a profession after her first year of college studying medical terminology was unsuccessful. She decided that upper-level chemistry and other science classes were not for her, and she decided she wanted to teach math. Ann did not aspire to become a superintendent when she started her education path but stated, "I enjoyed going to school and working through various degrees, so it seemed like the next step to take." As a superintendent, Ann noted that her biggest strength was connecting with people and being approachable. In contrast, her biggest weakness was the desire to micromanage the work of subordinates because her previous work as a building-level administrator made her accustomed to being highly

involved in daily operations. She acknowledged the need to appropriately delegate responsibilities.

Betty was led to education as a profession because she wanted to make a difference. As her children were going through school, she served as the "room parent" and a tutor. However, she wanted to do more. She said, "I needed to step it up and do more than just come in and help with parties and tutoring." Betty did not initially aspire to become a superintendent. She only wanted to be a principal, but once in the principal role she intrinsically wanted to keep moving up to the next level. As a superintendent, Betty noted that her biggest strength was knowing the curriculum side of education. She was proud of her district's work in curriculum and instruction and its academic growth. Her biggest weakness was fighting burnout and not making enough time for herself.

Cindy was led to education as a profession because she wanted to be a speech major and work with students with disabilities. Cindy did not aspire to become a superintendent but had a colleague who encouraged her to participate in a superintendent leadership program. While initially reluctant to participate in the program, she was glad she did. Through the superintendent leadership program, she realized that she could do the work of a superintendent. As a superintendent, Cindy noted that her biggest strength was authenticity and transparency. Those characteristics have allowed her to build a positive culture in her district and lead courageous conversations when needed. At the same time, her biggest weakness was in school law and finance. She relies on experts to guide her with matters in these categories.

Dana was led to education at a young age because she wanted to be a music teacher. She stated, "I have always known I wanted I wanted to go into education." She knew she would need a full scholarship to attend college, so she worked diligently in school from an early age. Her

hard work paid off as she received The North Carolina Teaching Fellows Scholarship. Like other participants, Dana did not aspire to become a superintendent until a superintendent encouraged her to consider the possibility and put her in a leadership role at the central office as the officer of innovation. She imagined that as her career progressed, she would be a band director for a large high school. As a superintendent, Dana noted that her biggest strength was team building and empowering people to do a good job. She described her weakness as a lack of experience and not knowing everything about the district.

Emma was led to education at a young age because she felt she always wanted to teach. She stated, "I always wanted to teach, whether I was playing school or teaching people how to play the piano." Like other participants, Emma did not aspire to become a superintendent. Not long after becoming a teacher, she thought about being a principal. At each level of career advancement, she considered the next level. Once she began advancing professionally, she started wanting to be a superintendent. As a superintendent, Emma noted that her biggest strength was building relationships and significant experience working as a principal at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. She added, "I feel that has really helped me a lot and the time I spent as a high school principal." She described her weakness as juggling the superintendency's day-to-day work and layering that with the significant initiatives that occur simultaneously.

RQ1: Perceptions About Factors That Obstructed Advancement Into a Superintendent Role

The first research question sought to examine the perceptions of women superintendents about the factors that obstructed their advancement to the role of superintendent. Data analysis

was completed to examine the factors. The analysis also examined methods for overcoming identified challenges.

Individual Experiences Influenced Obstruction Factors

The primary theme associated with RQ1 was that individual experiences from the participants influenced obstruction factors. Their stories included how family dynamics and the lack of confidence impacted their advancement. They also discussed how the presence of gender discrimination possibly held them back when competing against a male for the superintendency role.

Family Dynamics. Ann, Betty, Dana, and Emma waited to apply for superintendent positions until later in their careers. Doing so meant their children were grown and they did not have as many family obligations. They all agreed that with the time commitment that is required by the superintendency, family dynamics are a barrier that obstructs women from being able to apply for the superintendency earlier in their careers. Participants described women as the primary caregiver for their children, and as a result, they cannot commit the time needed to a superintendent role.

Ann captured this theme by explaining how she had to be strategic about where she applied to become superintendent. She stated, "Family commitments would be a barrier, I could not apply for positions all over the state because of my family and age." Even though her children were grown when she decided to pursue the superintendency, she had to consider her spouse and grandchildren. She did not feel it would be best to apply for vacancies all over the state if she did not intend to move because doing so would uproot her family. For example, Ann recalled withdrawing from a superintendent position that she applied for and had verbally accepted because she had a medical emergency with a family member that would have prevented

her from being able to move or devote the necessary time. She stated, "I had to call the lady from the school board association and tell her I had to withdraw." She continued, "I knew I would be needed to help care for a sick family member." While Ann waited until her children were grown before she finally accepted a superintendent position, that meant she had aged as well. As a result, her age became a barrier because she knew she would have more grandchildren and did not want to be too far from them.

Betty discussed how her family dynamics were a barrier because she had lived on family land her entire life. That made it very difficult to apply for positions because she knew she would have to leave that land to live in the district that she would be serving. Fortunately, because she waited until her children were grown to become a superintendent, her son agreed to buy the land from her. Like Ann, she waited until she was older to apply. This too became a challenge because her mother was aging as well. She did not have children to look after, but her mother needed her care. Even though her family was supportive of her career decisions, it was initially hard for her not to feel selfish about deciding to relocate.

With Dana waiting until later in her career before she started looking for a superintendent role, she did not feel the pressure of family dynamics standing in her way. She applied for the superintendency in her late 40s and in the district where she already resided. Therefore, family commitments did not hinder the process. She recognized that any superintendent position she sought would have to be a perfect fit for numerous reasons including, fitting her personality of always thinking outside the box and finding innovative ways to improve student achievement.

Emma had a background in high school administration, so her family was accustomed to her spending much time on work-related tasks around the clock. When she was ready to start thinking about the superintendency, her children were either in college or living independently.

The superintendency she applied for was in the district where she lived, so she knew there would not be a huge disruption to her family dynamics. Additionally, Emma shared that her husband encouraged her professional advancement when she said, "My husband has always been very supportive." While family commitments did not prevent her from applying for the superintendency, she knew how important it was to effectively balance the demands of being superintendent with the needs of her family. She wanted a superintendent position that would work for everyone.

Cindy was unique in that she was the only participant with small children when she was actively searching for a superintendent position. When she started looking, she had the full support of her husband. He encouraged her to apply for different positions and believed in her ability to lead a district. He was supportive of the family having to move if necessary. Together they felt their young children were resilient and could transition if a move was necessary. When Cindy applied for positions, she remembered having two interviews with the search firms but did not get a callback to interview with the district. She was concerned that not being allowed to advance in the interview process may have been related to being a mother of three small children. Cindy did accept a superintendent position that required her to relocate to another state. She stated, "My husband is the reason we moved from X to North Carolina. He said it is your time to shine." She knew her small children would not be directly impacted by the move, and she would be able to devote the necessary time to being a superintendent.

Lack of Confidence. All the participants expressed confidence in their abilities to effectively serve as superintendent. However, that confidence was not always there as they strived to reach the superintendency. Four participants narrated accounts where their lack of confidence was a barrier to advancement into the superintendency.

Cindy talked the most about her lack of confidence. She experienced cognitive dissonance because, on the one hand, she knew her previous jobs helped her to create the skill set needed to lead a district. On the other hand, she was very concerned about never having served as a principal and viewed it as an obstacle. She stated, "So I started thinking, maybe I can do this. Some of the barriers that I put I was putting in front of myself was this belief that you had to be a principal." She overcame these fears when she realized that her other experiences truly prepared her. When describing building her confidence she stated:

> I started thinking, I am in this chief of staff role. You know this is a really large district, and the work I was doing was pretty much the work of a superintendent of a smaller district, so it started building my confidence.

She knew that if she wanted to be a superintendent, she would have to see herself as a leader in that capacity before others would. So, she built her confidence by focusing on her strengths and believing in herself and her skill set rather than marginalizing her abilities.

Ann and Betty described confidence issues that were similar to one another. These confidence issues stemmed from incidents that occurred when they tried to reach the superintendency in the district in which they had already served in other leadership roles. Specifically, Ann had left her central office director position to return to a principal position in a different district after being unable to advance further. While serving as a principal in the new district, she received a phone call encouraging her to apply for the vacant superintendent position in the district she left. Ann said, "I got a call from Board Member X, and he wanted me to come and talk to them about being superintendent." Ann felt that this was her opportunity because they sought her out. However, she was not selected to be the next superintendent, but she was asked to return to the district. She stated, "I even had a board member comment that they needed me to

come and help guide the superintendent that is coming in because he is from out of state." She agreed to return as the assistant superintendent at that point, but her confidence was shaken. She questioned if she could do the job of superintendent, and she feared that others would think she was incapable of leading the district. She continued, "So, I was basically going to lead him." It took time for her to believe in herself and to apply for other superintendent positions. Her confidence was restored over time from being a successful assistant superintendent and knowing intrinsically that she was behind most of the great work in the district. She stated, "I was the assistant superintendent watching him. I learned a lot from him and a lot of how not to do things."

Betty was serving as assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction when the superintendent role in her district became vacant. She decided to apply for the position and became one of two finalists. The other finalist, a male, had minimal educational experience. Despite her years of educational experience and high-ranking position in the district, the other finalist was selected. She stated, "It wasn't meant to be." Even though she later recognized that it was a blessing that she did not get that superintendency, it was hard to accept at first. Having the board select a candidate without experience with curriculum and instruction made her wonder what skill set school boards were looking for. She described an incident years later where she later ran into a board member that did not select her, and they said, "We messed up." Even though the fault was admitted, the damage had been done. Six months after not receiving the superintendent role, Betty left the district to rebuild her self-worth and to seek a superintendent opportunity elsewhere.

Gender Inequities. Three of the five participants recalled at least one incident in which they felt they were the victim of gender discrimination while seeking a superintendent position. Ann and Betty recalled more explicit acts that occurred.

Ann recalled that in several of her superintendent interviews, she could tell by the tone of the board that they were looking for a "good ole boy" to run the district instead of a strong instructional leader. From the interview questions, she quickly determined that they were not interested in how she could move the district forward academically. For example, she stated, "It depends on what your board wants and is it that they are wanting a superintendent so they can run the district or just one of the "good ole boys" or do they truly want an instructional leader?" While she did not recall any of the specific questions, she implied that she did not feel that they were looking for a strong instructional leader. Furthermore, she recounted a finalist interview she participated in for the superintendent position in the district where she was employed. She did not get the job, and later a board member said to her when discussing the candidate that was hired, "Oh, he is a big athletic guy, and so on." Based on that board member's own words, she felt that he was selected over her because he was male and a former college athlete.

Betty had a similar story. She was the finalist for the vacant superintendent position in the district where she worked as an assistant superintendent, and the other finalist was a male. A review of their educational credentials and experiences would suggest that Betty was the more qualified candidate. Betty had been in education for over 20 years and held multiple leadership roles including principal, district office director, and assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. The other candidate did not have a background in education. Rather, his background was in business and finance. However, the male business and finance candidate was selected. It was later discovered that the selected candidate was good friends and golf buddies with one of

the male board members. After that discovery, it became apparent to Betty that the selection was

not based on educational experiences and leadership skills. Betty felt that her new superintendent

was selected because he was a "good ole boy" despite limited school experience.

Cindy spoke about two of her interviews for superintendent positions with search firms

that possibly discriminated against her because of her gender. From the feedback provided, she

believed that the firms had concerns about her being a wife and a mother. They also appeared to

have concerns about how she would navigate certain contexts as a female. For example, she

stated, "They were concerned that as a mother of three children that I would not have time or

capacity to do the job." The firm ignored her skillset and dismissed her because they were afraid

she could not withstand the time commitment. She continued by saying that people think she

looks younger than she is, which sometimes caused concern and challenges when she addressed

older males. She stated, "I knew I was an effective leader in the roles I played." She wanted

everyone to be able to see past her gender and focus on what she did. She continued, "I never

doubted my ability to be able to do the job, but I was questioned about how I would navigate

certain contexts." She recognized that she had to be strategic when addressing the males she was

supervising and work hard to build relationships.

Dana and Emma did not feel that they experienced explicit gender discrimination. Dana

said that one could assume that maybe the district that did not call her for an interview may have

been looking for a male, but nothing was explicitly said to make her think that. She added that

the district that she currently serves is unique in its support of women in higher leadership roles.

When she was hired the board chair was a woman, and the outgoing superintendent was a

woman. Emma did not feel that she was subjected to gender discrimination when seeking a

superintendent position because the district that she was applying for had a female

superintendent. She stated, "Dr. X probably paved the way for that." She felt that a female previously holding the role helped to shape the mindset that women could serve in the role.

The levels of gender discrimination experienced by the participants as they were searching for a superintendent position varied from none to extreme. For the participants that did experience gender discrimination, they were able to overcome and persevere by being resilient and knowing their worth and value. They worked hard to produce strong instructional programs and were able to show their results.

RQ2: Perceptions About Factors That Supported Advancement Into a Superintendent Role

The second research question sought to examine the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that supported their advancement into the role of superintendent. Data analysis was completed to examine the factors they felt supported their advancement. Each participant told stories of different experiences and elements that helped them advance into the superintendency. The overarching theme and subthemes that surfaced from the data are described in the following section.

Advancement Factors Are Multifaceted and Systematic

The primary theme from RQ2 was that advancement factors are multifaceted and systematic. Three important advancement factors were career choices, professional development, and effective mentoring. First, participants elaborated on how their career choices and decisions regarding positions they accepted supported their advancement. Each participant recognized that there was a traditional pathway to the superintendency that commonly includes working as a principal and district administrator. However, participants had different perspectives because they all took different career paths that provided different leadership opportunities. Second, participants also shared how professional development opportunities supported their

advancement into the superintendency. Finally, the presence of mentors was the last factor that supported their professional advancement. Participants shared stories about their mentors acting as confidence boosters and cheerleaders. Mentors also provided participants with the support they needed to apply for superintendent positions.

Traditional Career Pathways/Career Choices. A traditional career pathway into the superintendency was described as having been a classroom teacher, school-level administrator, central office director, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. Ann, Betty, and Emma took traditional pathways to the superintendency and vocalized that this sequential pathway helped support their advancement into the superintendency.

Ann started her career as an elementary math teacher. She taught various grade levels before transitioning into school administration, where she served as a high school assistant principal and then as principal at the elementary and middle school levels. After serving as a school-based administrator, she held numerous director roles at the central office before becoming an assistant superintendent and then superintendent.

Ann mainly worked in the district where she became superintendent. She believed this allowed her to showcase her skill set and be promoted internally. She recalled a time when she was an elementary school principal, and the superintendent asked her to be the inaugural principal for a new middle school. When describing the challenge of opening that school, she said, "I worked out there in a yard chair. We opened that school." She continued by explaining that those leadership roles she was asked to complete allowed her to develop the skills needed for higher leadership roles. Ann also felt that holding sequential titles associated with education such as teacher, assistant principal, principal, central office director, and assistant superintendent helped initiate the next step of applying for the superintendent position. She stated, "I think it is

important for superintendents to come through the ranks in order to have an understanding." Ann affirmed that it was necessary to have an array of educational leadership opportunities that create a skill set to be successful as a superintendent. She stated, "I don't understand how a person from the business sector could just come in and effectively run a school system." Ann described herself as a "number-crunching person" and felt confident with the financial management skill required of the superintendency. However, she did not think someone with limited to no higher educational leadership experience could be a successful superintendent.

Betty had a similar pathway. She taught third-grade math for 11 years and then transitioned into administration. She was also an assistant principal in a high school before serving as a principal at the middle school and high school levels.

Betty described being tapped for higher leadership roles. The superintendent she worked for was pleased with the job she was doing as an assistant principal. One afternoon, the human resources director approached her at a meeting. Betty stated, "She told me that Superintendent X wanted me to go up to the middle school and be the principal." After a short time in that principal role, she was approached again and asked to turn around a high school that had recently been through turmoil. When describing her high school principal experiences, Betty said, "I thought they hated me because it was awful at first, but I loved it when I finished." After successfully leading a high school, she was asked to apply for the assistant superintendent position which she later assumed. Betty worked in the same district until she became superintendent.

Betty shared the same feelings as Ann when she spoke about traditional and nontraditional pathways to the superintendency. Betty communicated that her multiple leadership roles were essential factors that supported her advancement into a superintendent role. Betty

stated, "I went over to do curriculum and instruction and still had student services, I had everything but finance and transportation. I had good teams and good people." She used these multiple experiences to expand her skill set.

Emma also held multiple roles in education before becoming superintendent. She taught high school history immediately after college. The following year she moved to another district to teach in her content area, English, for eight years. After teaching, she transitioned into school administration, where she served as an assistant principal at the middle school level and then became the principal of a middle school and then a high school. While serving as principal at one high school, her superintendent asked her to move to the largest high school in the district. She stated, "I was moved to X High School for four years, and the superintendent asked me to go to X High School which was our largest high school in the district." The superintendent's decision to make her the principal of the district's largest high school exposed her to opportunities that would prepare her for other leadership roles. She was later promoted to the secondary director role and eventually became the assistant superintendent. Her chosen pathways initiated the career process that supported her advancement into a superintendent role. Emma said, "The fact that I have worked on all three levels, I feel that has really helped me a lot and the time spent as a high school principal." Being able to see through multiple lenses helped create her leadership style and being the principal at a high school helped her adjust to the time demands of the superintendent position.

Ann, Betty, and Emma felt strongly that having a sequential educational pathway with experiences at multiple grade spans was essential to their ascension to the superintendency. Those experiences acted as advancement factors that initiated their career process and supported their advancement into the superintendency. Ann shared:

Coming through the ranks created an understanding of how the school and community interact with one another and then to know the different levels - to have a feel for them so you don't have a disconnect when coming up with ideas.

She felt that having served in the roles that you oversee helps establish relationships and effectively run a school system.

Nontraditional Career Pathways/Career Choices. A nontraditional career pathway was described by participants as a pathway that did not include the common career sequence of teacher, school-based administrator, central office director, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. Cindy and Dana took a nontraditional pathway to the superintendency and vocalized that their career choices served as a factor that supported their advancement to the superintendency.

Cindy had a nontraditional route to becoming a superintendent. Specifically, she never served as a school principal. She obtained an undergraduate degree in special education and worked with students with disabilities at multiple grade levels. After getting her master's degree in reading, she became a Title I reading specialist and then a special education coordinator. These positions led her to become the director of special education and gifted students. From that role, she transitioned into an assistant superintendent for instructional support position and later became a chief of staff. While Cindy was exposed to many leadership opportunities throughout her career, she initially believed she would be unable to be a superintendent because of her lack of school-based leadership. She stated, "I was always under the impression that superintendents had to be people that were principals." Even though Cindy had that preconception at first, she began looking at leadership profiles of districts searching for superintendents and selected vacant superintendent positions that matched her skill set and did not require principal experience.

Taking the nontraditional pathway resulted in Cindy working in various districts and states, presenting her with roles and opportunities that supported her advancement into the superintendency. Cindy stated, "Make sure the leadership profile matches your skillset." She continued, "I developed a social-emotional program, I had been a reading specialist, so there were several things in the leadership profile that checked the box for me." She realized that her experiences would help her become a superintendent in a district that wanted to emphasize literacy and social and emotional learning.

Dana also had a nontraditional pathway to becoming a superintendent. As soon as she received her undergraduate degree, she returned for her master's degree in music before becoming a high school band director. She decided to get her PhD, and once that work was completed, she started applying for central office positions. Her first director role was director of magnet programs. Then eventually, she inherited federal programs and strategic planning. With her experience in innovative ideas, she accepted a job opportunity in her district of residence, and there she became the officer of innovations before she became superintendent. Even though she had to wait on the right superintendent position to match her experiences, she commented, "But I am kind of like you. Once you get into a position and you realize you can do it, then these bigger positions just start coming to you." She believed that the pathway she selected and the opportunities she experienced supported her advancement into the superintendency. In her position as director of magnet programs, she saw the value of grants because she knew that for her programs to thrive, she would have to secure funding through grants. She stated, "We had seven magnet schools when I started, and I wrote a lot of grants." Because she understood the grant process and the importance of funding, she was put in charge of more departments. She explained, "Dr. X saw that I could turn schools around and bring in grant money, so he put me

over federal programs." These opportunities enhanced her skillset and led to other leadership positions, including the superintendency.

Cindy and Dana felt strongly about the educational pathways they selected. They were confident that even though they did not have experience as a principal, the experiences they did have put them in roles that supported their advancement. Dana stated, "If you can show that you can put in major workforce development programs and get resources my resume had enough on it to overcome the fact that I had never been a principal." Her work with federal programs and strategic planning allowed her to gain experience in different capacities. She stated, "I really pushed innovation here." For example, she helped the district start a dual language program. Similarly, Cindy felt confident in her career choices that helped shape her leadership profile even though she was never a principal. She confidently stated, "I had been a reading specialist." She knew that having that title would be useful if a district prioritized literacy. She continued, "Someone who prioritized the importance of third-grade reading." She could use her experience as a reading specialist to capitalize on that priority.

All participants agreed that regardless of whether the pathway is traditional or nontraditional, to advance to the superintendency one must find the superintendent position that is most suited for them based on their skills, experiences, and background.

Professional Development. All participants talked about how professional development and support programs helped support their advancement into the superintendency. The Aspiring Superintendent Program, an initiative of the North Carolina School Superintendent Association to support aspiring superintendents, was the most frequently mentioned professional development opportunity. Other professional development opportunities were also mentioned.

When describing her involvement with the Aspiring Superintendent Program, Ann said, "There was a support group. It was not from DPI; they were support programs where you go in and do the reading cohorts and supports." She explained that the connections made in the Aspiring Superintendent Program were crucial to advancing in the role. She stated, "The support groups Jack Hoke [executive director of the North Carolina School Superintendents Association] did were good. You can't underestimate those connections." Those connections enabled her to develop professional relationships with seated superintendents, attorneys, and North Carolina Department of Instruction employees. By the time she ended the program, she had a repertoire of people to contact for advice.

Betty also spoke positively about the Aspiring Superintendent Program. Specifically, she learned some interview techniques from the program. She stated, "They said to apply [for superintendent positions] because you probably won't get the first one you apply for, and you have to learn." In the program, they also gave each other advice on interviewing. Betty learned, "You have to be short and to the point, but yet explain the questions and answer them well." Through reflecting, she learned to cut out the rambling during interviews and provide concise answers.

Dana was serving in a leadership role in her district when her superintendent asked her to participate in the Aspiring Superintendent Program. She said, "When I was in X County, they have at least 6,000 employees, and he picked me and one other to go to the Aspiring Superintendent Program." As she went through the program, Dana learned about the duties of a superintendent and, like the others, formed a network. Completing this program helped support her advancement because it led to, her superintendent giving her more responsibilities that would help prepare her to one day become a superintendent. For example, there were times when the

superintendent asked her to represent him at meetings he could not attend. She stated that her superintendent said, "If I am not there as superintendent you go in my place." Representing her district on behalf of the superintendent at functions helped her to envision herself in the role. She continued, "So once you start seeing yourself in that those things can really help you." Attending the program opened these opportunities for Dana.

Cindy was from out of North Carolina, so her leadership program was a superintendent academy that was comparable to The Aspiring Superintendent Program. She stated, "It is more than a professional learning experience where you walk away with a network and number of contacts." She continued to talk about the guest speakers brought in to talk about experiences and scenarios future superintendents might encounter. This experience was impactful because the relationships she developed helped support her journey to the superintendent role. She explained, "Again, from across the country, so I ended up with great relationships and mentors and people who are or had been superintendents, um attorneys that have experience." Those experiences helped Cindy to enhance her circle of contacts. She described her experience, "It is more than just a professional learning experience where you walk away with a network and a number of contacts." She used the adjective "unbelievable" to describe how professional development helped support her advancement.

When Emma was asked about the support she experienced while ascending to the superintendency, she stated, "I think we have a great state organization that supports all superintendents, not just females." Through those organizations, she enhanced her leadership skills and developed a collegial support network. In addition to the state organizations, she also talked about a leadership program, *We Lead Together*, by Dr. Lille Cox. By completing Dr. Cox's program, she found support and growth that was beneficial as she became ready to

become a superintendent. Emma said the following about Dr. Cox's program, "I really sought out other female leaders that I felt wanted me to be successful." She felt that surrounding herself with people with similar goals was a support for her as she ascended to the superintendency.

Mentors. All participants discussed how strong mentors helped support their advancement into the superintendency. The participants told stories about how mentors provided advice and bolstered their confidence to transition into a superintendent position.

Cindy recalled her mentor. It was a somewhat unique relationship because her mentor was also her professional subordinate. When she was the assistant superintendent of learning, she received much advice from the director of elementary education. Even though Cindy was her supervisor, she received helpful advice from her. She stated, "So technically I was higher up in the chain of command if you will, but she really encouraged me and served as a mentor." This mentor became someone that Cindy relied on. She continued, "She had been in education for 30-plus years and someone who I really relied on." This mentor was often a sounding board for ideas. Cindy also talked about other mentors she had that were superintendents. She explained, "I had worked with colleagues who had recently gone into the superintendency or been in the superintendency for quite some time." She called upon them for advice and encouragement to prepare her for advancing into the superintendency.

Dana and Emma described their mentors as superintendents whom they worked for. Dana said, "They were good supports for me and mentors." She felt that her current superintendent at the time believed in her. As previously discussed, he selected her out of all the employees in the district to attend a leadership program. From that point, she felt that she could transition into a superintendency because he believed in her. Emma also talked about how the superintendent that was in the district when she was the assistant superintendent served as a mentor. She stated,

"Working for a female superintendent. I worked with her the whole time I was here." She was able to form a collegial relationship with her that ended up forming a great relationship. She continued:

> She was on my dissertation committee, so she knew I wanted to grow as a leader so I feel like she made an investment in me that was probably different than it would have been even having a great relationship with a male superintendent.

Emma believed this support encouraged her and gave her the confidence to take the next step. She was able to be open with her superintendent about her career aspirations and get advice from her. Emma credited her with having the skillset and support needed. She stated, "Yes, I had someone there as a role model for me as a female superintendent that really supported me and helped me." Having a role model was very important to Emma. She learned from her and was able to ask her questions about different incidents that would occur. They would walk through scenarios and learn together.

The theme, advancement factors are multifaceted and systematic, was illustrated by the participants as they explained what they felt helped them advance to the superintendent role. Their explanations included their chosen career pathway in education and how it led them to the superintendency. The participants also discussed the importance of professional development opportunities as an advancement factor. Finally, they described mentors' essential role as they sought to advance to the superintendent role.

RQ3: Perceptions About Factors That Inhibit Success While in the Superintendent Role

The third research question examined participants' perceptions about factors that inhibit their success in the superintendent role. This question was asked so the researcher could better understand the barriers they face now that they are in the role. Data analysis was completed from

their responses to examine the factors inhibiting their success in the role. Each participant told different stories about factors and elements that inhibit them in their day-to-day operations as a superintendent and get in the way of their success. The overarching theme and subthemes that surfaced from the data are described below.

Individual Experiences Influenced Obstruction Factors

The primary theme from RQ3 was that individual experiences influenced obstruction factors. Their voices included explanations of their experiences in the superintendent role that they faced daily that obstruct their success while in the superintendent role. While each participant described how different obstacles inhibit their success, most responses were similar and can be related to their gender. Participants elaborated on how gender discrimination and the glass ceiling concept are visible and how they must strategically make decisions because they are women. In addition, participants also shared how the school board often acts as a barrier to support. Finally, the participants shared how time commitment and local politics impact their success and decision making as a superintendent. The participants' stories about gender discrimination, the school board, time commitment, and politics clearly illustrated that their individual experiences influenced obstruction factors.

Gender Discrimination (Glass Ceiling). Four out of the five participants talked about how gender discrimination and the glass ceiling concept obstructed their success as a superintendent. The participants told stories of how they had to strategically navigate situations when their gender was under the microscope and influenced their daily operations as superintendent. Ann, Betty, Cindy, and Emma felt that their gender had impacted their success. However, Dana was an outlier in that she did not mention gender as an obstruction to her success as a superintendent.

Ann talked about a time when male superintendents did not take her seriously because of her gender. Specifically, she went to a professional conference shortly after she became superintendent. She walked into a room of veteran superintendents sitting at a table. When describing their dismissiveness toward her, she said, "All these superintendents sitting there, and they were all men, and they looked up and looked at me and said that the instructional people were meeting down the hall." All the male superintendents assumed she was there as an instructional coach. This was one of many times she was shunned because of her gender.

Ann also recalled an incident when a well-known man in the community explicitly questioned her trustworthiness because of her gender. She stated, "I had one local guy from X. He did not want me in the role of superintendent because I'm a woman." The well-known resident told her he did not want her to be superintendent because she was a woman and supported middle schools. He further claimed that other people did not trust her because she was a woman. To combat this, Ann met with the man to let him know that she works for the board and does what the board asks of her.

Betty had several incidents of gender being a barrier for her when she was in the role of superintendent. One of the most intense occurred when she was conducting a presentation at a county commissioner's meeting. As she was giving an update, a male commissioner known for disliking the school system acted very rudely. He interrupted her presentation to express his dissatisfaction with some flooding that was taking place at one of the schools. He even produced a picture of the problem which he proudly displayed as evidence that the school district was not properly maintaining its facilities. Luckily, Betty had been proactive and addressed the flooding issue. She explained to the commissioner that gravel was put down to stop some of the water erosion and that there was a long-term plan to correct the problem. She said, "He rudely said you

can sit down now. He wasn't the chair. I was not walking away." Betty knew that he did not like

the school system, but he especially did not like that a woman was running it. In addition to the

personal affront, this hindered Betty because she knew could not seek assistance from the

commissioner for upcoming projects.

Betty also spoke about a time when she asked the county commissioners for approval to

start constructing a new high school. Through grant funding, she had the cost to construct the

high school down to $11 million dollars. The commissioners would not approve the funding. She

stated, "The commissioners would not approve the construction, but they did agree to a bond."

Betty believed that they agreed to the bond because they did not think there was any way that the

community would approve the bond at the upcoming election.

Betty felt that her being a woman was part of the reason the commissioners would not

approve the construction of a new high school. Nonetheless, Betty knew that her district needed

the new high school and that her gender should not impact what is best for students. She lobbied

passionately for the bond's passage and made sure that constituents saw past her gender and

understood the need. Her efforts were successful, and the bond passed. However, time was

wasted because the commissioners forced her to get a bond passed instead of trusting her

judgment and leadership of the construction project.

Cindy discussed a time when an upset parent that was a male did not trust her because

she was a woman. He was not satisfied with a decision made by a male, building-level principal.

The parent called Cindy and acted surprised when he realized she was a woman. She said, "His

first words were, I really don't know what you are going to be able to do anyway." She explained

that he was very passive-aggressive in his tone and that is how she realized he was referencing

her gender in his statement. She said he continued, "He has been a principal for quite some time,

and you are new to this." Cindy replied, "I am new to the superintendency, but I am not new to this work." She chose not to address the implicit gender bias in his comments and focused instead on finding a resolution. She was determined to prove that while she was a new, woman superintendent, she could do the job. She stated, "I am here to help you and help resolve the concerns." Even though the parent was reluctant, he did share with her the situation that needed to be addressed.

Cindy further discussed how creating an executive cabinet had to be carefully considered because of her gender. She consciously built her team that would assist in situations when people might be demeaning in their communication with women leaders. She stated, "I have been really fortunate to build a team around me that balances me out." She developed a division of school leadership people that served as building-level principals and selected men to serve as her deputy superintendents. Cindy continued, "There have been times when I had to be strategic and send a male into a certain situation." She did not give a specific incident when she did this, but did elaborate and said, "Sometimes I have to have one of the men from my cabinet team with me as part of that support, kind of to back up the decision." Cindy acted strategically when deciding whether to involve her male deputy superintendents or handle the situation herself.

Emma felt her longevity of over 30 years in her school district had minimized the gender bias within the day-to-day operations. However, she also noted that most stakeholders felt that gender stereotyping was present with the county commissioners and other leadership groups. She stated, "X is such a conservative county, and it is not as progressive as other districts." She continued to describe some progress in her county's acceptance of a woman superintendent, and she noted that the superintendency is changing from a male-dominated profession. However, the perception that women cannot run the business side of a district still looms large. She said that

the perception of women not being able to manage business affairs is present in her community. She stated, "When it comes to time to talk about school bonds or building new schools that's man's work." While she has not specifically had those conversations with the commissioners, she feels that would be their perception because she understands her community.

    School Board/Politics Ann, Betty, and Dana mentioned how the school board or local politics obstructed their success as superintendent. The participants told stories of specific incidents when a decision, comment, or action of the school board or other politicians obstructed their success. Cindy and Emma did not mention either of those as a barrier.

    Ann described a conundrum related to the board of education that ultimately led her to retire. Specifically, the board of education asked her to gather data on student enrollment at various schools to develop student reassignment options to make the district more economically efficient. She said, "There was an accountant on the board, and he knew that I could come up with a more efficient way to run things." Because she works for the school board, she complied with their request. However, her findings did not make the public happy. Her plans to maximize efficiency included shuttering schools and redistricting students. She stated, "I was like, folks I did what my board asked me to do." Simultaneously, several school board members were up for re-election, and some were not running for re-election. Several disgruntled community members who opposed redistricting ran for and secured seats on the school board. She stated, "Some people ran for the board so they could fire me after the schools were closed and the redistricting." This was a significant barrier for her because the newly composed school board was more concerned about finding ways to fire her even though she was doing what was requested. As a result, she felt she could not make decisions based on the best interests of students. She explained, "Are they wanting a superintendent so they can run the district or are

they truly wanting an instructional leader?" Ann felt that she was a strong instructional leader, but the personal agendas of the board interfered with her ability to improve academic performance. Even though she still had three years left on her contract, she retired. She stated, "It wasn't worth it."

Ann also spoke about the political environment surrounding the position being a professional challenge. She was constantly discouraged when she saw how political expediency impacted board decisions more than what she perceived to be in the children's best interests. She stated, "The politics were not always what was best for children." Specifically, she recalled a conversation when she was advocating for additional funding for a low-performing school. She said her school board made the following statement, "They are poor underachievers and it's not going to make a difference how much money you pour in there." Ann knew that students from low socio-economic backgrounds needed additional support, but the school board did not agree. Despite her frustration, she understood that it was important to find a balance with the school board and that she needed to keep the board as unified as possible for the district to accomplish anything. Her frustration was magnified because she previously had a strong board that worked collaboratively with her when she was hired as the superintendent. She stated, "I had a very cohesive board, everybody just kind of went along." Ann noted that a superintendent can achieve more positive results with a school board that works together and focuses on the best interests of the students.

Betty also talked about the political context inhibiting her success while serving as superintendent. When asked about her biggest challenge now that she is in the role she stated, "The political environment and I would be shocked if that wasn't everyone's number one hurdle." Betty realized the importance of knowing her legislators and other key stakeholders at

the state level. With the rise of charter schools and reductions in school funding, Betty discussed the importance of meeting with legislators to advocate for public school funding and position allotments. She stated, "One of the first things you need to do as a superintendent is to know your legislators and know the environment at the state level."

Betty was especially concerned about educational funding because her district is a low-wealth district. For example, she did a study to examine how low student proficiency rates on end-of-year state testing correlated with districts that were low wealth and had under 60% student availability to broadband internet in hopes of gaining support from legislators for additional funding. Even though the study revealed a correlation, the results had not picked up any traction with legislators. She stated, "There is a direct correlation to the districts that are low wealth, rural low wealth with under 60% broadband, and there was not one single district in the state of North Carolina that was above non-performing." Despite her frustration, she talked about remaining steadfast in her efforts to obtain additional funding to meet the needs of her students.

Betty also discussed the county commissioners being a barrier to her success. Specifically, they have refused to provide funding to provide local supplemental pay for teachers (often referred to as "teacher supplements"). Betty knows the importance of teacher retention, especially in a low-wealth district, and she believes that not paying a local supplement to teachers negatively impacts teacher retention. However, she does not think the commissioners see the big picture. She stated, "I mean we are one of the two districts that are across the state of North Carolina that give teachers zero supplement." While she was able to use Covid funding to provide a retention bonus to teachers, she has not had any luck securing additional funding from the commissioners to provide supplements. She continued, "One of the commissioners publicly said I can't see paying teachers a supplement when we can't even pay our own staff a

supplement." While Betty understood the principle of the comment, she wants the commissioners to understand the importance of the local supplement when recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers. Participant B explained, "There is no incentive to come to X county. There is no nightlife. There are no apartments." She is concerned that she will lose teachers to nearby districts that pay local supplements when the Covid money is no longer available to offer a retention bonus or a competitive supplement.

When describing the challenges associated with navigating the political context, Betty also talked about the importance of educating stakeholders who are not elected officials but are nonetheless positioned to impact education. She stated, "I think that political piece, maneuvering around you know various boards whether it is your own boards or any outside agencies or just parents or adults." It was important to her to make sure that the community was informed of the rationale for her decisions. She explained her belief that much of the criticism of education generally, and her decisions specifically, stems from a lack of understanding about education. She continued, "People don't have a clue as to what goes on in education, they just assume they do. They just think it is easy. That is a bad perception for the public to have."

Dana, who described herself as wanting to "push the envelope," also shared frustrations related to the political environment in which superintendents work. Specifically, she talked about wanting the district to be more innovative while working for an elected board that is often satisfied with the status quo. She believed the board's desire to limit changes slowed progress and inhibited her success in moving the district forward. She stated, "I think that for some districts that are not innovative, they have a hard time understanding those of us that are." She constantly thought about where she wanted to go next as a district and how they could be better. However, it was frustrating for her when getting everyone rallied around her ideas would take

longer than she anticipated. She explained, "I get frustrated when I am with people that want to be mediocre when they could be visionary." For example, she created an innovative schedule to have students return to school five days a week for in-person instruction during the Covid pandemic when most other districts used a rotating schedule that limited the days of in-person instruction for students. As the superintendent, she knew the importance of getting students back to school for learning but had to make sure all the school board members agreed with her proposed schedule. When describing the frustration of having to balance her desire for innovation against those who seek to limit changes, she said, "You always feel like someone is talking behind your back when you are trying to do what is right for kids."

Dana also discussed the county commissioners and other businesses and industries acting as a barrier. She explained that sometimes she felt like they did not trust her because she was a woman. She would take a male with her when meeting with them so that way she would feel like they would listen to her or move forward with the goal she was trying to achieve. She spoke about a construction project that she had going on in her district and she knew that if she went to the meeting alone, she would not be taken seriously, so she took a male counterpart with her. She stated, "I think for the expert advice they don't trust me, so I have to have a guy there to also back me up what don't understand about HVAC."

Time Commitment. Ann, Betty, Cindy, and Emma mentioned that the amount of time that must be committed to the duties of being a superintendent obstructed their success in some capacity. The participants gave specific examples of how time hindered their success.

Ann talked about how she was a perfectionist and wanted to have her hands in everything that was going on in her district. She quickly realized that she would have to change her leadership style. She stated, "I realized I could not be everywhere and do everything for

everybody, so I had to delegate." She learned to trust those around her to assist with carrying out her day-to-day duties. Whereas she was used to micromanaging in other roles, she discovered that she was spread too thin when she got overly involved in daily operations. She explained, "As a principal, I had my hand in everything. I knew to make sure it got carried out the way it should." She originally feared that things would not be done correctly if she was not directly involved, but quickly learned she could not fulfill all the superintendent duties if she did not delegate.

Ann talked about the time constraints and not having enough time to get everything that needed to get done to her level of satisfaction. She stated, "There were few nights that I got home before 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. from all of the meetings and after-hour events." To be a successful superintendent, she had to attend county commissioner meetings and different community events. Her demanding schedule impacted her performance because she felt that there were times when she could not get everything done. She stated, "I mean, it is a mentally and physically draining job."

Betty shared a time when she was at a conference, and it was time for an hour break on the first day. She felt overwhelmed from being out of the office, so she used the break to catch up on voicemails and emails. She said, "You go to these workshops and people are like, let's go play golf or workout." She explained that she had no idea how these people had time to do that because she struggled to return the phone calls she missed. She knew that even in her absence at a conference, she still had obligations to her district. She continued, "I have to do this or that and you can't." Betty worked to get everything done promptly but discovered that time constraints hindered her success as a superintendent.

Cindy discussed that being a superintendent meant that she must quickly transition from one task to another while ensuring sure the job is done with fidelity. She stated, "I feel like I need to have on roller skates because you are from one place to another and you have to turn and wear certain hats, multiple hats in one day." She explained that it was easy to forget things and overlook details because of the pace. She added that being a woman added to this pressure. She stated, "I literally look at my calendar to see what I am doing that day or the next to determine what I am going to wear, how my hair is going to look, whether or not I am going to have on makeup." All those components go into her daily preparation, and she added, "Men don't have to think about that. They just show up." Because the pace is so fast and things pop up or are canceled, she felt that being prepared and presentable was crucial.

Emma talked about how she is a visionary leader but very detailed orientated. When she led a new district initiative, she always made sure that she had people in place that could focus on the work because she understood that with her demanding schedule, she would not be able to be directly involved. She stated, "I think that is just a challenge when you are trying to juggle the day-to-day work of the superintendency and then layer that with some big project or big initiative." She explained that balancing the big projects and still fulfilling her other superintendent duties was hard. With her job, she said, "People that can't juggle a lot of things or have to be laser-focused on just one thing at a time you know there is a place for that, but I don't think it is the superintendency." She has had to learn how to balance her schedule and allocate her time to maximize efficiency while ensuring everything is attended to.

The primary theme from RQ3 was that individual experiences influenced obstruction factors. Participants shared stories about how their personal experiences influenced obstruction factors. As these participants shared recollections, they also discussed ways to overcome these

obstacles. Collectively, they shared that the best way to overcome these barriers is to work at what they do and capitalize on their strengths. Ann shared, "Capitalize on your strengths and know you are putting together strong instructional programs." By following that advice, participants worked to overcome their obstructions.

RQ4: Perceptions About Factors That Support Success While in the Superintendent Role

The fourth research question sought to examine the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that supported their success while in the role of superintendent. Data analysis was completed to examine the factors they felt supported their success. Each participant told different stories of experiences and elements that helped them succeed while in the superintendency. The overarching theme and subthemes that surfaced from the data are described in the following section.

Support Systems in Place to Ensure Success

One theme from RQ4 was the importance of having support systems in place to ensure success. Networking with colleagues, mentors, and other professionals and having building-level principal experience were important support systems to ensure success as superintendent. First, participants explained how networking with colleagues, mentors, and other professionals supported their success. Additionally, three participants talked about how experiences they encountered as building-level principals helped their success as a superintendent.

Networking with Colleagues, Mentors, and Other Professionals. Ann, Betty, Cindy, and Emma told stories about how networking with colleagues, mentors, and other professionals supported their success.

Ann stated that one of her biggest supports while in the superintendent role was having someone she trusted to talk to about incidents that she encountered. She said, "Having a

coworker from another district that you trust that you can share things with and that you can bounce things off each other was my number one support system." She recalled that having those people in place helped make sense of situations and reassured her that she was making the correct decision. She continued, "I had two other superintendent friends that I could call. We spent a lot of hours talking to each other about situations." In addition to having people from other districts to talk to, she said having a central office staff that believed in you was important.

Ann also referred to the responses she made when previously talking about the support she received while ascending to the superintendency. The professional networks that helped her to ascend to the superintendency supported her while serving in the role. She stated, "You can't underestimate those connections." She continued talking about how DPI and other professional people would be there if she needed encouragement, advice, or support. She stated, "X from DPI was very supportive, and they were my cheerleaders." In addition, she talked about the relationship with professional people and attorneys. For example, a close relationship with the board attorney helped when she had a disciplinary incident with a staff member. She said, "I had a principal that I dismissed, and she sued the county, and he was our person I worked closely with." The trusting relationship that she developed with the attorney made it easier to resolve the challenging situation. She continued, "I never minded picking up the phone and calling him." Having those professional connections is vital to being successful in the superintendent role.

Betty also discussed the importance of a professional support network of women superintendents. Specifically, she shared that she is part of a group of women superintendents that she relies upon for professional support and friendship. She said that her group of women leader friends was formed over time from going to different meetings and conferences. This was important because this group of friends would help one another address challenging situations.

She stated, "I know I could pick up the phone and call about everything and it would stay confidential." To Betty, it was essential to have this network because she often needed advice or encouragement from someone else that has been through similar situations. In addition to the professional support, she enjoys seeing this group outside of work. She stated, "I have become very close to them, and we go out to dinner, and we call it just the women's group." That networking is important to Betty's success.

Cindy discussed that mentors that she met in her leadership academy are important to her success as a superintendent. The mentors serve as her network, and she created a repository of contacts she can reach out to for advice. For example, she talked about the attorneys she met. She stated, "I ended up with great relationships and mentors and people who had been superintendents, especially attorneys that have experience." Because she trusted these people, it made it easier to reach out to them when she had questions. She continued, "It is more than just a professional learning experience where you walk away with a network and a number of contacts." Having this network has supported her success as a superintendent.

Emma shared that her success comes from the support of other women superintendents and her infinity group. Her infinity group is made up of superintendents that lead districts with similar student enrollment. She said, "We try to support each other." They support each other by calling each other and asking for advice or talking about professional dilemmas. She continued, "I have found mentors and other collegial support systems." In addition to her infinity group, she explained that she looked up to other women superintendents. As previously mentioned, she talked about the woman superintendent that she replaced. She stated, "I had someone there for me as a model for me as a female superintendent that really supported and helped me." She stayed in contact with her and relied on her frequently for advice.

Emma realized the importance of relying on other women superintendents for mutual support. She stated, "I really sought other female leaders that I felt like wanted me to be successful. There are about six or seven, but we try to have dinner once a quarter." As friends, they would talk about incidents within the districts as well as personal occurrences. Emma said, "We try to support each other, and I think those kind of groups are going to naturally continue to grow."

Principal Experience. Ann believed that her time in other educational roles leading up to the superintendency assisted with her success, particularly being a building-level principal. While she understood that a superintendent had to be well-rounded, she did not feel that someone without principal experience could easily navigate the complexity of the superintendency. Rather, she felt that her service as a principal equipped her with an understanding of school district dynamics that was essential to her future success. Specifically, as a principal she had to develop interpersonal relationships with an array of competing stakeholders, and she had to make nuanced decisions about professional dilemmas that sometimes mimicked the challenges she faced as superintendent. She stated, "I think it is important for superintendents to come through the ranks in order to have an understanding of the school." She was referring to being able to understand the organizational complexity of the district. She continued, "I have a math background and I am a number-crunching person." She knew she had the ability to use that to make her successful. While someone from the business sector may have the same ability to manipulate numbers, they lack the ability to make the connection with the numbers and the best interest of students and stakeholders. She continued, "I don't understand how a person from the business sector could just come in and effectively run a school system."

Betty recalled that she was assigned to serve as principal at a high school that was going through turmoil. While she was initially uneasy about the assignment, she now realizes how much that experience prepared her to become superintendent. She stated," I thought they hated me at that point because it was awful." It took her some time to establish trust with the staff and students while restoring orders. She compared that experience to how it was when she entered her superintendency. She had to foster relationships and earn trust so everyone would buy into her ideas. She stated, "My experience as a high school principal provided me with valuable knowledge in budgets, facilities, personnel, and of course, students and maintaining a focus on student instruction." As a principal, she became an expert in those areas, and she was able to make more informed decisions as a superintendent. However, she had to learn to let the people that were hired to oversee those departments do just that. She continued, "You quickly learn that distributive leadership is essential." Betty explained that if you do not, you will get in the weeds and not be able to effectively see the big picture.

Emma spent much of her career as a high school principal. She discussed how her experiences as a principal were pivotal to her success as superintendent. She stated, "I feel that has really helped me a lot and the time spent as a high school principal." She continued to explain that many people believe that if you did not have experience as a high school principal, you may have a hard time understanding the role of a superintendent and not be selected. She said:

> I feel like whether this is fair or not, I feel like it is a little bit of a, I feel they are perceived or is a deficit either people feel like they can't understand what it is like to be 24/7 in all the athletics and extracurricular that go on or if they really don't then they can't understand because they haven't experienced it.

She also explained that serving as principal helped her craft conversations with people because she has been in their position and can closely relate. Experience as a principal also helped her develop her decision-making skills. She also felt that principals and other staff members she supervises were more likely to trust her decisions because she had been a building-level principal. She explained that she would have difficulty trusting someone who had not been a building-level principal. She stated, "You can't understand if you haven't experienced it."

Lastly, Emma described how being a principal prepared her for the demands of the superintendency. Specifically, she described how the long hours and multi-tasking that are required of principals are similar to what she experiences as superintendent. She said, "It's all consuming if you do it well and that's very similar to the superintendency." She continued, "I know what it is like to be 24/7 in all the athletics and extracurricular that go on." Having experience with a demanding schedule helped her learn to balance her load as a superintendent.

The primary theme from RQ4 was the importance of having support systems in place to ensure success. All participants shared stories about their experiences of support systems that supported their success as superintendent. Networking with colleagues, mentors, and other professionals and having building-level principal experience were essential support systems.

Summary

This chapter detailed how participants responded to the study's four research questions. The questions involved the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that obstructed their advancement into the superintendent role and factors that supported their advancement into the superintendent role. Additionally, the research questions addressed the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that inhibit their success while aspiring to the role of superintendent along with perceptions of women school district

superintendents about factors that support their success while the role of superintendent. The study aimed to assess these research questions and reveal through participant interviews the supports and barriers that women superintendents face.

This chapter included an analysis of the responses given by the five participants to the interview questions associated with each of the four research questions. Results were analyzed, evaluated, coded, and assigned a theme based on the formation of patterns seen in previous levels. Implications associated with the findings of this research along with recommendations for future studies are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This chapter summarizes the problem, purpose, methods, and ethical components of this research study. Conversations concerning the findings, connections to existing literature, and recommendations for future practice including recommendations for future research are presented for each of the four research questions. In addition, Chapter 5 provides suggestions for women leaders resulting from this study's findings. Finally, the chapter ends with a summary of important elements from the study.

The labor market supports that women in managerial ranks in the workforce continue to increase (Grupton, 2009). However, women are still underrepresented in advanced leadership roles (Cataylst, 2022). This holds true in education as well. Specifically, women represent 71% of the teachers in North Carolina, but only 26% of the superintendent positions are held by women (Gordon, 2020; Hart et al., 2022). While the presence of women superintendents has increased over the years, they still represent a small percentage of all superintendents (Tienken, 2021). While barriers such as gender discrimination, time commitments, and family dynamics often prevent some women from securing a superintendent role, other women superintendents speak openly about the support of mentors and career experiences that helped them become superintendents. Therefore, the problem that this research study aimed to examine was the barriers and supports faced by women superintendents.

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was to identify barriers and supports faced by women school district superintendents as they ascended into the role and while they serve in the role. The purpose of Chapter 5 is to provide important contributions of this study toward understanding the barriers and supports women superintendents face.

This qualitative research study was conducted using face-to-face interviews. Four currently serving and one retired superintendent from North Carolina that identify as women were asked to participate in the study, and all five agreed to be interviewed. Digital demographic surveys, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, and Google form follow-up questions comprised the various data sources utilized in this research study.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) discussed the importance of ethical considerations and the importance of researchers protecting their participants. In addition, researchers should be sensitive to the participants and have their best interests and welfare in mind (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Keeping all this in consideration, it remained the ongoing intent for the researcher to implement feedback from the dissertation committee and IRB process to ensure that the protection of the participants was not jeopardized.

The protection of the participants was conducted in the following manner throughout the research study. All the participants and information remained confidential, with only the researcher having access to the information and data collected. While participants shared personal thoughts and experiences, interview questions centered on barriers and supports of superintendents and did not ask anything sensitive in nature. Pseudonyms were given to participants and used throughout the research process to further secure the confidentiality of responses.

In addition to being sensitive to confidentiality, this study fully complies with the guidelines in place by UNC Charlotte and received approval from the IRB review process. Due to the content of this study, the risks were minimal. At no time were participants exposed to physical or psychological harm. Furthermore, the researcher ensured that each participant understood the nature of the study and that participation was voluntary. Participants were also

informed that there were no penalties if they decided not to participate or withdrew once the research process started. Participants also had the right to decline to answer questions if they desired. These terms were communicated from the beginning of the study.

The literature review explained the creation and evolution of the superintendent's position while examining factors that impacted women in the superintendency. With the focus of the study being perceptions of women school district school superintendents about factors that supported or hindered their advancement in the role and the factors that support and hinder their success while in the role, it was also essential to investigate literature related to these topics. Previous literature discussed barriers women face while ascending to the superintendency, but research is limited involving women overcoming the barriers.

Two frameworks guided this study. Both the Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Gatekeeper Theory shaped this study because they emphasize the marginalization of women. These theoretical perspectives helped shape the research questions and provided the lens through which the data were analyzed.

Nancy Hartsock's (1980) Feminist Standpoint Theory was used to frame this study and analyze the barriers and supports encountered by women superintendents. The core concepts and research that guided this study were based on a feminist perspective and how power imbalances relate to today's superintendency (Harding, 2004). Just as Feminist Standpoint Theory highlights disparate, gender-based rights, data about women in the superintendency reveal inequitable, gender-based opportunities for district-level leadership. This disparate gender-based outcome is illuminated by the overwhelming presence of women in the lower levels of school district hierarchies and the preponderance of men at the highest levels.

The Gatekeeper Theory, developed by Kurt Lewin in 1943, was also a fundamental part of this research that investigates how school boards and other entities act as gates that keep women from securing superintendent positions (Roberts, 2005). Comparably, in the search for a superintendent, school board members, search committees, and other influential people act as gatekeepers. They control the selection and interview process methods, thereby shaping the outcome. Gender-based inequities arise as the pathway of the woman leader is often blocked by gatekeepers that men do not encounter (Connell et al., 2015).

The structure of the theories presented by Hartsock (1980) and Lewin (1943) was crucial in the triangulation of the research questions, interview questions, and participant responses. Together the triangulation allowed the researcher to identify barriers and supports faced by women school district school superintendents as they ascended into the role and while they serve in the role.

This study's results indicate that women face numerous barriers as they are ascending to the superintendency and serving in the role. Women superintendents identified several barriers as well as supports that assisted them in overcoming the barriers as they ascended into the superintendent role. For example, family dynamics, a lack of confidence, and gender inequities were all experienced as obstacles by participants as they ascended into the superintendency. The obstacles were mitigated by supports such as previous work experiences, professional development, and supportive mentors.

This study also highlighted barriers and supports that women superintendents experienced while serving in the role. For example, gender discrimination still occurred after becoming superintendent, sometimes manifesting in participants being minimized in their professional interactions. Additionally, participants described challenges related to the political

climate and significant time demands of the position. These obstacles were mitigated by supportive mentors and confidence gained through previous work experiences.

<div align="center">**Discussion of Findings**</div>

RQ1: Perceptions About Factors That Obstructed Advancement Into a Superintendent Role

This research revealed that individual experiences influenced advancement factors. Explicit barriers impacted participants as they advanced into the role of superintendent. Three separate barriers emerged from the participants' voices.

First, family dynamics were viewed as a barrier by participants. Participants agreed that with the time commitment that is required by the superintendency, family dynamics obstruct women from being able to apply for the superintendency earlier in their careers. Specifically, women are often the primary caregiver for their children and cannot commit the time needed to serve as a superintendent. Along with being a caregiver, relocating to a new community affected family dynamics. Participants had to strategically select the district where they served as superintendent because they typically did not want to make their families relocate.

Connections exist between the findings of this study about the barriers that women superintendents face and previous literature. First, research supports that family obligations and duties prevent women from applying for superintendent positions. Second, women struggle to find an appropriate balance between work and home (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Along with finding a balance that meets the needs of their family, research revealed that women often feel the need to provide consistency and comfort for their family and are unwilling or unable to relocate to a district outside their current location (Connell et al., 2015; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015).

Like existing literature, participants in this study expressed that family obligations limited their ascendency to the role of superintendent. The unwillingness to relocate their families limited the number of superintendent positions that participants applied for. All but one participant in this study explained that even though their children were older, they would have to consider the location of the superintendency and make sure it was a good fit for family obligations. One participant did have small children, and while she did feel that she was overlooked in several instances for a superintendent position, she served as an outlier and relocated to another state to secure a position. By contrast, three of the five participants secured superintendent positions in the district where they were already employed. This made the transition more seamless and allowed them to overcome the barrier.

Participants also discussed the importance of ensuring they had enough time and endurance to dedicate to the duties of being a superintendent while simultaneously caring for their families. Since most of the participants waited until their children were grown to become superintendents, this meant they were older and would have to make sure they could handle the taxing duties. This finding aligns with Burke and Karambayya's 2004 finding that the exhaustive and demanding lifestyle pace of nurturing a family contributes to many women not having the time or energy to pursue superintendent positions.

A lack of confidence was another barrier discussed by participants that is found in the literature. While participants expressed confidence in their abilities to effectively serve as superintendent, that confidence was not always there as they strived to reach the superintendency. Participants felt that their lack of self-efficacy and belief in themselves slowed the process and prevented them from applying sooner. All participants noted strengths that they possessed, but some explained that there were aspects of the job that they felt they would

struggle with. From talking with the participants, low confidence was present in areas with which they were unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity acted as a barrier and prevented the participants from applying for positions sooner. For example, all participants had a strong background in curriculum and instruction but questioned their skills related to finance and management. Research supports that women often display low self-efficacy and question their capacity to serve as superintendents (Clark & Johnston, 2017; Gresham & Sampson 2019; Grupton, 2009).

Lastly, gender inequities were a barrier that participants discussed that is found in the literature. Multiple participants recalled at least one incident in which they felt they were the victim of gender discrimination while seeking a superintendent position. Participants worked to overcome these barriers and persevere by being resilient and knowing their worth and value while finding a vacant superintendent position that was the right fit for them. Participants felt they were subject to gender inequities, and that did prevent them from seeking superintendent positions.

Gender inequities experienced by the participants in this study illustrate Kurt Lewin's Gate Keeper Theory. This theory investigates how school boards and other entities act as gates that keep women from securing superintendent positions (Roberts, 2005). The participants in this study perceived that they faced a disadvantage when they were interviewed because of their gender. While they did not recognize it as gender discrimination at the time of the interviews, thoughtful reflection caused three participants in the study to become confident they were not selected for the position because of their gender. This finding illustrates previous research from Connell et al. (2015) in which women reported experiencing gender bias in either blatant or concealed acts from entities involved in the recruiting and hiring of superintendents.

These findings are important because they illuminate barriers that hinder women from applying for superintendent positions at the same rate as men. These barriers contribute to women not securing superintendent positions, leaving them in teaching or entry-level leadership roles. Just as Feminist Standpoint Theory highlights disparate, gender-based rights, these barriers that women encounter while ascending to the superintendency reveal inequitable, gender-based opportunities for district-level leadership (Harding, 2004).

RQ2: Perceptions About Factors That Supported Advancement Into a Superintendent Role

This research revealed that numerous supports impacted the advancement of participants into the superintendent role. The participants told stories that revealed the theme that advancement factors are multifaceted and systematic. Participants elaborated on three concepts that acted as supports to their advancement.

The first support factor discussed by participants was their career pathway. Existing research suggests that a common barrier was that women are often poorly positioned for career paths leading to the superintendency (Glass, 2000). The AASA reported that approximately 75% of elementary school teachers were women and that nearly 75% of superintendents did not teach at the elementary level (Gordon, 2020). Despite this research, participants selected different pathways to advance their careers, some including teaching at the elementary level. They all felt confident that their pathways supported their advancement because of the experiences they gained while in those positions. Three participants with high school experience agreed that being a high school administrator helped them to develop the skill set for a superintendent, especially learning how to navigate the demands of being available at all hours. The experiences of these three participants support previous research (Gordon, 2020; Glass, 2000; Wiggens & Coggins, 1986) suggesting the importance of high school experiences for becoming a superintendent.

While the participants previously worked in educational leadership roles, not all had principal experience. The two that did not have principal experiences felt that their alternative pathways still provided them with opportunities that set them up to apply for superintendent positions. That contrasts with the previous research (Gordon, 2020; Glass, 2000; Wiggens & Coggins, 1986) that suggests the path to the superintendency generally begins at the secondary level.

Participants also discussed how professional development supported their advancement. Specifically, all participants completed an aspiring superintendent's leadership program. According to the participants, this professional development was beneficial regarding interview preparation and learning about the duties of a superintendent. The aspiring superintendent's professional development also allowed the participants to establish support networks. These networks helped the participants apply for positions and strengthened their skill sets. These findings align with literature suggesting that formal mentoring programs and leadership academies assist aspiring women superintendents in building their professional networks, social networks, and leadership skills (Smiley et al., 2021).

Lastly, participants shared how mentors strongly supported them as they aspired to become superintendents, a finding that aligns with the literature. Specifically, Reed and Patterson (2007) described how mentors are important sounding boards for superintendents and particularly helpful when facing adversity. More recently, Clark and Johnson (2017) reported that women who received helpful mentoring when they first became superintendents feel they should mentor other aspiring and practicing women superintendents. In this study, the participants shared that their mentors were practicing superintendents they worked for at some point. One participant talked about how her superintendent was the one that encouraged her to

apply for the superintendent position when he retired. Another participant talked about how her superintendent was also a woman who encouraged and advised her as she pursued the position after her retirement. In addition to superintendents, participants had other school employees they thought of as mentors. One participant shared that while serving as the chief academic officer, she was mentored by a veteran director of elementary education. Even though she supervised this employee, she valued her input and appreciated her advice.

These findings are important because they illuminate supports that women experienced while advancing into the superintendent role. These supports encouraged women to apply for and secure superintendent positions.

RQ3: Perceptions About Factors That Inhibit Success While in the Superintendent Role

This research revealed factors that inhibited participants' success while serving as superintendent. Three separate factors emerged from the participants' voices.

First, just as Feminist Standpoint Theory highlights disparate, gender-based rights (Harding, 2004), participants talked about how gender discrimination and the glass ceiling concept obstructed their success as superintendent. The participants told stories of how they had to strategically navigate situations when their gender was scrutinized and influenced their daily operations as superintendent. Participants always had to carefully think about how they would craft responses or plans to address situations based on their audience. For example, participants talked about taking a male colleague to meetings and events involving tasks such as finance and construction because they were commonly considered "man's work." Participants described not being taken seriously when dealing with these types of tasks. While the participants did not mind bringing a male colleague along, it often hindered their process because they would have ensure

their schedule coordinated with the meeting. This claim by participants aligns with Brunner's (2000b) finding that women superintendents are often met with silence.

School boards and the political climate were also mentioned as factors that inhibited their success as superintendent. Participants talked about how their school boards frequently overstepped their boundaries. Participants described being frustrated when their boards expected unqualified support for their agendas, even if the superintendent did not believe the board was acting in the best interest of students. Gresham and Sampson's (2019) research aligned with the participants' discussions about how school boards hinder success due to their limited confidence in women superintendents and their ability to manage the district.

 In addition to having their own agenda, school board members often overstepped because they did not trust the work of a woman superintendent. Even though existing research supports that women are more apt in curriculum and instruction (Sampson et al., 2015), participants often felt their competencies were questioned. According to research, their abilities were often questioned because they lacked management experience and were not seen as financial managers (Connell et al., 2015).

Lastly, participants discussed how the time commitment of being a superintendent hindered their success. Regardless of the location or size of the school district, job descriptions and expectations for superintendents are long and exhausting. Their duties include a range of managerial duties, instructional responsibilities, and analytical tasks (Kowalski, 1999). Participants talked about how the job was never-ending and it seemed like they could never catch their breath. Even when others would be relaxing at conferences, participants needed to utilize their spare time to check in at the office or catch up on emails. Mostly, participants talked about how they felt they were always on call. For example, employees, community members, board

members, or other stakeholders would call them at all hours of the night. This finding aligns with research supporting that the superintendent is the district's leader and must be available at all times to support the day-to-day operations and be responsible for everything that goes on in the system (Tienken, 2021).

These findings are important because they illuminate the factors inhibiting women's success in the superintendent role. The participants in this study remained focused on the needs of their district and were able to neutralize the factors that inhibited success.

RQ4: Perceptions About Factors That Support Success While in the Superintendent Role

This research revealed factors that supported women superintendents while in the role. The participants told stories that revealed the theme of how important it is to have support systems in place to ensure success. Participants elaborated on two factors that acted as supports while in the superintendent role. First, participants described support from networks of colleagues, mentors, and other professionals. Second, three participants talked about how previous experience as a principal prepared them to serve as superintendents.

The first support factor discussed was networking with colleagues, mentors, and other professionals. Participants told stories about how networking with colleagues, mentors, and other professionals supported their success. Participants agreed that it was important for them to have trusted colleagues, especially superintendents from other districts, to confer with when addressing challenging situations. Participants recalled that having colleagues in place helped them to make sense of situations and provided reassurance that the correct decisions were being made. Having support groups was vital to their success. They appreciated having professionals with similar experiences providing feedback and nonjudgmental advice. They described these support groups as vital to their success. Existing studies reinforce (Connell et al., 2015; Reed &

Patterson, 2007; Smiley et al., 2021) that colleagues are influential in the success of women superintendents. They provide support to assist with adversity and act as a sounding board for ideas.

In addition to colleagues, women superintendents found mentors imperative to their success while in the role. The mentors that the participants had ranged from previous superintendents to veteran educators. Each mentor played an important role in the success of the participants. Mostly, the mentors provided advice and shared scenarios involving experiences they previously encountered. Participants were advised by their mentors not to make hasty decisions or make changes too quickly without thoroughly assessing the district's needs. That advice shared by the participants echoes existing research. Sampson and Austin (2018) stated that mentor's most commonly reported advice was not to make changes to the district as soon as they started in the role.

Participants also referred to the professional networks that have assisted them while serving in the superintendent role. They talked about not underestimating the power of connections, especially how DPI and other professional people would be there if they needed encouragement, advice, or support. Specifically, relationships with professional people and attorneys were vital for success when dealing with challenging situations. Most of these connections were formed from attending leadership academies. In these programs, women superintendents not only enhanced their leadership skills but built their social networks and social skills. Participants created a repository of contacts that they could reach out to for advice. Women were more likely to apply for these leadership academies that specialize in mentoring and networking (Smiley et al., 2021). Having these networks supported their success while in the superintendent role.

The last factor was described by three participants. Three of the five participants served as principals prior to advanced leadership roles. Those three participants credit their success as superintendent to the experiences they encountered while serving in that capacity. Participants believed their time in other educational roles leading up to the superintendency assisted with her success, particularly being a building-level principal. They felt that being a building-level principal made them well-rounded and allowed them to look at situations through different lenses. In addition, participants felt that the experiences allowed them to communicate more effectively with stakeholders and look at situations more globally. Their experience provided them with valuable knowledge in budgets, facilities, personnel, and of course, students and maintaining a focus on student instruction. As a principal, they became an expert in those areas and were able to make more informed decisions as a superintendent. While the research that supports this claim is limited, it was reported that most superintendents worked as secondary principals (Wiggens & Coggins, 1986).

These findings are important because they illuminate the factors that supported participants' success as superintendent. Participants recognized the importance of having support systems in place to ensure success.

Implications

The results of this study produced recommendations to address the lack of representation from women in the superintendency and future research to address why there are not more women superintendents.

Barriers that impact the ascendency of women to the superintendency need to be eliminated or minimalized. While numerous barriers emerged from the study, the one common barrier that surfaced was family, especially having to relocate. Betty stated,

I lived on farmland that my grandparents owned and passed down from generation and I still have that. It won't go out of our family, but knowing that the superintendent must live in the district that they are superintendent is difficult. Luckily, my kids were already out of high school and to college so it was easier.

Ann echoed Betty's concerns about relocating, "I had to be very strategic where I applied. I had grandkids so you know age and family. That is probably one of the factors for females." Emma talked about the double standard that exists concerning relocating to the district. She shared a conversation she had with a colleague. She stated, "He said he would go home and say honey we are moving. And I think that is a lot and much more acceptable when it is the male."

Currently, North Carolina statutes require the superintendent to live in the district they serve. Based on the findings of this study, it would be beneficial for further discussions and research to take place that could examine the requirement of residency because several participants alluded to the fact that they passed on numerous superintendent positions because they were not able to move. This law should be further analyzed because of the impact it had on women applicants. In addition, it would be helpful to eliminate the societal norm that the man is the breadwinner and decision maker for the family. It should be normalized that women can feel comfortable about having difficult conversations that impact their families. The correlation with the study's theoretical framework is on point in this instance. According to the Feminist Standpoint Theory men and women inherit different rights allowing them to live structurally and systematically different lives (Wood, 2009).

This study also revealed barriers that women encountered once they secured the superintendency. Those barriers can account for the lack of representation from women in the superintendency due to not being able to balance the duties of a superintendent with other

responsibilities. Often women that obtain the superintendency relinquish the role because of the time constraints it poses. RQ3 revealed that women in the superintendent role must create a support system to personally and professionally assist with time commitments. Emma stated,

My husband has always been supportive. I have a very supportive family structure. You're not at home much and there are sacrifices made for that and it has to be an all-in approach. I have been very fortunate to have my mother and when my dad was still alive they were very supportive with my children.

Cindy had a similar response. She communicated,

I do, jokingly, I call my husband the preferred parent. If the kids have a doctor appointment, he is the one making their appointments. I cannot tell you what size shoe my kids wear. If they need new socks, my husband takes care of all that. When I call him he picks up the phone and says Cindy's taxi service.

Cindy continued to talk about the need for a support system by sharing how her mom also helps her. She said, "My mom is not the typical grandmother. She moved to this area from another state to be closer to the grandchildren and to help." Dana echoed her response, "Your family really has to understand why you are doing the job for them to stick with you through everything because it is really a hard job." Forming a support system to assist with the ongoing demands of the job is imperative.

Being surrounded by a team of supportive and competent professionals is essential to the success of women superintendents. Betty stated, "I had good teams. It wasn't me. I had good people." Given all that Betty wanted to accomplish as a superintendent, she knew she would have to rely on others to help. That is why she communicated the importance of ensuring you had people in place that you could trust and depend on to help with the workload. Without a

strong team, it is impossible to be able to manage all the operations of a superintendent with other responsibilities. Ann communicated, "The other piece is having a central office staff that believed in you and had your back. I always felt that I had that in a central office. I think they supported me very much."

RQ3 reiterated that women aspiring to be superintendents need to ensure that they have a support system in place personally and professionally to combat the time constraints that come with the job.

It is also evident that having mentors and professional development is imperative for practicing and aspiring women superintendents. Dana stated,

They were good supports for me and mentors when I was in X county. They have at least 6,000 employees and he [the former superintendent] picked me and one other to go to the aspiring superintendents' program. So naming me made me feel like I can do it.

Cindy communicated, "Leading up to my participation in the superintendent academy my mentors were people that I had worked with as colleagues who had recently gone into the superintendency or people who had been superintendents for quite some time." Emma added, "I think we have great state organizations that support all superintendents, not just female. I have found mentors and other you know collegial support systems through that, primarily are other women and other female leaders." Betty also agreed that having professional development would be helpful. She stated, "I encourage them to get into the aspiring superintendent program with Jack Hoke. Jack is a wealth of knowledge." Lastly, Ann noted, "The support group he (Jack Hoke) did was good. Because it was a group of assistant superintendents aspiring to be superintendents and that was a really good program."

Multiple research questions revealed the need for aspiring superintendents to secure mentors and seek professional development for advancement. According to the participants' responses, mentoring and professional development for prospective leaders are justified, and they are crucial in securing a superintendent role. Through attending professional development opportunities, women candidates become aquatinted with mentors that assist them after the professional development concluded (Sharpe et al., 2004). These relationships are the support structures that the participants spoke of and shared the importance of having these mentors to assist with the hiring process and to assist once the role has been secured.

In addition, research from this study revealed the negative impact of gender bias and the glass ceiling effect demonstrated by school boards and other elected officials, specifically county commissioners. Ann stated,

> Down there [in X district] the guy was from out of state, and he was an assistant superintendent just like I was and did not have as much experience as I did. I think this was biased because of gender too. It was between me and a male and the guy ended up getting it.

Ann felt that the other applicant was selected because he was a man even though she had more experience. She continued, "He was somebody's cousin. That was a strange situation."

Ann spoke of one more negative situation when applying for a superintendent position. She felt confident that she would be selected for the job because she was approached by members of the school board and asked to apply. She stated, "I got a call from X [school board member] and they wanted me to come and talk to them about the superintendent position." She did and she applied. She was very disappointed and felt like gender impacted their decision when later a board member approached her and said, "He is a big athlete and played college football."

While she admits that it was for the best, she was not selected, she strongly believes gender played a role in her not being selected.

Betty also believes that women know the importance of women in educational leadership roles, but a lot of stakeholders overlook that value because of gender bias. She stated,

A lot of your boards that interview and that provide funding like commissioners are still mainly male and a lot of them are old school and don't see the value in a female, whether they say it or not actions speak clearly.

Betty continued by giving a specific example of those actions. She continued by talking about an incident in which she was speaking to the county commissioners about a facility issue. As she was explaining the issue a male commissioner looked directly at her and she stated he rudely scoffed, "You can sit down now, and was not even the chair." She is certain this only happened because she was a woman trying to address the panel about a facilities issue. She said, "I felt like a little kid that had been reprimanded."

Providing training for school boards regarding gender bias and hiring practices is imperative for practicing and aspiring women superintendents. School boards are often the gatekeepers of the hiring process for the superintendent position; therefore, they need to examine how they perceive women as leaders and be aware of potential biases they may face when interviewing a female candidate. Implementation of gender bias and hiring practices training for school boards could prevent aspiring women superintendents from having some of the same inappropriate experiences that the participants in this study encountered during their interview process as well as when they are serving as superintendent. Training would assist school board members with being conscious of implicit and explicit biases when hiring and working with a woman superintendent. Training would also benefit county commissioners and other

stakeholders that consistently communicate with women superintendents to ensure they are not discriminating based on gender.

Also, aspiring and seated women superintendents should be encouraged to stay abreast of current research, literature, and statistics concerning gender issues in higher educational roles. Bringing awareness to the issue will allow women to navigate the advancement process with confidence and instill confidence in women that are superintendents.

Lastly, the findings of this study illuminate the need for additional studies on this vital topic. The stories of often marginalized women superintendents need to be told, suggesting the need for more qualitative work that gives voice to their experience. While this study adds to the limited literature about the barriers and supports women superintendents' experience while serving in the role, more work in the area is warranted. Quantitative studies that generate larger quantities of more generalizable data are also needed. Finally, studies exploring the preparation women superintendents receive that helps them overcome gender-based inequities are needed.

<div align="center">**Conclusions**</div>

This study started with an inquiry by the researcher wondering why there were so few women superintendents. As a woman educator who is motivated to become a superintendent and is passionate about education, it is perplexing why there are not more women superintendents. The inquiry was then brought to five women superintendents that had lived experiences that they shared. Through their voices and perceptions, the researcher hoped to be able to establish some conclusions. The challenge remains of how one encourages women teachers to climb the educational leadership ranks to the superintendency when many factors that impact advancement. Therefore, this qualitative, exploratory case study aimed to identify barriers and supports faced by women school district superintendents as they ascended into the role and while

they serve in the role. By giving voice to the lived experiences of women superintendents, the researcher hoped to describe the phenomenon of women dominating the teaching profession and other entry-level positions in education yet having a noticeably limited presence in the superintendency.

Nancy Hartsock's (1980) Feminist Standpoint Theory and The Gatekeeper Theory, developed by Kurt Lewin were used as framework to understand the research and to make recommendations for moving forward. The findings from the study were consistent with previous research to some degree. Findings concluded that individual experiences influenced advancement factors. Those experiences included numerous barriers and gender inequities. In addition, it was found that advancement factors are multifaceted and systematic. Those factors covered traditional and nontraditional pathways, professional development and mentors.

Recommendations from the data included the need for barriers to be eliminated or minimized. In addition, the data revealed a need to ensure that women aspiring to be a superintendent have a support system to assist with time constraints. Lastly, the research revealed a need for aspiring superintendents to secure mentors and seek professional development opportunities to help prepare them to become a superintendent and continue their learning once in the role.

Giving voice to the experiences of women superintendents was important to this research to ensure that it can be better understood why women are not equally represented in the superintendent role. Studying the barriers and supports women superintendents encountered could one day lead to significant opportunities to narrow the gender gap of women in the superintendency. Bringing awareness to the barriers and supports women superintendents

experience could also foster more equitable workplaces. Lastly, it is the hope that over time,

more women that are equally qualified as men will assume the role of superintendent.

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APPENDIX A: INTRODUCTORY EMAIL

-----Original Message-----
From: Dale Ellis <dale.ellis@montgomery.k12.nc.us>

Good afternoon fearless school system leaders! Emily Shaw, my Director of Secondary Education, is a doctoral student at UNC-Charlotte. She is to that wonderful stage of completing her doctoral research. Her topic is on women in the Superintendent role. As such, she would like to interview you about your experiences. You would remain anonymous. Neither you nor your district would be named. I told her I would share your contacts with her and send an introductory email. I know you all have more than you can do, but if you are able to help, I know she would appreciate it. She will be getting in touch with you soon. I hope you all have a great week!

Thanks! Dale

Dale Ellis, Ed. D
Superintendent
Montgomery County Schools

#imagineMCS22

APPENDIX B: CONTACT PROTOCOL

Department of Educational Leadership
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte NC 28223

"An Exploratory Study of Barriers and Supports Faced by Women Superintendents"
Emily Y. Shaw / UNC Charlotte / Educational Leadership Department

Greetings . . . this is Emily Shaw, and I am completing a research project entitled "An Exploratory Study of Barriers and Supports Faced by Women Superintendents." The purpose of this project is to identify barriers and supports faced by women school district superintendents as they ascended into the role and while they serve in the role.

In your role as a superintendent, I would like to ask you to participate in an audio-taped interview on this subject. You have been selected because of your status a current or retired woman superintendent in North Carolina with at least two years of experience.

Your participation in the project will take approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes; approximately 15 minutes to complete a very brief demographic survey, 45 minutes with the interview itself, 15 minutes to complete the interview follow-up prompt via google docs, and approximately 30 minutes to verify your comments as they appear in the final work product or to follow up on any details. If you decide to participate, you will be one of approximately 4–6 subjects in this study. I am happy to arrange the interview at a time and place that is convenient for you.

Any information about your participation, including your identity, will remain confidential. The data collected by the investigator will not contain any identifying information or any link back to you or your participation in this study. Also, you are asked to not use identifying information of fellow school district employees, immediate co-workers, students, parents, or others during the interview.

Attached to this email are the Informed Consent Form and the Interview Protocol Form. Both documents provide detailed information about the research study and the interview process. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at any point of the process.

At this point in the process, you have several options. If you are ready to agree to participate in the study, you can tell me that now. If you would prefer not to participate in the study, you can tell me that now as well. Or, if you would like additional time to consider participating in the study, that is a third option. After you have made your decision, please e-mail to let me know whether you would like to participate or if additional time is needed.

Researcher:
Mrs. Emily Yow Shaw
9779 Clifton Drive
Stanfield, NC 28163
704-239-6226

If you have any concerns regarding this study, please contact the faculty advisor of the researcher.

Faculty Advisor:
Dr. Walter Hart
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

APPENDIX C: POST RECRUITMENT PRE-INTERVIEW FOLLOW UP EMAIL

Department of Educational Leadership
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte NC 28223

"An Exploratory Study of Barriers and Supports Faced By Women Superintendents"
Emily Yow Shaw / UNC Charlotte / Educational Leadership Department

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study, "*An Exploratory Study of Barriers and Supports Faced By Women Superintendents.*"

This study is designed to explore the barriers and supports that women superintendents face. I am interested in exploring the paradox of women dominating the teaching profession and other entry-level leadership positions in education but being underrepresented in superintendencies and other higher-ranking roles.

We will work together through email to establish an interview date, time, and location convenient to you. One week prior to your interview, I will send you a Google form containing a demographic survey.

Please note that I have re attached the Informed Consent Form to the body of this e-mail for you to review again if necessary. I will also bring a hard copy of this Informed Consent Form to our actual interview session for you to personally sign.

Researcher:
Mrs. Emily Yow Shaw
9779 Clifton Drive
Stanfield, NC 28163
704-239-6226
If you have any concerns regarding this study, please contact the faculty advisor of the researcher.

Faculty Advisor:
Dr. Walter Hart
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Department of Educational Leadership
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte NC 28223

Project Title
An Exploratory Study of Barriers and Supports Faced by Women Superintendents.

Structure

This is a semi-structured one-on-one interview with five (5) open-ended warm-up questions and twelve (12) open-ended interview questions linked directly to applicable research questions. The interviewer will possibly ask some probing questions depending on the responses of the interviewee during the interview process.

Procedure
1. The researcher will find and secure an appropriate area outside of school premises and outside of school working hours to conduct the interview.
2. The researcher will ask if the interview may be audio recorded.
3. If the participant verbally provides his/her consent (paperwork has already been collected), the recording will begin.
4. The researcher will ask the interviewee questions.

Interview Guidelines

Thank you for agreeing to an interview as part of this project. As you know, the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the barriers and supports faced by women superintendents. I am going to ask you a series of questions. Your name will not be reported. There are no wrong answers, so please answer as freely as you can. You do not need to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable with. No penalties will be applied if you decline to participate in the study, decline to participate in the study once the interview session has begun, decline to answer certain questions during the interview, or voluntarily withdraw from the study. Later I will transcribe the interview [type up what we both said] and provide you a copy for you to review. At that time, you may make any corrections or retractions to the transcription. You may stop at any time for any reason. Would you still like to proceed?
- If no, the researcher will stop the interview and ask whether the participant is willing to be interviewed at another time.
- If yes, the researcher will continue the interview.

Research Questions
1. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that obstructed their advancement into the role of superintendent?

2. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that supported their advancement into the role of superintendent?
3. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that inhibit their success while in the role of superintendent?
4. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that support their success while the role of superintendent?

Interview Questions

Warm-Up Questions
1. What led you to education as a profession?
2. Share your career path up to the superintendency?
3. How long have you been a superintendent (any district)?
4. How long have you been a superintendent in this district?
5. Have you always held aspirations for the position of superintendent?
   - If yes, what steps did you take to ensure you achieved the position?
   - If no, how did you wind up in the position?

Research Question 1. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that obstructed their advancement into the role of superintendent?
1. How would you describe the process of reaching the superintendency?
2. What are some of the challenges/obstructions you experienced while you were looking for your first superintendency (i.e., race, gender, age, family commitments, individuals, other)?
3. What role did gender play in your search for a superintendent position?
4. How did you overcome these challenges/obstructions?
Note: Questions 1-3 for Research Question 1 will be repeated for subsequent superintendencies if the participant has been superintendent in more than one district.

Research Question 2. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that supported their advancement into the role of superintendent?
1. What supports did you experience when you were trying to become a superintendent (i.e., mentors, professional training, individuals, other)?

Research Question 3. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that inhibit their success while in the role of superintendent?
1. What are the greatest professional challenges you have experienced now that you are in the role of superintendent?
2. What are the greatest personal challenges you have experienced now that you are in the role of superintendent?
3. What factors inhibit your success as superintendent (i.e., people, circumstances)?
4. How has gender impacted your work in your current position?
5. How does family intersect with your role as superintendent?

Research Question 4. What are the perceptions of women school district superintendents about factors that support their success while the role of superintendent?

1. What are the internal factors that support your success as superintendent (i.e., attitudes, beliefs)
2. What are the external factors that support your success as superintendent?

APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Department of Educational Leadership
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte NC 28223

Title of the Project: *An Exploratory Study of Barriers and Supports Faced by Women Superintendents*
Principal Investigator: Mrs. Emily Yow Shaw, UNC Charlotte
Co-investigator: N/A
Study Sponsor: N/A

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Important Information You Need to Know

- The purpose of this study is to explore the barriers and supports faced by women superintendents.
- I am asking that current and retired women superintendents with at least two years of experience to complete a simple demographic questionnaire, a one-on-one interview about the respective topic and a brief follow-up prompt in the shape of a Google Form sent via shared Google link.
- Some of the questions I'll ask you may be construed as personal and sensitive given your connections to education and the superintendency. For example, I'll ask you about your experiences as it relates to the superintendency. These questions are personal and you might experience some mild emotional discomfort. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer. You will not personally benefit from taking part in this research but our study results may help in better understanding how it is that women dominate the teaching profession and other entry-level leadership positions in education, but their representation decreases in superintendencies and other higher-ranking roles.
- Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether to participate in this research study.

Why are we doing this study?
The purpose of this study is to explore the barriers and supports faced by women superintendents.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?
You are being asked to be in this study because you are a current or retired woman superintendent with at least two years of experience.

What will happen if I take part in this study?

   If you choose to participate you will complete a simple demographic questionnaire followed by a one-on-one interview about the respective topic. The demographic questionnaire will ask you demographic questions (teaching experience, education level, age, race, gender, undergraduate major, and parental education level) and the 1 on 1 interview will ask you questions about your experiences as a superintendent and while ascending the position. I would like to audio record our interviews so that I can capture your words accurately. If at any time during our interviews you felt uncomfortable answering a question, you would let me know, and you wouldn't need to answer the question. Or, if you wanted to answer a question but did not want your answer recorded, you would let me know, and I would turn off the recorder. If at any time you wanted to withdraw from the study, you would let me know, and I would erase the recordings of our conversations. Your total time commitment if you participate in this study will be approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes.

What benefits might I experience?

   You will not benefit directly from being in this study beyond contributing to the research to explore why women dominate the teaching profession and other entry-level leadership positions in education, but their representation decreases in superintendencies and other higher-ranking roles.

What risks might I experience?

   The questions I'll ask you might be construed as personal or sensitive, as they pertain to your experiences as a superintendent. For example, I'll you about barriers and supports you encountered. These questions are personal, and you might experience some mild emotional discomfort. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer. I do not expect this risk to be common and you may choose to skip questions you do not want to answer.

How will my information be protected?

   You are asked to provide your personal e-mail address as part of this study. I will use your personal e-mail address to deliver to you the Informed Consent Form as well as to then provide you with the Google link to the Google Form containing the follow-up prompt to be sent one week after the interview. Additionally, I will use your personal e-mail to send you your completed interview transcript. To protect your privacy (identity), I'll assign a study ID code to your questionnaire responses. Once I do this, I'll delete the e-mail address from the questionnaire responses so the responses will only have the study ID code. To reduce deductive disclosure and to ensure anonymity the researcher will not include any district identifiable information such as region, district, demographics, socio economic makeup, or other identifiers that could potentially link the participant to the district. When describing the participants in the narrative ranges will be used in the research. For example, when asked how many years you have been in the superintendency you will answer in a range of 0-5 years instead of stating 3 years. I will use a digital audio recorder to record our interviews. I plan to complete all the transcribing and coding manually. However, if assistance is needed with transcribing, I will transfer the audio file from the digital recorder to the university's password-protected cloud data storage, and I will delete the audio file from the recorder. After the research project is completed, I will delete the audio files from the password-protected data storage. I will transcribe each interview using word processing software on if necessary. The transcriptions will be stored in password-protected data storage and will be deleted after the research project is completed. While the study is active, all

data will be stored in a password-protected data base that can only be accessed by the primary researcher. Only the researcher will have routine access to the study data. Other people, with approval from the Investigator, may need to see the information I collect about you including people who work for UNC Charlotte and other agencies as required by law or allowed by federal regulations; however, that information will be coded for anonymity.

How will my information be used after the study is over?
After this study is complete, study data may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies without asking for your consent again or as may be needed as part of publishing our results. The data we share will NOT include information that could identify you.

Will I receive an incentive for taking part in this study?
You will not receive a financial incentive for taking part in this study.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?
It is up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?
For questions about this research, you may contact:
> Mrs. Emily Yow Shaw
> 9779 Clifton Drive
> Stanfield, NC 28163
> 704 239 6226
> Dr. Walter Hart
> University of North Carolina at Charlotte

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 704–687–1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Consent to Participate
By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will receive a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

_____
Name (PRINT)

_____
Signature   Date

_____
Name & Signature of person obtaining consent　　Date

APPENDIX F: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Department of Educational Leadership
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte NC 28223

This survey was designed to collect demographic information pertaining to current and retired superintendents with at least two years of experience. Data collected from this survey will be used for dissertation research purposes only.

1. How many years have you served in public education in North Carolina?
    A. Less than 10 Years
    B. 10-15 Years
    C. 16-25 Years
    D. More than 25 Years

2. Indicate your highest level of education achieved:
    A. Bachelor's Degree
    B. Master's Degree
    C. Doctorate Degree

3. Indicate your age range:
    A. 20-24
    B. 25-29
    C. 30-34
    D. 35-39
    E. 40-44
    F. 45-49
    G. 50-54
    H. 55-59
    I. Over 60

4. What is your race?
    A. Caucasian
    B. African American
    C. Hispanic
    D. Asian American
    E. American Indian
    F. Other
    G. Choose not to disclose

5. What is your marital status?
   A. Single
   B. Married
   C. Choose not to disclose

6. What was your undergraduate major?
   A. Elementary Education
   B. Middle Grades Education
   C. Secondary Education
   D. Other

7. Please indicate the highest level of education achieved by your parent(s) **or** legal guardian(s):

Mother	Father	Legal Guardian
A. HS Diploma	A. HS Diploma	A. HS Diploma
B. Associate's Degree	B. Associate's Degree	B. Associate's Degree
C. Bachelor's Degree	C. Bachelor's Degree	C. Bachelor's Degree
D. Master's Degree	D. Master's Degree	D. Master's Degree
E. Doctorate Degree	E. Doctorate Degree	E. Doctorate Degree

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW FOLLOW UP PROMPTS

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These follow up prompts were designed to collect additional information from the study participants after they have successfully completed the interview with the researcher. These follow-up prompts are being offered to the participants as a reflection tool and as an avenue to further communicate answers if the participant feels additional information needs to be added. Data from these follow up prompts will be used for dissertation research purposes only.

1. In the week since we conducted the interview session, have you given further thought to the topic of the barriers as it relates to the superintendency?
2. In the week since we conducted the interview session, have you given further thought to the topic of the supports as it relates to the superintendency?
3. In the week since we conducted the interview session, have you thought of anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX H: MEMBER CHECKING PROTOCOL

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Please read through each research question, a participant quote, and the initial findings. In addition, please read through the provided transcript. If you have any questions, concerns, additions, or redactions to the document, please reach back out to me. Member Checking is optional. Thank you for your feedback.