WOMEN RISING: THE PATHWAY TO BECOMING A FEMALE SUPERINTENDENT IN A METROPOLITAN AREA THROUGH THE LENS OF ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENTS

by

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WOMEN RISING: THE PATHWAY TO BECOMING A FEMALE SUPERINTENDENT IN AN URBAN DISTRICT THROUGH THE LENS OF ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENTS

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DEDICATION

They say a journey of 1000 miles begins with a single step. Over the past four years, I have traveled a thousand miles and then some in pursuing this degree. I want to dedicate this work to my family, who has walked alongside me every step of the way.

To my Mom and Dad: what can I say except, “Thank you”? You have been my champions for my entire life, and I thank you for that. Throughout this journey, you have cheered me on, picked me up when I fell, and encouraged me when the road just seemed too long. You have always made me feel like there is no goal too high for me to attain—your unwavering love and encouragement have made me who I am. I know that the song “Wind Beneath my Wings” brings with it some poignant memories for our family, but that is truly the way I feel about you. You are, and always have been, the wind beneath my wings. I love you both!

To my children, Cameron and Gracie: Mommy is finally done with “her work” as you call it! Now, when you ask me to play with you, I can say, “YES! Mommy is finally ready to play!” I love you and I hope that I have set an example of hard work and dedication for you that will inspire you on your own journeys.

To my husband: you believed that I could complete this degree and supported my career and education goals, without a second thought. You took the kids and did fun activities with them when I had to do “my work”, so they never missed a beat or felt like they were missing Mommy. Thank you for supporting me.
To my grandmothers: Two beautiful, influential, strong women in my life. I hope you are looking down from Heaven and smiling as I complete this degree and journey. I believe in myself because of both of you, and I know you would be so proud of me! I miss you both every day. As one of the women in my study said, “I stand on the shoulders of the great women who came before me.”

To my “sister”: You are so generous with your time. Thank you for always pitching in, helping with the kids, and feeding us dinner. No matter when or what I ask of you, you try to make it work. Even if we are not sisters by birth, you are my sister. I appreciate you more than you know, and now you do not have to hear me talk about my dissertation anymore!

Thank you to my family for walking beside me and helping me complete this journey! This work is dedicated to you.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Completing my doctorate has been a lifelong goal for me. I have always admired those who have attained this achievement, and now that I know all that it entails, I bow at their feet. This is a degree in perseverance, and anyone who has persevered and attained this degree should be commended! I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and thank the strong female leaders and role models who made this journey possible.

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To my chair, Dr. Carol Isaac: I still remember being interviewed by you and a panel of your colleagues as part of admittance to this program. At that time, I did not have a clear idea of what problem I wanted to research for my dissertation. I did know that I always admired and respected accomplished, powerful women, and I had just finished reading Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*. One of the members of the panel asked me what I wanted to research, and it just came out, “The lack of women in leadership.” At that time, I did not know you or your areas of interest but all eyes and chairs in the room
turned to you! I wavered a bit over my time at Mercer with my dissertation topic, but this was meant to be! I cannot thank you enough for your support, knowledge, and encouragement as I walked this journey. You truly took every step with me.

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Conceptual Model: “It’s Okay”
This qualitative study investigated the scarcity of females in the superintendency in the U.S. public school systems through the lens of the little-studied female assistant superintendent. Females remain underrepresented in the superintendency, with very little change in the last century. While 76% of the K-12 educators in the United States are female, only 22.6% of superintendents are female. To understand this issue, the researcher conducted a constructivist, grounded theory study, framed within social role theory and feminist standpoint theory. Through semi-structured interviews, 12 female assistant superintendents in a metropolitan area presented the barriers, motivators, and relationship they have had with power as they climbed the career ladder.

After interviewing the participants, the data revealed collective trends. Analysis indicated that these women had to be “okay” with choices made and how it impacted them, personally and professionally. Motivation and leadership qualities were evident for these women at a young age, and for most, their families encouraged and supported them as they pushed for excellence. These women spoke of influence by others and influence of others. Many had been “tapped by others” to move into leadership roles; in turn, they were motivated by empowering others. It can be concluded that barriers, including gender bias, stereotypes, cultural norms, social roles and expectations of what a female
can and cannot do in terms of leadership, play a large part in the scarcity of women in the superintendency.

Further research in the area of gender studies and cultural norms is necessary, along with more research into the superintendency from the male’s perspective. Continued research could lead to more innovative and inclusive leadership and hiring practices, and mentorship programs, which could increase the numbers of females in educational leadership roles, including the superintendency.

Although advances have been made for women in the last 30 years, a pervasive problem remains that cannot be ignored as the number of women qualified for the superintendency is well below the number of women achieving this role. This problem is present in other sectors aside from education, as highly qualified women continue to be underrepresented in positions of power.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Leading the charge for United States’ educators and students are public school superintendents and leadership teams, including assistant superintendents. Results of a meta-analysis of superintendents and the impact on student achievement in the field of educational leadership reveal a strong positive relationship between an effective superintendent and a high-achieving school system (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Marzano and Waters (2009) identified five areas of responsibility that correlated with student achievement in a district: “the goal setting process, nonnegotiable goals for instruction and achievement, board alignment with and support of district goals, monitoring progress of goals for achievement and instruction and use of resources to support achievement and instructional goals” (p. 3).

The role of the superintendent is multi-layered, crucial, and often compared to that of an orchestra conductor, serving as a voice for all students, which makes this role critical (Domenech, 2009). Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), further summarized the role of the superintendent:

The superintendent is the voice for all the children in the community, including the many children that would have no voice if not for the superintendent. Today, more than ever, America’s superintendents have the awesome responsibility to protect public education from the private and political interests that regard our
schools as investment opportunities for corporate gains rather than fostering the
American tradition of an educated community that is the core of our democratic
process. (as cited in Kowalski, 2011, p. iii)

In addition to possessing knowledge of system data, analyzing finances, and
navigating school boards successfully, superintendents must be instructional leaders,
political leaders, competent communicators, motivators, and managers of human
resources (Andero, 2001; Ansar, 2015; Cuban, 1984; Grogan & Sherman, 2003; Harris,
Lowery, Hopson, & Marshall, 2004). This work is a team effort that may include various
supporting roles, including deputy superintendents, assistant superintendents, chief of
schools’ officers, and various other leadership roles, based on the structure of the district.

While the representation of females in educational leadership is growing, certain
roles continue to be male dominated, such as high school principal, assistant
superintendent, and superintendent (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999). Today, White
males are a minority in the teaching field, yet they comprise the majority of the leaders in
educational administration, many of them identified as possessing the potential to be
leaders early in their teacher careers (Cognard-Black, 2004; Myung, Loeb, & Horng,
2011). Often, they rise up the ranks rapidly due to preferential treatment of men in
typically female-dominated professions, a phenomenon referred to as the glass escalator
effect, or “subtle mechanisms that seem to enhance men’s positions” (Williams, 1992, p.
263).

Diprete and Buchmann (2013) contended that it was logical to assume that
women would dominate K-12 educational leadership positions because of the high
percentage of women in teaching positions and the significant rise in the number of advanced professional degrees acquired by women. However, Snyder and Dillow (2012) suggested, “As leadership positions rise in stature and power, the number of women declines” (p. 61). A survey conducted by Bitterman, Goldring, and Gray (2013) showed that 52% of public school principals were female overall, but the distribution was not consistent with 64% in primary schools, 42% in middle schools, and 30% in high schools. Brunner (2000) stated that White males have primarily occupied the position of school superintendent since its inception, a fact upheld by the U.S. Census Bureau (Bjork, 2000). The most current statistics show that 22.6% of superintendents across the United States are female (AASA, 2016), which is less than a 15% increase in 106 years.

Furthermore, a pool of women, though highly qualified, choose to opt out of consideration for superintendent positions for various reasons. These include lack of job security and dearth of female mentors (Wolverton & Macdonald, 2009), as well as the difficulties of navigating the dual role of professional and caretaker (Coltrane, Miller, DeHaan, & Stewart, 2013; Norton, Gupta, Stephens, Martire, & Townsend, 2005).

The Dual Role of Women in the Workforce

Women’s roles continue to shift from homemaker to wage earner. Coltrane and colleagues (2013) noted a “mismatch between the workplace and workforce” (p. 280) in the United States. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), women’s roles in the workforce have expanded. In married couples with children, 59.1% are dual-earning households and in single-mother homes with children under age six, 68.2% of mothers worked outside the home. Despite the changes in the makeup of the workforce,
its design typically favors people who do not have family responsibilities, hence the “mismatch” noted by Coltrane et al. (2013).

Hochschild and Machung (2012) asserted that working women come home to work a “second shift” (p. xix) of household duties of caring for children and the home, while men do not feel this pressure, and the working world does not accommodate women and perceived gender roles. Hochschild and Machung (2012) found that working mothers, on average, worked 15 hours each week longer than men, which resulted in an extra month of work per year, between their first job (professional career) and second job (family and home life). In 1975, only 3% of women with children six and under were in the labor force, while in 2009, that number had risen to 61% (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Although gender roles are changing, Norton et al. (2005) discovered that women still tend to be the predominate caretakers and feel obliged to fulfill that role, as the balance of work and home life accounts for both stressors and rewards for them.

Pay Discrepancies

Despite the fact that women occupy dual roles, achieve greater education, and comprise a larger portion of the nation’s workforce, the Council of Economic Advisors (2015) reported they are earning 80% of the salary men receive even when they have more advanced degrees. Statistics cited by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (2017) clearly show that in 2015, women working fulltime in varied fields earned only 80 cents for every dollar earned by a man.

In 2015, the median weekly earnings for women were 21% lower than men’s earnings (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016), which is commensurate with the median
weekly earnings in various sectors. Despite women achieving advanced degrees at higher rates, they still have not reached a state of pay parity in the workplace (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Median Weekly Earnings of Fulltime Wage and Salary Workers*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Average Weekly Median Earnings ($)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>749</td>
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Women are also seeking careers in fields historically dominated by men, yet research has shown that when this happens, the median pay decreases due to several factors, including gender bias (England, 2010). Eagly and Karau (2002) suggested that when a level playing field exists in all areas, and women receive lower salaries and gain fewer promotions, it is due to gender discrimination. According to Blau and Kahn (2007), many reasons explain the gender pay gap, including known factors such as work experience (including maternity leave), choice of occupation, and other unknown factors.

Disproportionality in Other Fields

Disproportionality occurs in sectors outside of education, as well. Catalyst (2018a) divulged that of the Standard & Poor 500, 25 (5.0%) women hold Chief Executive Officer (CEO) positions. In government leadership positions, Catalyst reported that women hold 83 (19.1%) of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives. In the Senate, women hold 21 (21%) of the 100 seats. Women have made gains in the
areas of managerial positions, yet still trail behind in senior management roles (Pew Research Center, 2015).

This is surprising when confronted with higher education statistics published by the National Center for Education Statistics (2015). Enrollment rate for women is now 57%, which is higher than the enrollment rate for men. For the first time in history, data from the American Community Survey in 2014 show that the percentage of men graduating with a bachelor’s degree was 29.9%, while for women, it was 30.2%. Based on a report by the Council of Economic Advisors (2015), women are 48% more likely to have attained a graduate school degree.

Data from an online survey generated from a randomized sample of 1,835 adults revealed that women are perceived as indistinguishable from their male peers when it comes to leadership qualities, such as intelligence and capacity for innovation. In other qualities—honesty, fairness, organization, compassion, and willingness to compromise—many Americans judge women as superior (Pew Research Center, 2015). The same study also found that 4 in 10 Americans believe women must do more than men do to prove themselves as they rise up through the ranks in business and politics.

Although many Americans see women as equally good leaders in business, gender bias is still prevalent. The study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2015) revealed that 54% of the people surveyed indicated men would do a better job than women at running a sports team, a male-domain, but they were two and a half times more likely to say that women would do better running a hospital or major retail chain of stores.
Problem Statement

Despite education being labeled as a *feminized* profession with large numbers of women dominating the field (Bitterman et al., 2013), very few women succeed to the highest levels of educational leadership (Keller, 1999). Women make up only 22.6% of the superintendency in public schools in the United States, which is disproportionate to the percentage (76%) of women in the field of education (AASA, 2015). According to Skrla (2000), men are 40 times more likely than women are to achieve a superintendent of schools’ position. Bjork’s study (2000), which included data from the U.S. Census Bureau, described the superintendency as “the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States” (p. 17). Mertz (2006) stated that the lack of females in the superintendency and . . .

the continued scarcity in the position of superintendent, even after 30 years, suggests that the position has been little affected by Title IX and that women continue to have a long, uncertain way to go to reach the top spot. (p. 556)

At the administration level in public schools in the United States, the ratio is 4:1 (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). This glaring systemic inequality, which has existed in the United States for over 100 years, is grossly disproportionate (AASA, 2015; Blount, 1998; Lennon, 2013; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2012) and possibly indicative of the more encompassing issue of gender bias (Bosak & Sczesny, 2011).

Research shows that when women lead, the organization’s employee retention rate, impact, and profit improve (Lennon, 2013). Many express the concern that continued neglect of half of the U.S. workforce will negatively affect the United States’
ability to compete globally (Lennon, 2013). By mitigating gender bias, a broader pool of
talented leaders with a range of voices from which to choose will emerge (Davies, 2011).

The assistant superintendency is part of the traditional pathway to the
superintendency (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). The office of the assistant superintendent
is known by various monikers in different school systems, including area superintendent,
deputy superintendent, regional superintendent, associate superintendent, and academic
officer, but for the purposes of this study, the term assistant superintendent will be used.

According to Leach (2009), the assistant superintendent’s role often depends on
the size of the district. In larger districts may require several assistant superintendents,
while smaller districts may only need one. Their duties may include curriculum and
instruction, human resources, and school business among other responsibilities.

Little formal research and studies about the role of the assistant (or associate or
deputy) superintendent exist. However, a plethora of research and data regarding the
superintendency is available. Several national studies have been conducted to examine
the superintendency in depth. For example, the American Association of Superintendents
(AASA) conducts a study of this role every 10 years, but no such study has been
conducted on the role of the associate superintendent. Professional organizations exist
for the superintendency, such as AASA, but there is no organization dedicated to
assistant superintendents. Because of the lack of research on this role, including its
responsibilities and perceptions, a gap in the literature regarding the role of the assistant
superintendent, male or female, exists. This study seeks to add to the literature in this
area.
Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions from the perspective of assistant superintendents:

1. What do these women perceive as the barriers and motivators for higher position aspiration?
2. How do these women describe the support systems for attaining a higher position?
3. How do female assistant superintendents view and describe the relationship between the production and practice of knowledge and power based on feminist standpoint theory?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used to guide this study was the combination of feminist standpoint theory and social role theory. The two paradigms worked in conjunction to frame the study as one deals with the voice of a marginalized people while the other points to how society came to marginalize them. The following sections provide the basic tenets of these two theories.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

According to Harding (2004), feminist standpoint theory gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s as a critical theory in feminism, used to guide research regarding the relationship between the production of knowledge and practices of power. Given women’s history of social and cultural subordination in the public world, an understanding of marginality theoretically informs feminist standpoint theory, which
highlights personal experience (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000). The intent of using feminist standpoint theory is to allow those who have been marginalized by society to have a voice in creating knowledge that will be valued (Sherman, Munoz, & Pankake, 2008). In the case of this study, those who have been marginalized are the females aspiring to the superintendency.

Harding (1991) posited that the aim of feminist standpoint theory is:

. . . [to] suggest a way of knowing from the meanings women give to their labors. The search for dailiness is a method of work that allows us to take the patterns women create and the meanings women invent and learn from them. If we map what we learn, connecting one meaning or invention to another, we begin to lay out a different way of seeing reality. (p. 129)

Social Role Theory

The researcher used social role theory in conjunction with feminist standpoint theory to frame this study. Social role theory recognizes and highlights the historical division in various forms of labor between males and females regarding who handles responsibilities in the home and outside the home (Eagly, 1987). Because of the gender differences in social behavior, the thought of what was expected of women and men began to divide (Eagly, 1987).

Sexual stereotypes (Williams & Best, 1982) occur when the expectancies of responsibility are seen by future generations and begin to shift the behaviors of gender (Eagly, 1987; Wood & Eagly, 2012). Social role theorists contend that the way men and women behave is determined by their social roles. This theory is applicable to this study
because of the gender disproportionality evidenced in the male-dominated superintendency in the United States and society’s prevailing perception of women as caregivers.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the gender disproportionality in the superintendency in terms of barriers, motivators, and supports as perceived through the eyes of female assistant superintendents in a metropolitan area. Assistant superintendents tend to be present in metropolitan school systems, as they are typically larger school systems that cover more geographical area. According to survey results of superintendents and assistant superintendents in 53 of the 66 Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) member districts, approximately 70% of the urban superintendents are male and 30% are female, which is similar to the national statistics in all systems (CGCS, 2014). Tenure rate is similar in rural and urban districts; however, the turnover rate (“churn”) in the largest, urban, metro districts is higher than that smaller districts (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Lafee, 2002), which leads to a need for qualified candidates.

The findings of this study may add to the body of literature promoting all highly qualified candidates who aspire to the superintendency and explore paths for females to navigate through the pipeline. It may also add to the repository of lived experiences of women in senior leadership positions in urban school districts.
Procedures

This study utilized a qualitative, grounded theory approach to extract the lived experience of 8-15 female assistant superintendents in urban districts. The researcher utilized a purposive sample, along with snowball sampling, to identify participants who aspire to advance as superintendents (Creswell, 2013). Participants took part in semi-structured interviews in an effort to capture the lived experiences of these female assistant superintendents (Creswell, 2013).

Participants received pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using a grounded theory methodology ( Strauss & Corbin, 1998). From the data, the researcher developed coding categories and biographical narratives (Trochim, 2006). Member checking, peer review, audit trail, and an external audit served to verify procedures and increase validity and reliability ( Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because the researcher was a female in a leadership position within a public school setting at the time of the study, she used bracketing to mitigate researcher bias (Beech, 1999).

Limitations

As in any study, limitations must be considered. First, there was a possibility that participants would not answer questions truthfully, which is inherent in self-reporting. Creswell (2014) cautioned researchers that participants may perceive the interviewing as a “potential power imbalance” and “a moral inquiry” (p. 137). Therefore, the interviewees possibly experienced discomfort in regards to how their statements were interpreted and what consequences could result from their revelations (Creswell, 2014).
Secondly, the researcher’s subjectivity possibly caused bias. The researcher was a female administrator and former classroom teacher, as well as the daughter of two long-time educators. The researcher’s desire for career advancement in education posed a potential for bias; therefore, the researcher enacted verification procedures to mitigated potential bias. Finally, some of the women interviewed did not aspire to the superintendency, so the researcher made interpretation of findings in context of this fact.

Delimitations

A delimitation of this study was the selection of female assistant superintendents from public, urban districts who aspire to become superintendents. This selection failed to include the perspectives of female assistant superintendents in rural, suburban, or private school districts, which would most likely offer different perspectives. Consequently, the choice of participants affects the transferability of the study results.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided to assist the reader:

*Assistant superintendent* is a role that entails supporting the superintendent and school-based leadership and leading improvement initiatives throughout district (Kaltenecker, 2011).

*Glass ceiling* is an “unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements” (U.S. Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

*Glass cliff* is a term coined to represent the phenomenon of women promoted to leadership roles that are precarious with a high risk for failure (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).
Glass escalator is a nuance of the glass ceiling, for it refers to men rising more quickly than women in occupations that are typically female dominated (Eagly & Sczesny, 2009).

Labyrinth is a term proposed by Eagly and Carli (2007) to replace the outdated term of glass ceiling. The labyrinth is a metaphor for a journey with twists and turns.

Gender gap in this study refers to the systematic difference women and men face in the labor market (Goldin, 2008).

Metropolitan area contains at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more inhabitants (Wilson, Plane, Mackun, Fischetti, & Gowerowska, 2010).

Superintendent is the leader of a school district whose work encompasses numerous areas, including instruction, finance, human resources, and politics (Andero, 2001; Harris et al., 2006).

Urban areas consist of 50,000 or more people and contain urban districts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Summary

Across the United States, more than three quarters of educators are female, yet less than 30% are in administrative roles. Even though females are earning more advanced degrees than men, they remain underrepresented in leadership roles (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013) in various sectors, including government and business. The role of the public school superintendent also remains heavily underrepresented by females (AASA, 2015).
Factors impacting females’ advancement to the superintendency include external barriers, such as lack of mentors and sponsors (Hill & Ragland, 1995), difficulty managing work-life balance (Norton et al., 2005), gender bias (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011), and internal barriers such as struggles with power (Brunner, 2000). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) posited that underrepresentation of females is because of lack of options due to stereotypical beliefs.

A wealth of literature and research focuses on this disproportionality (Bjork 2000; Blount 1999; Derrington & Sharrett, 2009; Gammill & Vaughn, 2011; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Hanson, 2011; Keller, 1999; Skrla, 2000). However, the fact the women conducted the majority of this research is done by women “is problematic, if only women find the topic important enough for further investigation, the cries for change will remain marginalized” (Brunner, 1999, p. 1). According to Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011), women’s experiences in this role were investigated on a limited basis until the 1980s because White men dominated the superintendency.

Although numerous research studies highlight the underrepresentation of women as school district superintendents, there is a gap in the literature regarding the experiences of female assistant superintendents as they face barriers and motivators on the journey to the superintendency. This study aims to address this problem through the lens of urban female assistant superintendents in the public school system.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter offers a review of literature pertinent to the gender disparity in the superintendency in the United States. The superintendent role is of vital importance in a school district as the superintendent is key in many areas, including moving the district’s vision forward, examining student achievement, choosing principals and placing them in strategic positions, and being the mediator with the school board and community (Kamler, 2009). Waters and Marzano (2006) stated that the role of superintendent has an impact on student achievement because the superintendent is responsible for overseeing the goals and the resources of the school system.

Of particular interest in this study is the pathway females must negotiate on their way to the superintendency. Literature addressing the duties and viewpoints of female assistant superintendents is limited, so this review investigates the career pathways and roles of the superintendency and the barriers women face as they strive to attain it. The review begins with a description of the proposed framework to study the phenomenon of gender disparity in the superintendency. Next, the review relates the historical creation and the resulting ramifications of the superintendency. Following this are sections of gender disparities in hiring and salary in leadership positions. This leads to an accounting of the barriers females experience in leadership positions. Following this is an account of the difficulties females in leadership encounter due to societal biases,
expectations, or stereotypes. The chapter ends with a discussion of the motivators that drive females to seek leadership positions.

Theoretical Framework

Portney and Watins (2009) contended that theory is born from a need to give meaning to complexities and organize explanations and observations. With this in mind, a combination of feminist standpoint theory and social role theory will frame this study. This research deals with gender disparity and gender bias in the superintendency in the United States that is the result of cultural and societal perspectives; therefore, these theories will augment one another. The following sections describe these theories.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Sprague (2005) explained, “In feminist standpoint theory, epistemic privilege is often accorded to the standpoint of women, who are themselves diverse in location in systems organizing race, class, nation, and other major relations of social domination” (p. 41). Feminist standpoint theory attempts to explain power related to “the sexual division of labor” (Sprague, 2005, p. 42) in our culture, which makes women responsible for duties in the home and meeting people’s needs (Hartsock, 1983, 1985). Many researchers and feminists feel that standpoint theory is subjective, for the words and thoughts of people serve as the basis of the perspectives of a group or member of that group (Sprague, 2005).

Social Role Theory

Social role theory will also be used to frame the study. Social role theory is a social psychological theory regarding the similarities and differences perceived in social
roles in society (Eagly & Wood, 2016). Eagly (1987) stated that traits and characteristics are associated with men and women as well as the division of labor, based upon the type of work that they do, both inside and outside of the home. Male traits tend to manifest agency, such as leadership skills, and be more assertive, while female traits are associated with being communal and caretakers (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 2016).

In a meta-analysis of the literature on the superintendency, Lemasters and Roach (2012) reported that the qualities of female superintendents generally vary widely from their male counterparts; male superintendents gravitate more toward politics, fiscal concerns, and power than women do. For example, women tend to value collaboration and other people and dedicate themselves to curriculum, instruction, learning, and children. Despite these attributes that highlight roles within education, males continue to dominate the superintendency in the United States (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). These findings are consistent with social role theory and warrant a discussion of the history of the superintendency.

History of an Unequal Office

The inception of the superintendent position occurred in the late 19th century in response to educational concerns expressed by state and city officials and school staffs. According to Blount (1998), the creation of the superintendency granted state governments the sought-after control of local schools, freed school boards from administrative and office duties, and offered male teachers “a new route for promotion within a profession that otherwise held diminished appeal” (p. 46).
Historically, White males have dominated the office of the public school superintendent (Brunner, 2000). Bjork (2000) revealed the U.S. Census Bureau regarded the position of superintendent as the most gender-biased administrative position in the United States. Mertz and McNeely (1998) declared, “From its inception, school administration has been male dominated and male defined (largely white male): that is, explained, conceptualized, and seen through the eyes of males” (p. 196). Blount (1998) explained this phenomenon: “Superintendents received substantially higher salaries than teachers; they assumed more masculine-identified supervisory duties; they maintained their offices in central locations near local male power structures; and the title offered incumbents some stature in their communities” (pp. 46-47).

Tallerico and Blount (2004) proposed that history demonstrates that women have consistently struggled to rise to leadership roles and have their cause championed, as opposed to marginalized, by organizations and informal networks. In 1909, Ella Flagg Young, the first female superintendent of Chicago City Schools, expressed her excitement for the future of females in educational leadership (Blount, 1998). She was quoted in *The Western Journal of Education* as saying:

"Women are destined to rule the schools of every city. In the near future, we will have more women than men in the executive charge of the vast educational system. It is a woman’s natural field, and she is no longer to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership. It will be my aim to prove that no mistake has been made and to show critics and friends alike that a woman is..."
best qualified for this work than a man. (Ella Flagg Young as cited in Wagner, 1909, p. 515)

Hansot and Tyack (1981) referred to the period after Flagg’s appointment as the golden age of women administrators due to the significant increase in the numbers of female superintendents during this time. In this golden age of women administrators (Hansot & Tyack, 1981), the percentage of females in the superintendent was 9% in 1910, and the numbers climbed to 11% in 1930. By 1930, women held the seats of approximately 28% of county superintendencies and 11% of all superintendencies (Blount, 1998).

However, it is important to note that these women were in less desirable elementary school principalships and county and state superintendencies (Brunner & Grogan, 2007), for these atypical positions in the pathway to the superintendency paid less than other positions (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Tallerico and Blount (2004) concluded that this increase in females in administrative roles was due to the women’s suffrage movement and the election of the majority of superintendent positions, as opposed to appointment (Blount, 1998; Gribskov, 1980; Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

In 1950, the number of women in educational leadership dropped around the time that men came home from World War II and the U.S. government sponsored the G.I. Bill, an incentive that encouraged education in many fields of study, including school leadership for a predominantly male population of veterans (Blount, 1998; Shakeshaft, 1998, 1999; Tallerico & Blount, 2004; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Therefore, it is not
surprising that men returning from war took over many of these upper level positions (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). The number of males in educational leadership roles increased, and the number of females in these roles declined from 9% in 1950 to just 3% by 1970 (Blount, 1998; Glass, 1992). Despite the passing of the Women’s Educational Equity Act in 1974, females continued to be underrepresented in the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). By 1998, the percentage of females in the superintendency had risen to only 10 percent (Tallerico & Blount, 2004).

Furthermore, over the years, school teaching had shifted from being a primarily male-dominated occupation to being female-dominated (Blount, 1998; Oppenheimer, 1970; Strober, 1984) due to job vacancies created by war, major technological changes, occupational growth, and loss of job attractiveness to males (Matthaei, 1982; Patterson & Engleberg, 1978; Schmuck, Charters, & Carlson, 1981). In 1980-81, 66.9% of individuals in the teaching profession were females. Derrington and Sharratt (2009) found that women represented 72% of all K-12 educators in the United States, yet comprised only 14% of public school superintendents. In 2011-2012, females comprised 52% of the number of principals and 78% of central office administrators, including assistant superintendents, while in public middle schools, 42% were women (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2012). The number is smaller still in public high schools, with only 30% of principals being female. On the 2012 USDOE Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), females comprised 76% of the teacher workforce, whereas only 23% of public school superintendents were female. Snyder and Dillow (2012) found that
while women accounted for 76% of public school teacher positions, women held only 44% of the leadership positions in education.

In an ex post facto study, Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011) analyzed data generated from electronic surveys completed by nearly 1,900 superintendents across the United States. They noted an increase in the number of female superintendents from the 1990 to 2010 from 6% to 24% and attributed this increase to three factors. First, female enrollment in doctoral programs surpassed male enrollment, and females became credentialed for the superintendency, thus widening the pool of qualified candidates. Second, school boards began to hire from within the district in order to cut costs of recruitment. Finally, standardized testing and national school rankings placed more emphasis on instruction, which is typically associated with women (Kowalski et al., 2011).

Even so, the public school superintendency that began as a male-dominated occupation in the 19th century (Brunner & Grogan, 2007) continues that trend in the 21st century (Domenech, 2009), for it is the least gender diverse executive position in the United States (Bjork, 2000; Skrla, 2000). Research has shown only modest growth in the number of women in the position of public school superintendent (American Association of School Administrators [AASA], 2016; USDOE, 2012). Table 2 displays a historical representation of females in the superintendency.
Table 2

History of Females in the Superintendency in the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Female Superintendents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Male dominance in the superintendency has not changed significantly since Ella Flagg Young became the first female superintendent of Chicago City Schools in 1909 (Blount, 1998; AASA, 2016). Although the number of women in educational leadership has increased throughout the years, women continue to be underrepresented, as compared to men, in roles such as the superintendency and the high school principalship (Dowell & Larwin, 2013). With the slow growth of the numbers of females in these roles, research projects that females will not match their male colleagues in representation and earnings
until 2044 (Kowalski et al., 2011). Researchers have found that females are not securing leadership roles at the same rate as men (Brown, Irby, & Jackson, 2013; Cook & Young, 2012; Kerr, Kerr, & Miller, 2014), despite the assertion by Brunner and Kim (2010) that women aspiring to the superintendency meet and exceed requirements and their expertise in curriculum and instruction may even give them an advantage over men.

According to Brunner and Grogan (2007), the lack of females in the superintendency mirrors the history of women in education:

First, in the early stages of American history, teaching was dominated by white men just as the superintendent is currently being dominated by white men. Second, women were labeled unqualified candidates for teaching positions; the same is true for the superintendency. Third, the demand for women as teachers increased as the teaching positions became less desirable for men. The same is currently true for the superintendency, there has been concern over the decline of superintendent candidates.

Fourth, 15 years ago research on women superintendents did not exist and is now expanding. As a result, this information has presented support for an increase in women superintendents. Fifth, the literature has highlighted women’s attributes, strengths, and talents towards developing collaboration and a focus on instruction. Lastly, women are dominating credentialing programs to which they were once denied access. (p. 15)

This warrants an examination of the career route to the superintendency.
Route to the Superintendency

The most typical career pathway to the superintendency is moving from a secondary school principalship to a position within the district office then into the superintendency (Glass, 2000; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2011). However, research conducted by the AASA (2015) shows that most superintendents were middle or high school principals before the superintendency, rather than elementary school principals. Farmer (2007) found that there were five typical pathways to the superintendency, but that the most frequent was that of secondary teacher, secondary principal, and then superintendent. Eckman (2004) found that the high school principalship, typically held by men, was seen as holding higher value than the elementary or middle school principalship and was the most often seen link to moving into the superintendency.

Studies suggest that women may reach the position of superintendent via a more circuitous route than their male counterparts (Kim & Brunner, 2009; Pascopella, 2008). In a Midwest survey of men and women superintendents and women central office administrators who aspired to the role and women central office administrators who did not, Kim and Brunner (2009) found that before moving into the role of superintendent, women’s career pathways were different. They found that women spent more time at an assistant level within the district/central level than their male colleagues. Typically, women were elementary teachers who lacked exposure to coaching athletics at that level, whereas men were high school teachers with greater access to coaching jobs. This access granted men greater opportunities to socialize and for status, thus they were better known.
as community leaders than women who lacked this advantage. Kim and Brunner’s (2009) findings were that men’s career pathways tended to be more vertical, while women’s pathways tended to be more horizontal.

Women typically spend more time (7-10 years) in the classroom and move from the principalship to a district office position (such as assistant superintendent) then on to the superintendency. In a review of a survey of 1338 superintendents in 2006, Pascopella (2008) reported that nearly 40% of women moved into the role of the superintendency from an assistant superintendent’s position, while approximately 53% of men moved into the role of superintendency from a principal’s position, bypassing the role of assistant superintendent altogether. Men spend about 5-6 years in the classroom and move straight from the principalship to the superintendency, often jumping over the central/district office altogether (Kim & Brunner, 2009; Pascopella, 2008). Even after 20 years following Title IX, Grogan (1996) found that males move into these roles at earlier ages, while women wait until later in life, as they had family responsibilities such as raising children or caring for aging parents. Recruiting practices are impacted when women do not advance into top leadership roles at the same rate as their male colleagues, which Brunner and Kim (2010) attributed to the general beliefs and bias of society.

Trends in the Superintendency

Even after the implementation of Title IX in 1972, Grogan’s (1996) research on females aspiring to the superintendency indicated, “Over the past 20 years, significant increases in women in doctoral programs in educational administration suggest that more women aspire to the superintendency” (p. 21). In the United States, women are twice as
likely to have earned a doctorate in education, yet men are five times more likely to hold the job of superintendent of schools (Soberhart, 2009). Pounder and Merrill (2001) reported that women were 50% of the graduates of educational leadership preparation programs. Although more women than men are graduating from educational leadership preparation programs, men continue to dominate leadership roles (Katz, 2005).

Other trends reveal further gender discrepancies. The mean and median age of female superintendents continues to be higher than their male counterparts, and significantly fewer females report being married or having children as compared to men (AASA, 2015). Lennon (2013) found that female superintendents earn 81.4% of what their male counterparts earn. Men often attain their first administrative role at a younger age than females (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). Brunner (2000) reported that women who have children tend to wait to enter the superintendency until their children are at an age where they are not as dependent on them. Consequently, women spend more years as classroom teachers (7-10 years) before moving into administrative roles than do their male colleagues (5-6 years) in the classroom (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008).

These trends support Goldstein’s (2014) contention that teaching has long been regarded a feminized profession in the United States due to society’s views of female as caretakers, a term also used in Britain, Australia, Spain, Brazil, Mexico, and Belgium (Cortina & San Román, 2006). Interestingly, in the late 19th to early 20th century, teaching changed from an almost exclusively all-male role to a female-dominated role (Blount, 1998; Strober, 1984; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Adams and Hambright (2014) posited that society perceives the field of education as a venue for women to extend their
nurturing roles. Over many decades, society—and women themselves—internalized these roles. Women focused on nurturing and caring for children, leaving men to attend to the administrative role of running the schoolhouse (Adams & Hambright, 2014).

Even policies that advocate the acceptance of women in the workplace can only work within the confines of the same masculine-driven prototype that has always prevailed in the United States (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). The traditional model of educational leadership promotes the male gender stereotype and discourages the hiring of females (Shakeshaft, 1999). Men are viewed as breadwinners while women are viewed as nurturers (Goldstein, 2014), a phenomenon that requires females in the workforce to occupy a dual role.

Balance/Demands of the Role

Work-life balance remains a factor in the lack of females in the superintendency. Role conflicts materialize as women are expected to balance careers with more traditional responsibilities of household duties and childcare (Brunner, 2000; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Quality performance in a demanding role can be in direct conflict with spending quality time with one’s family (Smith, 1993), taking away from the work-life balance.

To be able to manage all roles effectively, Hochschild and Machung (2012) found that women who work outside of the home usually work an average of a month and a half more than men who work outside the home and felt a greater responsibility to attend to housework and child-rearing duties. When these working women are mothers, in
attempting to be committed to their careers, women then felt a sense of guilt for leaving
their children (Hochschild & Machung, 2012).

In reflecting on Grogan’s 1996 qualitative study of 27 women leaders who were
also mothers, Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, and Ballenger (2007) found:

Women expressed fear of failing as a mother, responsibility for the
maintenance of relationships, and the difficulties of coping with household
labor. Unlike men who were in similar high-level central office positions,
women experienced daily contradictions having to balance work and
family. Ironically, some of the women in this study found themselves
relying on husbands and partners to take up some of the slack in the
management of the household only to find themselves later separated or
divorced. (p. 114)

In a 2001 study of New York state superintendents, Tallerico and O’Connell
found that in a sample of 416 male superintendents and 62 female superintendents, half
of the males had young children, while only 33% of the females had young children. In
the study, 33% of the female superintendents were single compared to 4% of their male
counterparts. The females were also more likely to be married to a spouse living in
another state, or to be single, divorced, or widowed.

Shakeshaft (1989) stated that family responsibility impedes attainment of
administrative positions for females. This may account for the fact that significantly
fewer women than men superintendents are married, and their divorce rate is significantly
higher (AASA, 2015). Since this seems to suggest that women are “paying a price for
their career choice” (AASA, 2015, p. 13), what motivates women to aspire to the superintendency?

Factors that Motivate Females to Attain the Superintendency

To determine why women aspire to the superintendency, Murphy (2009) identified and developed the Female Superintendency Aspiration Model through a grounded theory study using semi-structured interviews with 23 varied women across the United States who sought the superintendency. Murphy (2009) highlighted three main factors: “(1) a person of influence, such as a mentor and/or role model, (2) an innate drive to seek out challenging and competitive opportunities, and (3) enrollment in a doctoral program emphasizing superintendency credentials” (p. ix). Murphy further found that other dynamics came into play for these women, including networking opportunities, a strong sense of self-efficacy, and specific personality characteristics, such as being goal-driven and realistic. However, women who seek the superintendency face a variety of barriers.

Barriers to Female Advancement in Leadership

Many researchers over the course of many years have noted barriers contributing to the lack of females and abundance of males in the superintendency and educational administration (Estler, 1975; Grady, 1992, 1995; Schmuck, 1980; Shakeshaft, 1989, 1999). Tallerico and Blount (2004) listed various barriers: ideologies about sex roles; sexual stereotypes of leader characteristics; socialization of children regarding the normalization of stereotypes and norms; the bureaucracy of schooling, which includes teaching for women and leadership for men; stereotypical masculine strengths in
leadership seen as higher status as opposed to collaboration and service; employment practices that present higher barriers for women; and up until the mid-1980s, more men than women earned higher graduate degrees. The following sections provide a discussion of barriers affecting female superintendency appointments. These include traditional hiring practices, gender discrimination, female leadership traits, and lack of mentorship.

**Recruiting and Hiring Practices**

Because board members associate the superintendency with being a male role, women face another barrier in achieving the superintendency (Oakley, 2000; Tallerico, 1999). When school boards seek superintendents, gender, political, and cultural biases are still in favor of men (Dana, 2009). Kowalski et al. (2011) reported that 75.9% of all superintendents are male, and 94% are White, although the number of females and persons of color have increased over the last 10 years. Tallerico and Blount (2004) proposed that the overwhelming number of men as compared to women in the superintendency was the result of the norms of our culture, societal perceptions, and beliefs.

Tallerico (1999) determined that the gender proportionality of a school board can increase the chances of hiring a female superintendent, as districts with a majority female board are more likely to hire a female. According to a study done for AASA by Kowalski and colleagues (2011), larger districts, typically located in urban and metropolitan areas, tend to have more women on the school boards, which corresponds to the slight increase of women as superintendents in larger districts across the nation. Even so, school boards tend to focus on fiscal and political concerns, rather than student
learning, which contradicts the leadership styles of most aspiring female superintendents (Lemasters & Roach, 2012).

Every year since 1923, the AASA (American Association of Superintendents) has conducted and released a review of the state of the superintendency office across the United States. The 2015 survey of 845 educational leaders (down from 1838 in 2010) garnered responses from 45 states. In most districts, women represented one quarter of superintendents, with the numbers increasing in the largest districts. AASA (2015) found that men tended to be hired at a higher percentage from within their district. Consistent with the findings of the 2010 study, 2015 responses indicate that women tended to be hired for their curriculum knowledge while men were hired for their personal characteristics. Female superintendents were especially committed to using their instruction and curriculum knowledge to make gains in instruction.

Despite research supporting the recruitment of females because they have the skills and characteristics that would have a positive impact (Grogan, 1996), search firm consultants and school board members still believe that the superintendency is a job for a male and lack confidence that a female can fill the role of the superintendency as successfully as a male (Bowles, 2013). According to AASA (2010), almost 82% of school board members indicated that they do not see women as strong managers; 76% did not feel that women were capable of handling district finances; and 61% felt that a glass ceiling existed for women in school management. In the case of women candidates applying for the superintendency, this glass ceiling translated to gender barriers.
Gender Barriers

According to Morrison (2012), in a survey of 25 female superintendents in Pennsylvania, approximately 80% of women cited gender as the most pervasive barrier in their quest for upper leadership positions. After World War II, when women lost the opportunity to move into leadership roles due to gender polarization and the G.I. Bill, women who wanted to serve as administrators were “viewed as transgressing their gender-appropriate bounds and, thus, were stigmatized” (Blount, 1999, p. 13). Decades later, this phenomenon still exists, supporting the reflection of Dana and Bourisaw (2006): “Gender is the inherent and ever-present barrier” (p. 14).

Gender as it relates to leadership was not prevalent in the literature until the 1970s because researchers, who tended to be males, did not see the relevance of this topic. Thus, the assumption was there was gender equity in these roles (Hoyt, 2010). Within this body of literature, researchers noted that the researcher role has typically been held by White men (Bjork, 2000), which causes their voices to be heard over that of others, specifically women and minorities (Kowalski & Brunner, 2005).

Lemasters and Roach (2012) reported that in the 1970s, public attention regarding gender inequities led to research of women in leadership roles, and the body of literature began to grow in the 1980s, but it was not until the 1990s that the literature began to proliferate. Most of the research at this time focused on women’s leadership styles, career paths, and biases faced by women in upper level positions. Since 2000, empirical studies, such as descriptive surveys, which “painted women in a passive posture with respect to their own careers” (Lemasters & Roach, 2012, p. 10), replaced in-depth studies
of female executives. Because these studies are outdated in an era of great educational change, Lemasters and Roach (2012) highlighted the need for more analytical and qualitative research to address the current experiences of women in the superintendency.

Throughout the research addressing gender inequity, various terms have been used to describe the barriers women face in the top roles. Terms such as *glass ceiling*, *glass escalator*, *glass cliff*, and *labyrinth* refer to a woman’s struggle for advancement. Because of gender discrimination, the U.S. Department of Labor (1991) through the 1991 Civil Rights Act created a Federal Glass Ceiling Commission to study the barriers to women and minorities’ career advancement. The commission examined corporate America, but ample literature shows that it translates into other sectors, including education. The commission issued 12 recommendations on how to increase diversity and reduce discrimination, including items such as improve data collection, lead by example, and initiate work/life and family friendly policies (U.S. Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

Despite these recommendations, gender inequity remains a problem in the 21st century. When investigating the lack of females in the school superintendency, Kim and Brunner (2009) claimed that the difficulty women face when aspiring to attain the role of superintendent is due to society’s gender understandings. According to Carli and Eagly (2001), although the status of women has improved in recent years, it is still not at the level of men in areas such as access to power and leadership.

Haveman and Beresford (2012) proposed that because the job preferences, educational credentials, and work experience of men and women today are similar, the
vertical gender gap comes from society’s role expectation and gender bias as to what a leader looks like: male or female. This belief fits well with social role theory, which posits that specific traits and characteristics are associated with males (“agentic”) and females (“communal”) and influence beliefs about the type of work each gender should do (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly, Mitchell, & Paludi, 2004).

Female leadership approaches. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) posited that female leadership style differs from men because women tend to use shared-leadership and collective strategies. They stated that women are likely to lead using one, or a combination of, the following five approaches to help them contend with society’s expectations and standards: relational leadership, leadership for learning, leadership for social justice, spiritual leadership, and balanced leadership. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) delineated the five approaches:

- **Relational leadership:** “being in relation and sharing power with others” (p. 8)
- **Leadership for social justice** “they enter the field because they want to change the lives of children and help make the world a fair place” (p. 11).
- **Spiritual leadership:** “They always talk about spirit when discussing school leadership as a source of personal strength and a way to understand connectedness” (p. 14).
- **Leadership for learning:** “They support strong programs in staff development, to encourage innovation, and to experiment with instructional approaches” (p. 18).
Balanced leadership: “Women leaders strive to find balance between responsibilities at work and at home” (p. 21).

Pierro, Raven, Amato, and Bélanger (2012) maintained that social power plays a role in the dynamics of an organization. Ely (1995) found that effectively using power can result in equity of wages, advancement of career, and access to benefits. In the same vein as Grogan and Shakeshaft’s (2011) leadership styles typically adhered to by women, social psychologists French and Raven (1959) identified five bases of power:

- Legitimate—power resulting from leader’s legitimate power/position in the organization
- Reward—power resulting from ability to praise and compensate another
- Expert—power resulting from skills and knowledge
- Referent—power resulting from leader being perceived as a model worthy of emulation
- Coercive—power resulting from compliance out of fear of being punished

French and Raven (1959) explained that the bases of power are both positional and personal, and women and men operate from different bases. Men tend to operate from a more coercive power base, while women choose a more personal approach (Rosener, 1990).

Research shows that women do not want to lead by adhering to a masculine model of leadership (Brunner, 2000; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Lemasters and Roach (2012) credited this to “learned behaviors” (p. 6), positing that women relied on a collaborative and cooperative leadership style rather than dictatorial because experience
had taught them that it would “not be received well by men” (p. 6). Interestingly, this choice is beneficial in the current educational context. Paul Houston, AASA executive director stated, “I have always maintained that women culturally are well prepared for the role because they’re more collaborative and lean toward bringing more people together, which are some of the skills necessary for being a good superintendent” (as cited in Pascopella, 2008, para. 13). However; in contrast, Brunner (2005) stated that successful collaboration “does not equal competence” and can be a detriment to women’s influence and power.

Interestingly, many females in these leadership roles do not aspire to the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). In an AASA-commissioned national survey of 723 women superintendents and 472 women assistant superintendents in the United States, Brunner and Grogan (2007) discovered that 60% of female assistant superintendents were not interested in moving into the role of the superintendency for a variety of reasons, including work-life balance and family obligations. This lack of aspiration to the superintendency is problematic in the United States for several reasons, including the looming leadership crisis in the forms of of lack of qualified candidates for the superintendency and superintendent turnover (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000). Chingos, Whitehurst, and Lindquist (2014) reported that the average tenure for a public school superintendent is relatively short at three or four years. Furthermore, Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006) concluded, “The absence of women at senior levels of administration, particularly the superintendency, means that women’s influence on policy changes, decisions, and practice in the field is limited” (p. 486). Because White
males so heavily dominate the superintendency, the female voice is not heard (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). This male dominance also affects the mentoring and sponsoring of females in the superintendency as this is important to achieve this role (de Santa Ana, 2008).

Mentorship and sponsorship. A dearth of mentorship and sponsorship creates another barrier to obtaining the superintendency for women (Brunner, 2000; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Tareef (2013) defined mentorship as the act of a professional with more skill and experience providing guidance to support to another professional with less experience. Sectors outside of education also recognize the value of mentorship. Kovnatska (2014) found that over 70% of Fortune 500 companies are using mentors as a way to attract and retain quality employees. Holmes, Land, and Hinton-Hudson (2007) noted the importance and efficacy of mentoring relationships in all professions, but especially for those in the higher ranks of educational leadership. After triangulating a meta-analysis of the literature with the data from the narratives of 25 female current and past school leaders, Dana and Bourisaw (2006) stated, “The evidence is clear that women who have mentors move into school district or school leadership positions sooner than those who are without mentors” (p. 195).

Through interviews with 10 southern African-American women, Angel, Killacky, and Johnson (2013) found there is a lack of network and supports for women to obtain guidance and mentorship to be able to maneuver effectively within the educational system. Lemasters and Roach (2012) explained that because men dominate leadership positions, women are excluded from “good ole boy” (p. 4) activities, such as hunting and
fishing expeditions, golfing, and other typical male venues. Once again, gender serves as a “gatekeeper” (Lemasters & Roach, 2012, p. 4).

Magdaleno (2006) offered that same gender mentors are vital in helping female superintendents with achieving work-life balance and providing effective support for gender barriers. However, Munoz, Mills, Pankake, and Whaley (2014) found that mentoring for women by women was almost nonexistent at the level of the superintendency due to the lack of females in the role. This is a difficulty, as Kamler (2009) affirmed that “ongoing support for women who have secured the superintendency is also crucial for their continued growth and development as well as their ability to cope with the stresses of the position” (p. 143). These stressors are further complicated for females who must balance personal and professional life by balancing family, self, and work (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009).

Gender disparity in leadership positions. Research in the areas of history and culture regarding females in leadership roles in the United States offers numerous reasons for their underrepresentation. These include internal and external factors, such as gender and sexual division of labor, career path barriers, recruiting and hiring practices, and general personality traits that impact success (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Gender disparity is evident in the leadership of the federal, state, and city government and corporate sectors (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013), as well P-12 and higher education institutions (Rhode, 2014).

Disproportionality occurs at all government levels in the United States. At the federal level, women hold 83 (19.1%) of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives
and 22 (22%) of the 100 seats in the Senate (Catalyst, 2018b). At the state level, only four of the fifty state governors are women, and 24.8% of state legislators are women. Statistics show that as of July 2016, only 18.9% of U.S. cities with 30,000 or more residents had a woman as mayor (Rutgers Eagleton Institute of Politics & Center for American Women and Politics, 2017). Although there is evidence that the numbers of women in leadership positions in government is growing based upon recent statistics, men still own the majority (Catalyst, 2018b).

Disparity also exists in leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies. According to Catalyst president, Ilene Lang, women make up nearly half the total workforce and earn 57% of Bachelor’s degrees and 60% of Master’s degrees. Furthermore, they are influential in 73% of the consumer decisions in America (Catalyst, 2010). However, in Fortune 500 companies, women hold only 5% of CEO positions and 26.5% of executive positions (Catalyst, 2018c). Lang asserted that these inequities are not just harmful to women, but also to families, employers, and the U.S. economy (Catalyst, 2010).

In a study of female leadership across 14 sectors in the United States, Lennon (2013) reported a lack of females in educational leadership roles across the country. For example, in the higher education field, Lennon (2013) reported that fewer than 30% of college and university board members were women; a mere 26% of university presidents were women; and only 10% of fulltime professors were women (Lennon, 2013). In United States’ public school systems, classroom teaching roles are overrepresented by women, while men primarily hold the superintendency (Kowalski et al., 2011). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) posited that, despite the majority of females in classroom teaching
positions, the roles of superintendent and principal remain “just out of their grasp” (p. xx).

Lennon (2013) cautioned that U.S. companies and organizations will continue to lag behind their competition if they do not put strategies in place to expound upon the talents of 50% of the U.S. workforce. Potential strategies are needed to address the gender pay gap. The National Committee on Pay Equity (2012) reported that, in 2010, the wage gap had “narrowed by less than half a cent per year” (para. 1) since the signing of the Equal Pay Act in 1963.

Gender pay gap. Along with contending with underrepresentation in leadership roles, women also contend with the gender pay gap in terms of wages (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2017). According to the AAUW (2017), women face a pay gap in every occupation. Lennon (2013) found that the average salary for females CEOs in the top 10 technology companies in the United States was 26% less than the average male salary and women make up only 20% of leadership positions in this field.

In the early 1960s, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 attempted to address gender pay inequity, and the gap has narrowed since 1960, but progress has stalled. In 2009, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act worked to enhance pay equity in the workplace (Lennon, 2013). However, in 2015, females across the Unites States still made just 80% of the salary earned by males even after legislation (Proctor, Semega, & Kollar).

Women of color and women with children face a larger pay gap (AAUW, 2017). Because there are more working mothers now than ever before in the history of the
United States, this pay gap has a direct impact on families and children. Forty percent of mothers with children below 18 years of age are their families’ primary or sole breadwinner (Glynn, 2014). Because most employers still favor traditional versus flexible working hours, women with children can be at a disadvantage (Goldin, 2014) and often are forced to take time away from working outside the home or reduce their work hours (Bertrand, Goldin, , & Katz, 2010). AAUW (2017) determined that women, more than their male counterparts, take a break from the workforce to raise children, they face a “motherhood penalty” (p. 19). In contrast, after having a child, men often receive a “fatherhood bonus” (AAUW, 2017, p. 19) in the form of a higher wage.

After accounting for factors such as occupation, hours worked, location, and marital status, there is still an “unexplained gap” in the American workforce of 8%, which is often attributed to gender bias and discrimination (Blau & Kahn, 2016; Jagsi et al., 2012). Hegewisch and Hartmann (2014) found that a contributing factor to the gender pay gap is gender bias. At the conclusion of a 50-year study, Levanon, England, and Allison (2009) determined that when an influx of women enters a previously male-dominated field, the overall salaries for that occupation decrease.

In addition, segregation by occupation is an issue, since jobs traditionally associated with women and requiring the same skill level tend to pay less than jobs associated with men. Murphy and Graff (2005) claimed that over 47 years or a “lifetime” of full-time work, the gender pay gap contributes to an estimated difference (with females making less money) of $700,000 for high school graduates, $1.2 million with a college degree, and anywhere up to $2 million for a professional degree.
In 2013, 2014, and 2016, the American Association of Superintendents (AASA) conducted analyses of superintendents’ salaries. It was determined that as district enrollment increases, so does superintendent salary, regardless of gender. In the last Salary Study done by AASA in 2016, there was little difference in the mean average salary for men and women ($139,566 for men and $139,191 for women). However, it is important to note that most female superintendents assume the role with far more years of experience than their male counterparts have, lead larger school districts, and hold more advanced degrees—all of which should represent higher salaries (AASA, 2013).

Summary

The role of the public school superintendent continues to be one of the least gender-diverse leadership roles in the United States because White males typically hold the office (Bjork, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011). With 76% of educators being female and only 24.1% of superintendents being female (AASA, 2016), this is grossly disproportionate and qualifies as a pervasive problem. This chapter provided a review of the literature addressing these issues.

According to the literature, reasons for this disparity vary. The path to the superintendency usually follows this route: classroom teacher, assistant principal, and secondary principal (middle or high school) before moving into the superintendency role. However, women follow a more circuitous route to move into the role of superintendent, generally with a stint within the central office, such as assistant superintendent, which is usually circumvented by men (AASA, 2016; Glass, 2000).
Other reasons for this disproportionality include work-life balance and family obligations (Brunner and Grogan, 2007), the “good ole boy” network, gender bias in recruiting practices, and various social phenomena, such as social role theory, where women and men are placed into roles due to sexual division of labor as perceived by society (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Cultural and historical perspectives often further the perspective of men as more desirable for leadership roles, while women are in the role of caretaker (Eagly & Wood, 2016).

A crisis is looming in the role of the American public school superintendent, as turnover is high, and there can be a lack of qualified candidates (Cooper et al., 2000). By failing to elevate women to these roles, almost half of the U.S. population does not have a voice (Kowalski & Brunner, 2005; Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006). In many realms, women have made progress, for more women are in the workforce than at any point in history (Khairuzzaman, Ismail, Jafar, & Al-Taee, 2012) and research is addressing the lack of females in leadership roles (Wang, 2011). More women are earning advanced degrees than men and are participating in leadership preparation programs (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Women are bringing effective leadership traits (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) to the office, and the public is receptive to this, according to the Pew Research Center (2015). Despite this progress, women remain underrepresented in the superintendency and little has changed over the last 100 years regarding the gender diversity of this role (Blount, 1998; Kowalski et al., 2011). Ample literature that exists to explain why women would not aspire to the superintendency, but the literature is scant as to why women would choose to aspire this position that is fraught with pervasive barriers
(Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). This study seeks to add to the literature in this area of study, as researchers have found it to be underrepresented within the literature on females in the superintendency role.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

According to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), in 2015, approximately 23.1% of the superintendents across the United States were women, which is a disproportionate ratio of male to female superintendents. The literature cites and explores a variety of reasons for the underrepresentation of females in the superintendency. The purpose of this study is to explore the underrepresentation of females in the public school superintendency through the lens of the assistant female superintendent. Considerable research addresses the superintendency itself, yet very little investigation of the assistant superintendency exists (Kaltenecker, 2011).

Research reveals that 60% of assistant female superintendents do not aspire to the next level—the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). On the career path to the superintendency, men often go from the principalship to the superintendency, whereas women usually have an additional central-office level step, such as the assistant superintendency (Kim & Brunner, 2009). This study seeks to explore the barriers, both internal and external, that women face in these leadership roles, as well as the supports that have bolstered them along the way. This chapter proposes the research approach for investigating this phenomenon.

Research Questions Reiterated

The following research questions were addressed:
1. What do these women perceive as the barriers and motivators for higher position aspiration?
2. How do these women describe the support systems for attaining a higher position?
3. How do female assistant superintendents view and describe the relationship between the production and practice of knowledge and power based on feminist standpoint theory?

Research Design

The researcher used a qualitative approach to provide an in-depth exploration of the research questions. As Creswell (2013) explained, qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. For researchers who seek to gain a greater understanding of the process by which actions and events happen, a qualitative method is best (Maxwell & Loomis, 2002).

Crotty (1998) proposed four elements of the research process: epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodology, and methods. This section describes the four elements as they add soundness and rigor to a research study. Crotty (1998) stated that epistemology is “how we know what we know,” (p. 8) while Guba and Lincoln (1994) contended that it is “the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known” (p. 201). The epistemology used to frame this study was constructivism, which means that knowledge is not discovered but is created based
on the experiences and interactions of that person with other human beings and their world; hence, it only exists within our minds and is our own truth (Crotty, 1998).

Phillips (2000) examined constructivism more fully and deconstructed social constructivism as a theory that humans constructed segments of knowledge. He asserted that knowledge is the result of such things as “politics, ideologies, values, the exertion of power, and the preservation of status, religious beliefs, and economic self-interest” (Phillips, 2000, p. 6). This approach has a keen focus on factors such as power, politics, and society’s norms and how they have impacted how people gain understanding and knowledge regarding their world (Richardson, 2003).

The theoretical framework used for this study was feminist standpoint theory and social role theory, which will work symbiotically to frame the study. Feminist standpoint theory guides research regarding the relationship between the production of power and practices of power (Harding, 2004), highlighting personal experiences and guided by the historical marginalization of women (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000). Social role theory highlights the historical sexual division of labor between men and women, specifically the gender differences in social behavior and expectations (Eagly, 1987).

Additionally, to focus the analysis of this study, the sociological lens of symbolic interactionism, a theoretical perspective commonly combined with grounded theory, was used (Charmaz, 2006). The importance of the theoretical perspective is that it acknowledges the philosophical perspective behind methodology that has been selected (Crotty, 1998). Charmaz (2006) explained that symbolic interactionism is a
. . . theoretical perspective derived from pragmatism which assumes that people construct, selves and reality through interaction. Because this perspective focuses on dynamic relationships between meaning and actions, it addresses the active processes through which people create and mediate meanings. Meanings arise out of actions, and in turn influence actions. The perspective assumes that individuals are active, creative, and reflective and that social life consists of processes. (p. 5)

Constructivist grounded theory, a qualitative methodology, was used in this study. Constructivist grounded theory came about through the work of Strauss (1987) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1994, 1998), since they asserted that the outcome of the stories of the participants is the creation of a theory. Schwandt (2001) suggested that grounded theory is a targeted, well-developed, exhaustive, and rigorous set of procedures used to produce theory, often used in studying social phenomena to explain actions and process and generate theories “grounded” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, p. 107) in data gleaned through participants who have experienced the process.

According to Charmaz (2006), the grounded theory approach encompasses a systematic inductive comparative and interactive approach to inquiry with several key strategies for conducting inquiry. Constant comparison is used to look for similarities and differences in the data until theoretical saturation is reached (Schwandt, 2001). This approach allows researchers to collect data and build inductive middle-range theories using successive levels of data analysis (Charmaz, 2006).
Tying it all together, constructivism was used as the epistemology to approach this qualitative research. When looking at constructivism as an epistemology, individuals build reality as they assign meaning to their world in which they live and work (Appleton & King, 2002). Crotty (1998) elaborated: as individuals interact with objects and the world within which they live, meaning is constructed based on their social and historical perspectives. Charmaz (2006) further connected this view into grounded theory by stating that constructivism “assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and viewed, and aims toward an interpretive understanding of subjects’ meanings” (p. 250).

The method for this study was qualitative interviews with selected participants who were female assistant superintendents. According to Kvale and Brinkman (2009), “An interview is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose” (p. 3) that tries to understand the world from the point of view of the subject, and the purpose of interviews is to produce knowledge. Silverman (2010) believed that we are an “interview society” (p. 309), which is a society that relies “pervasively on face-to-face interviews to reveal the personal, the private self of the subject” (p. 309).

Population

The population for this study was female assistant superintendents working in a metropolitan area of a large city in the southeastern United States. This population was chosen because, although there is ample research on the paucity of females in the superintendency, there is very little research on the assistant superintendent, which represents a gap in the literature (Kaltenecker, 2011).
Sample

In the process of sampling, the researcher selects participants who are representative of the larger population of the study (Gay & Airasian, 1996). To recruit participants for this study, the researcher used the combination of purposive and theoretical sampling. Creswell (2007) stated that purposive sampling “selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). Using this sampling strategy requires the researcher to determine “who or what should be sampled, what form the sampling will take, and how many people or sites need to be sampled” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). According to Trochim (2005), purposive sampling is so named because it is sampling with a purpose in mind.

Charmaz (2006) suggested that theoretical sampling for grounded theory is a way of “seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory” (p. 96). As categories develop within the analysis of the data, theoretical sampling points the researcher towards which participants to interview as categories develop within the analysis of the data.

Participants

The researcher used purposive sampling and theoretical sampling to select participants. To participate in this study, participants fit the following criteria:

a. The participant must be female.

b. The participant must work in a metropolitan area of a large city located in the southeastern United States.
The participants were 12 female assistant superintendents selected from 23 school districts within a large metropolitan area in the Southeast. Regarding sample size, 12 female assistant superintendents were selected as a representative sample to participant in this study because research indicates this number is necessary for data saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). It was not necessary for the researcher to consider other metropolitan districts in the combined statistical area, as defined by the United States Census Bureau, to recruit the appropriate number of participants.

The participants engaged in semi-structured interviews with the researcher in a setting convenient to the participants. Creswell (2005) stated that semi-structured interviews is a type of interviewing that allows participants to freely express their views and permits the researcher to probe ideas that may emerge and unfold.

Instrumentation

When conducting qualitative research, the researcher becomes the key instrument of data collection for the study, because the researcher defines and chooses the parameters and processes of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2007; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). According to Charmaz (2006), “An interviewer’s questions and interviewing style shape the context and frame the content of the study” (p. 32). As part of the audit trail, Charmaz (2006) recommended recording and transcribing interviews because this encourages participants to share their stories and ensures an in-depth investigation of relevant questions and issues. This also assists with being sure that questions are relevant and align with grounded theory. For this study, the
researcher devised interview questions aligned with the research questions to encourage participants to share their experiences in relation to the topic (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Interview Questions Aligned with the Research Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Alignment with Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Describe your background.</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did your background motivate and/or create you?</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is leadership to you and how has this changed over time? Why?</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What actions have you taken that have created the leader you are today?</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What interactions supported you in your professional and personal life? Do you have support networks?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have been the barriers on your journey? Have these barriers turned into opportunities?</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has your thinking about leadership changed from earlier in your career?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership is a hierarchy of power; describe your relationship with power. How do you produce and use power?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel women lead differently than men?</td>
<td>1, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe a situation that best illustrates your leadership.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any regrets?</td>
<td>1, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you changed your leadership style throughout your career as you have moved into different roles?</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Subjectivity Statement

Creswell (2013) asserted that the researcher must set aside personal experience and biases because personal biases can influence the work of the researcher. For readers of the study to understand how the researcher’s biases and assumptions impact the data, the subjectivity statement calls for the researcher to think about herself as a human instrument (Merriam, 2002).

It was of vital importance that I set aside my own history and experiences to mitigate my bias in this investigation. As an assistant principal for two years, former classroom teacher for 15 years, and the daughter of two longtime educators, my bias could have stemmed from my own desire for career advancement in education. Part of the mitigation of bias includes utilizing verification procedures described in the next section.

Validation

Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited that to evaluate the worth of a research study, trustworthiness of data is essential. The qualitative piece of this study includes establishing the four criteria for trustworthiness of data, which include the following as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985):

a. Member checking with participants to ensure that data, interpretations, and conclusions are correct and error-free will promote credibility, or confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contended that this is the most critical piece of establishing credibility.
b. Providing rich, thick, description and ensuring that enough contextual information is given regarding the fieldwork will enhance transferability, which is applicable in other contexts. The researcher will sufficiently explain the assumptions and study’s central ideas, as well as the methods and data analysis.

c. The researcher will achieve dependability, which is being able to repeat the findings because they are consistent, by describing the processes for executing and repeating the study in detail. Reflection on the study will also ensure dependability.

d. Confirmability, which ensures the participants shape the findings instead of the researcher, will be achieved through peer review and clarification of the researcher’s biases and beliefs through the subjectivity statement and audit trail.

Institutional Review Board Approval

The researcher obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Mercer University (see Appendix A). IRB approval is important to ensure the protection of human participants and guarantee that no psychological or physical harm will come to them due to the research (Lincoln & Tierney, 2004). Each participant signed an informed consent form (see Appendix B). The researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants, their school districts, metropolitan area, and state to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. The researcher secured collected data by using a password-protected server.
Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval through Mercer, the researcher sent e-mails to female assistant superintendents and similar roles throughout the metropolitan area through their publicly accessible e-mail addresses. E-mails were sent until 12 female participants were interviewed and saturation was obtained. Selection of interviewees was also based on theoretical sampling after six interviews were conducted to ascertain if any other topics need to be covered (i.e., ethnicity, SES of students). Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphasized that “flow of work” (p. 29) in qualitative research includes data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and the impact of decisions on validity made by the researcher throughout the study by the researcher. In this study, data generated from in-depth semi-structured interviews with female assistant superintendents. According to Mathers, Fox, and Hunn (1998), semi-structured interviews are useful because they use open-ended questions about the topic and allow the researcher and participants to have frank discussion about the topic.

Using Kvale and Brinkman’s (2009) sequence outlined for the interviewing process, face-to-face or telephone interviews were conducted at a setting convenient for the participant and researcher. This process included thematizing the inquiry, interviewing, transcribing the interviews, analyzing the data, verifying the validity, examining the validity of the findings, and finally reporting the results of the study.

Following the conducting and recording of interviews at a mutually agreed upon setting, the researcher transcribed and analyzed the recordings using a coding software program. A systematic analytic procedure developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998)
proved beneficial in the “seeking to develop a theory that explains the process, actions or interactions” (Creswell, 2007, p. 63) in the realm of lack of females in the superintendency, through the lens of the female assistant superintendent. The research was checked, and all transcriptions were verified for accuracy, then analyzed prior to coding of the data. Field notes, memos, recordings, and any other data were kept secure on a password-protected computer. The researcher will destroy all recordings after the course of one year and have exclusive access to data.

Data Analysis

After transcription of the interviews, the researcher began memoing, the process that allows analyzing and coding of the data to occur at an early point in the process (Merriam, 2002). The researcher used memos and diagrams to capture ideas generated from the data. According to Merriam (2002), “Memos can provide a time to reflect on issues raised in the setting and how they relate to larger, theoretical, methodological, and substantive issues” (p. 165). Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested, “Memos and diagrams help the analyst to gain analytical distance from materials. They force the analyst to move from working with data to conceptualizing” (p. 218). Strauss and Corbin (2008) also offered that memos are vital documents because they add to the validity of the study, allow the researcher to keep detailed records of the process of analysis, and allow the analyst to develop ideas based on the products of coding. Wong (2008) stated that memoing assists the researcher in clustering the categories into themes and recording ideas as they emerge for a final theoretical model.
Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that the combination of collecting the data, memo writing, and coding the data “should blur and intertwine continually, from the beginning of an investigation to its end” (p. 43). Consequently, memoing continued throughout the analysis. After the researcher conducted three to four interviews, she followed Corbin and Strauss’s (2007) steps for sequential coding of data and grouping of codes. Line-by-line and open coding of each interview transcript were developed. The researcher then grouped the codes together based on similar concepts, known as axial coding, and synthesized the codes into themes, known as theoretical or selective coding.

To frame the data analysis, the researcher utilized the grounded theory research process, which incorporates a repetitive cycle of data collection and comparing themes until no new themes emerge. The computer software program NVivo assisted with data organization and retrieval, as well as qualitative analysis and coding (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013) to cluster the categories for a final theoretical model.

**Reporting Results**

Chapter 4 presents the results of the study and the collection process in the form of narratives, illustrated with quotes and inclusive of rich, thick descriptions of these women and their personal journeys through their professional lives. This summary allows readers to have a deep understanding of the journey of the female assistant superintendents and the challenges and supports they encountered along the way. The narratives include excerpts of the interviews and quotes to contribute evidence of their experiences and stories. Charts and visuals display the collected data, analyzed via Corbin and Strauss’s (2007) steps for sequential coding as previously delineated.
References to participants, school districts, metropolitan area, and state are in the form of pseudonyms.

Summary

This chapter reported the research design to investigate the perceptions of female assistant superintendents regarding the barriers and supports of their journey to the superintendency. In the constructivist epistemology, social role theory, feminist standpoint theory, and symbolic interactionism frame the study and provide context. Grounded theory was utilized as the methodology of inquiry, which allowed data collection and analysis to inform each other, using an iterative approach (Charmaz, 2006). Using purposeful, theoretical sampling, 12 female metropolitan area assistant superintendents participated in semi-structured interviews. Corbin and Strauss’s (2007) steps for sequential coding of data and grouping of codes were conducted. Upon attainment of saturation and transcription of the interviews, analysis of the data began with the assistance of the computer software program, NVivo.

Using open coding, the researcher began to form categories through the constant comparative method. When the open coding process was complete, axial coding was used to begin to sort the data into categories. The researcher created a logic diagram, or visual model, to illustrate central phenomenon, conditions, context, and consequences. Throughout the coding process, the researcher also used memoing to record thoughts and ideas about the evolving theory. After constant comparison of data, the resulting theory was used until saturation was conceptually dense and “grounded” in the data (Schwandt, 2001). Chapter 4 presents the results of this analysis.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to review and explore, through the lens of the female assistant superintendent, the underrepresentation of females in the public school superintendency in the United States. In 2015, American Association of School Administrators (AASA) determined that only 23.1% of superintendents were female. Because there is very little research about female assistant superintendents (Kalteneckner, 2011), a qualitative lens was chosen through which to view their experiences.

The epistemology used to frame this study was constructivism, meaning that knowledge is not discovered but instead created through the experiences and interactions of that person with other human beings and their world; hence, it only exists within our minds and is our own truth (Crotty, 1998). Oleson (2003) contended that when research is written for women, it is best done using the qualitative paradigm of constructivism. Feminist standpoint theory and social role theory were used in concert to frame this study, while the qualitative methodology used was grounded theory. The women who participated in this study were representative of diverse backgrounds and circumstances and open with the researcher as they shared their thoughts and experiences.

The researcher conducted a qualitative grounded theory study to gain insight into the lack of females in the superintendency in public education in the United States through the lens of the female assistant superintendent. The researcher chose this
population because of the lack of research and literature in this area (Kalteneckner, 2011). The researcher conducted 12 face-to-face or phone interviews with female assistant superintendents and similar titles.

Following transcription of the interviews, the researcher then conducted memo writing and member checking to ensure that the transcribed interviews were as the participants intended. Line-by-line coding was conducted using the coding software NVivo. The coding and memoing process guided the analysis and led to the derivation of themes from the data. This chapter, which begins with a review of the research questions, presents the findings of the interviews through the direct quotes, summaries, and a conceptual model.

Research Questions Reviewed

The following research questions guided the data collection in this study:

1. What do these women perceive as the barriers and motivators for higher position aspiration?

2. How do these women describe the support systems for attaining a higher position?

3. How do female assistant superintendents view and describe the relationship between the production and practice of knowledge and power based on feminist standpoint theory?

Description of Participants

In February of 2018, the researcher sent emails with a recruitment letter and IRB approval to 40 female assistant superintendents in a metropolitan area. Responses came
back within one week from 15 individuals who indicated that they would like to take part in the study. Three of the individuals later turned down the opportunity when they learned that IRB approval from their school system was necessary in addition to IRB approval from the researcher’s institution. Responses came back from three individuals stating that, although they saw the merit of the study, they were simply too busy to participate. Twenty-two did not respond at all. The researcher then set up face-to-face or telephone interviews with the interested participants. Semi-structured interviews took place in February and March of 2018 over the course of three weeks, with the shortest interview lasting 26 minutes and the longest lasting 41 minutes. Each interview participant responded to 12, open-ended, semi-structured questions (see Appendix D). The interviewees came from a diverse and varied range of backgrounds and experiences. Nine of the participants were married and three were unmarried. Eight interviewees had children, seven were African-American, and five were Caucasian. Two had recently retired from the assistant superintendency. To maintain anonymity, the researcher assigned the following pseudonyms to the women who participated: Gracie, Linda, Anne, Dianna, Jennifer, Lisa, Maggie, Hannah, Dottie, Olivia, Cecilia, and Audrey.

Findings

Grounded theory was used to guide the work in this study. Strauss and Corbin (1990) explained that grounded theory is “a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon” (p. 24). According to Neumann (2011), the purpose of grounded theory is to build a theory that is “faithful to the evidence” (p. 71). Charmaz (2011) stated that
grounded theory “uses an approach in which data collection and analysis reciprocally inform and shape each other through an emergent and iterative process” (p. 360). With this approach in mind, saturation was achieved after the 12 interviews. The researcher then sent the transcriptions to the participants for member checking or validation, thus allowing the participant to “judge the adequacy of the results” (Neumann, 2011, p. 456).

Following this, the researcher then began memoing, which is an important step in between collecting the data and coding that allows analysis of data at the beginning of the process, exploration of ideas, and active engagement with the data (Charmaz, 2006). Memoing serves as an audit trail but also allows for constant comparisons, as recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In addition, memos enable the researcher to guide the analysis and link the data to the literature.

Following memo writing, the researcher began the process of initial coding using the coding software NVivo. The researcher listened to each recording and read each transcription several times and, through a line-by-line coding process, the researcher formed 40 initial codes. According to Saldaña (2016), a code in a qualitative work is a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 4). Creswell (2013, p. 186) stated that in qualitative data, codes can represent three things:

- Information that researchers expect to find before the study
- Surprising information that researchers did not expect to find, and
- Information that is conceptually interesting or unusual to researchers (and potentially participants and audiences.)
Some of the 40 codes created were descriptive codes, while others were in vivo codes, which are codes that are exact words used by interviewees (Creswell, 2013). Through initial coding, the researcher then constructed axial codes/categories by condensing codes based on like categories. These were then narrowed down further to four inductive themes (Saldaña, 2016). Creswell (2013) stated that themes and categories are “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (p. 186).

The theoretical codes that emerged were Influence, Motivation, Overcoming Barriers, and “It’s Okay”; these codes connect to the research questions. Table 4 displays the initial codes, axial codes (categories), and theoretical codes.
Table 4

**Codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Axial Codes/Categories</th>
<th>Theoretical Codes/Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making a Difference</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Striving for Perfection</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Inner Drive</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Striving for Perfection</td>
<td>Determination</td>
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<td>Taking Risks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Bias</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Self-Imposed Gender Bias</td>
<td>Overcoming Barriers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Gender Roles</td>
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<td>Feeling “Not Good Enough”</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Boards</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“Not good enough”</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glass Cliff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building Capacity</td>
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<td>Collaboration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building Relationships</td>
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<td>Influencing Others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leading by Example</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hold off on Career</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacrifice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Managing It All</td>
<td>“It’s Okay”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Sacrifice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
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*Note.* Coding progression from development of initial coding to refinement of axial coding to emergence of four themes reached after 12 interviews with female assistant superintendents. *N* indicates number of participants who contributed to the codes.
In the conceptual model (see Figure 1) that emerged from the data, “It’s Okay” is the key theoretical code; revolving around it are: Motivation, Overcoming Barriers, and Influence, meaning that these women have come to be “okay” with the path they are on and what it has taken to get there. This theoretical model of leadership for female assistant superintendents shows how “it’s okay” is centrally located in their lives as they had to come to terms with being okay with whatever path they were traveling. Influence also plays heavily into their lives, whether it is influencing others, being influenced by others, or using power as influence. Inner drive and striving for perfection motivates them through the various barriers that they must overcome to realize their goals and aspirations, while understanding “it’s okay” to negotiate between home and career.

*Figure 1. Conceptual model: “It’s okay”*
Theme 1: “It’s Okay”

The first theoretical code under discussion in detail is “It’s Okay”. This theme ties into research question 1 regarding barriers and motivators. All of the other themes revolved around these women coming to terms with their work-life balance and feeling that “it’s okay”. These women were managing it all and had to work to be okay with the fact that sometimes you just had to be “good enough” and “okay” with the sacrifices and regrets that would come as they moved up the career ladder. This theme is about self-acceptance and being able to own the decisions made along the way, as well as the impact on self, spouse, and family. Axial themes that surfaced were holding off on family (for career), holding off on career (for family), sacrifice, regrets, and work-life balance. These emerged through the following initial codes: managing it all, work-life balance, and sacrifice. This ties in directly to social role theory as managing of the household and children was a concern for many of these women as they navigated their career. Feminist Standpoint Theory also served to frame this theme as power related to the sexual division of labor was evident throughout the words of the women.

The move up the career ladder had impacts on various aspects of the women’s lives. Being thoughtful about what these bigger professional roles meant for their families and their lives was a consideration. Support networks in the forms of husbands and families played a role in the discussion. It was important that families and husbands supported their careers, since it would mean a bigger sacrifice and commitment for them. One woman spoke of a family meeting before taking on the new role to say, “Okay, are we okay with Mom taking on a much bigger job?” as it would have an impact on her
family. “Internal negotiation” with her family was the term used to describe this and how it would impact her leadership role and that she could not do the job without this piece in place.

Another critical piece is typically women are those who “have children”. Making those critical decisions for yourself professionally, as well as making those critical decisions for your family, even from the case of family planning, has an impact on what it is that you do and the way that you lead.

Jennifer talked about how to manage it all at the “C-level” and how something had to “give” and she had to be “okay” with that:

You’re going to have to choose. You’re going to have to outsource something in your life. You’ve got to figure out what that is. Whether that you're choosing to outsource the laundry, whether you choose to outsource your meals, whether you choose to have a nanny. Something. When you get to C level, you can't be at C level and do everything and think that you can be successful. You can't. So you have to make some choices. And when you get to that level, usually in terms of monetary support, it's included in the salary. That’s the whole reason why the salary is what it is. Because you're going to have to give some things up.

Jennifer also went on to say that it also meant being sure that her family was “okay” with her demanding career and leaning on her husband as a support network as illustrated by the following comments:

Yes, I have support networks. Personally, it is my husband because I can’t do this job, and when I came into a senior leadership position role, I really was thoughtful
about what commitment that meant for my kids and my husband and our life. And had the sit-down family meeting to say, “Okay, mom’s taking on a much bigger job. Are we all okay with this?” Especially with my husband, “Are you okay with this?” Because what this means is that he’s picking up the kids and taking them to school, and he’s usually the parent that they call during the school day.

Several of the participants talked about sacrifice and what they had sacrificed personally to be where they are in their careers. Many of them seemed to have accepted that the choices they made along the way were necessary, and they had come to terms with whatever sacrifice they felt they made to get to where they are professionally. As one respondent stated, “Even though I am married, I don’t have kids. It’s hard because I am always gone. I accept that it’s a choice that I made and it was a sacrifice.” Another participant wondered if she was spending too much time away from her family.

Professionally, work-life balance can be a trade-off, according to Linda:

Things have a cost. As I’m advising principals now, I talk a lot about balance. Those 14, 16-hour days, I’m like, “I haven’t mastered it yet, but I need for you to master it. Go home, because this can really consume you.”

Work-life balance also came up frequently. Many of the women felt they needed to do better to manage this piece but had not quite found the secret to balancing career, family, and time for themselves. They made statements such as “the work-life balance is very hard” or “I haven’t done the best job of work-life balance”. Anne discussed the impact of a high-powered career on her personal life and relationships: “The higher up
that I got and the more influence you get, it really had an impact for me in my personal life. I experienced divorce the first year of my principalship”.

Several women talked about holding off on a family to be able to focus on the career. One participant remarked, “It always made me put it (kids) on the back burner”. It was also noted that critical decisions made personally and professionally included family planning, as even that has an impact on “what you do and how you lead”.

Linda illustrated sacrifice and being “okay” with her choices:

The bottom line and my last statement is when you get here, it’s a choice, and you take the hits. You take the sacrifices that you will have to make in one way or another. Hopefully, you have done everything you needed to have done on the front end with children and husbands, or whatever your family structure looks like. I always advise new principals, “As you ascend, get it in. Give us 110%, but go home and do something else, and balance, because this will end.”

Finally, as she described the work-life balance, how to manage it all, and “be okay” with sacrificing, Jennifer said,

But the part that I was like, “Okay, that's where I’m okay giving something up.”

For the part that I’m not okay giving up is making sure that I’m there for my kids when it's those big programs. The awards day or the play or the whatever. Those are the things that I just need to make sure that those are the things I’m there for. Because I think those are the things, for me, that they’re going to remember. And I think that’s the thing that I need. So those are the things that I’ve had to adjust and negotiate and think through.
Theme 2: Influence

One of the most common themes discussed by the participants was “Influence”. According to the participants, influence played a central role in their careers and lives, whether it was in the form of their desire to influence others, others influencing them and tapping them for their next career move or promotion, or using their *power as influence* as they moved up the career ladder. All of the participants talked at length about influence and its centrality to their work and their story; therefore, influence is central in the conceptual model. The axial codes that contributed to this theme were *power as influence, influenced by others and influencing others*, while the initial codes included: building capacity, collaboration, building relationships, leadership style, leading by example, support networks, mentors, influence, and tapped by others (for next career move), power, empowering others, transformation, difficult decisions and “buck stops with me”. This theme fits into research question 2 (How do these women describe the support systems for attaining a higher position?) as well as research question 3 (How do female assistant superintendents view and describe the relationship between the production and practice of knowledge and power based on feminist standpoint theory?). The relationship between influence and the research questions will be depicted through the eyes of the interview participants. Negotiating power and seeing it as influence was a common theme among all but one of the respondents.

Eleven of the twelve interview participants described leadership as influencing people. One participant shared, “Influence. I just think a big part of any leader is how you can take the collective and move them towards a goal.” Influence and leadership
seemed to be synonymous. Another assistant superintendent described leadership this way: “Can you influence people to get on the same train with you and move it? To me, that’s what leadership has been.” Dottie echoed this thought about leadership as influence with this thought, “I think of it more as influence, facilitating, trying to get people to a certain point.” Adding to the contextual gendered leadership description, Linda shared,

It’s putting out what you want back. If you want influence, you got to be it. If you want graciousness, you got to be gracious. A lot of it is teaching people about reciprocity, and the laws of reciprocity, and how you always put your best foot out first. Put it out, and good things will come back to you. Influence.

Understanding that you can’t lead by yourself.

Additionally, for all of the women interviewed, relationships and influence appeared to be synonymous and interchangeable. Gracie stated,

I see it as a combination of both being able to galvanize a group of individuals, may it be a team, may it be a division, a department, and really bringing together the strengths, the talents, of these individuals to really help transform not just the individual, but the collective. It’s about transformation.

Relationships and building were key for these women because it helped them to get others “on the train” or “in the boat” and all “moving in the same direction”. Creating a team culture where others felt empowered via a shared, collaborative leadership model was mentioned by most of the participants. As Dianna stated,
I think there’s just that relationship thing, that humanist relationship that you build with people. Unless you have that, as a leader, you're going to be sitting in an office by yourself. And I know that's kind of a cliché is you have got to have people follow you if you're a leader. But there's some truth to that.

On the other hand, just as influencing others played a central role in the women’s view of what leadership means to them, all of them discussed how others, often mentors, had influenced them and their career. This is consistent with research by Dana and Bourisaw (2006), who concluded that when women have mentors, they move into leadership roles sooner than those without mentors.

Throughout the interviews these women spoke of being “tapped by others,” whether it was their principal, a colleague, or someone from the central office. Someone saw leadership potential in them, when perhaps they didn’t see it or hadn’t been thinking along those lines in moving forward in their careers. As Linda stated, “Just folks that said, ‘You need a leadership opportunity’”, or, as Dianna shared,

I can count 10 or 15 people right off the top of my head that helped me take a step forward that either saw something in me that maybe I didn’t see or saw when I had seen it and kept insisting I have it, I can do it! And I think that’s probably a big piece for women, is you kind of wait for somebody to ask you to do it, “I need you to do this.”

According to research, others tapping women for job promotion makes sense as women report lower levels of self-confidence and tend to underestimate their performance and
skills (Cecha, Rubineau, Silbey, & Seron, 2011). This is illustrated in the following comment shared by Cecilia:

And actually, about a year ago one of my mentors pulled me aside. He said, “This is great. And I think you really need to consider going back to school for your doctorate. And I think you should consider a superintendent position in the future.” And I thought, “What? Me? A superintendent? Yeah right.”

When asked how they produce and use power, most interviewees talked about power as influence, rather than positional power. As a whole, consistent with the research, these women did not like the term power and preferred influence. They used words such as influencing others, empowering others, and collective power. For example, when asked about power, Hannah said,

Your voice is at the table first. And if that equates to power, I don’t see how.

And you have . . . I always see it as your sphere of influence gets to be closer and closer to the ultimate decision making. That’s how I see it.

Similarly, Audrey also shared that she was not comfortable with the term power and said,

So, the way I feel about power is, one, I don’t like the term “power” because I feel that that somewhat has a negative connotation. I lead by example, and it gets people in the boat with me and wanting to follow me. And when I have to make those decisions that are not comfortable decisions, I have to use all my resources to try and make that the best decision possible. And so, there are times, yes, where I just have to say, “This is the road that we have to go down.” It may not
be everybody’s favorite road, but it’s the way we have to go. And I know that the
department I’m in, and what I do . . . people see it as having a lot of power, but I
don’t feel that way.
Hannah had this to say when asked about power and her relationship with power:
Power can sometimes be perceived as a negative word. I don’t utilize the power
of position but I more so use the power of moral authority. Demonstrating
competence is important to me. It’s always been important to me from a child,
but as a leader when you have moral authority, that means you can lean in and
influence and it doesn’t matter what seat you sit in.
Interestingly, a meta-analysis conducted by Eagly (2007) determined that female leaders
supported and encouraged others and were more transformational than male leaders.
Research indicates that women tend to operate from a more personal space regarding
power than men do (Brunner, 2000; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lemasters & Roach
2012; Rosener, 1990), which is what these women intimated when asked about power.
Theme 3: Motivation
The third theme to emerge was motivation. A commonality between the
interview participants was that they spoke of their inner drive to succeed and persevere.
Axial codes in this section included: inner drive, striving for perfection and
determination. The axial codes were derived from the following initial codes:
responsibility, competition, making a difference, motivation, striving for perfection and
integrity. This theme tied in to research question 1 regarding the perception of
motivators and barriers.
Motivation is the act, process or condition of being motivated but is also a motivating force stimulus, or influence according to Webster’s dictionary. In the case of these women, they were motivated by making a difference in the lives of others and empowering others. This is consistent with Grogan and Shakeshaft’s (2011) research, which found that women are motivated by factors, including social justice. Gracie illustrated being motivated by social justice and making a difference in the lives of children:

Just being able to see how can we intentionally close the gap and address the needs of all students and provide those opportunities for our students. Just seeing where the opportunities that were afforded to me, because at one point while I was a student, I was told, “Oh you don't need to go to college, you can just become a cosmetologist”.

Family upbringing also contributed to the motivation of these women. In describing these women as motivated, all mentioned being the best at whatever it is they set out to do and “whatever it took to be the best”. Some mentioned that their families shared this philosophy. For example, Linda shared, “My parents were really into that. They thought that you had some talent, they would make you participate, and my dad always had a saying: ‘If you’re in it, you better stand out.’”

Several of the women talked about competition and competing motivating to be the best at what they do. For some, they recalled this being the case, even at a young age. Anne recalled, “Personally, I was always competitive, so that competitive nature really started by playing sports.” She also shared that she identified with “that winning spirit,
that spirit of excellence”. Some recognized that at this level, competition was part of the package, although it was stressed that healthy competition is okay, although it can feel conflicting. Linda shared,

Everybody, if you’re at this level, you’re competitive, whether you say it or “No, I want everybody to win.” No, you don’t. You do want everybody to win, but you know you want to win, too. You just want it to be a healthy thing, because you respect it, because it’s who you are.

Audrey illustrated this by saying, “Who is going to make the best impressions? Who’s going to be on top?”

Theme 4: Overcoming Barriers

The final theme emerged as Overcoming Barriers, which again tied in well to research question 1. Although these women had the motivation, they had to overcome barriers and obstacles to realize their goals. Axial themes included: self-imposed (barriers), gender bias, and feeling “not good enough”, which surfaced through the following initial codes: gender bias, perceived gender roles, school boards, hiring, politics, feeling “not good enough”, and self-imposed barriers.

Some of the respondents shared that any barriers they had faced were self-imposed. Anne stated,

Oh yeah, I’m more introverted; I’m not a networker; I don’t like to get out there and have those conversations or insert myself in front of someone in a position above mine, so I think that has been a self-imposed barrier as a lot of it is about who you know.
Self-doubt and comparisons to others were also mentioned as self-imposed barriers. For example, Maggie spoke of it this way, “You know, I think it’s just that self-doubt. You know, there’s always someone else that you just feel like, ‘Oh, my gosh, you’re such a rock star’”. Anne echoed these sentiments and overcoming this barrier with this statement:

Because I feel like people are going to be like, “Who does she think she is?” But I just have to push myself to come out of that. Maybe I could take that jump. Maybe I could take that leap. Maybe I do know enough. Maybe I am smart enough. So, again, I think that just having that lack of confidence or feeling like you need to know everything.

Other respondents, when queried about barriers, agreed that gender bias was a factor, and “women just have to prove themselves more”. Some respondents felt that women’s voices are often not heard over the men’s voices. Gracie replied,

As a woman, I’ve been in that situation. You’re sitting in a room like, “Is that what I just said?” The man, “This is what we’re going to do.” It’s strong. It’s definite and definitive, and people see that as power, and they go, “Yeah, what he said.” As a woman, when you’re sitting in a room, you have to be careful not to cross the line of being too overly assertive, because then you’re seen as the witch…I'm serious. If you’re a guy, you’re forceful, and you’re powerful, and most men don’t even realize that they don’t hear women.

Similarly, Olivia said, “For me, if a man gives a directive in a direct way, people will typically follow and that's what is expected. If a woman does it, then it's the
perception of power. There's the perception of being mean or the delivery or how did it land.” Likewise, another respondent said, “It’s real, they can’t hear you”. Some of the women spoke of being in meetings where men were lauded for their ideas, and the women were thinking, “But I just said that”.

Gracie also considered gender bias from school boards to be a barrier. She said, “I see where boards are more responsive to the male superintendent and will give more of a longer leash than female. I’ve seen that, and not just in districts where I’ve worked.” This is consistent with research that has shown that when seeking a superintendent, gender political and cultural bias on school boards tend to favor men (Dana, 2009).

One woman described the barrier of gender bias this way: “I mean, it’s like, you’ve got to put your game face on, man, or they will run over you.” Being a woman and being a woman of color was thought to be a barrier by one of the respondents, who stated, “I don't want to say there are two strikes, but there are two challenges. One, being a woman and then two, being a woman of color.”

Age came up as a barrier for Maggie, as she spoke of comparing in this way: And you always compare, especially as a woman. You’re always comparing yourself to someone else. And then, of course, there's that ageist thing… You've got to keep up. You have to keep up with so much technology that I don't even know what it all is.

Dottie felt that some women used femininity to their advantage, creating barriers for other women. She stated,
Some of the female candidates . . . this is ugly, but I feel like sometimes they used their femininity to progress, rather than substance. And some of the males, who were in the decision making well, were misled, or were drawn to that more than substance.

When asked about barriers, some women shared that they had not faced barriers throughout their career and didn’t perceive that there was an issue related to barriers. For example, Audrey shared that she “can honestly say that I haven’t faced any barriers. I’ve been very, very lucky”. Rhode (2014) called this the “no-problem problem” (p. 6), which refers to the fact that sometimes women do not recognize or acknowledge that gender bias is a problem that needs to be addressed.

According to Eagly (2007), in roles traditionally held by males, such as the superintendency, females face challenges that men do not face, which is in line with the data collected in this study. The literature also contends that most people are unaware that gender stereotypes and bias are factors that influence their judgement (Kaatz & Carnes, 2014). One of the interviewees described a superior’s words and journey like this:

She was like, “I am who I am because I’ve had to fight so much as a woman. They didn’t hear me when I was a superintendent.” This is my third, fourth superintendency, she was telling them, and I would have to come out swinging because people would try to kill your light. If you were trying to give a really good idea or move a district, that male energy would dominate you. She said, “So I always come out fighting. I’ve been fighting for years.”
Summary

The researcher conducted a qualitative study to view the lack of females in the public school superintendency through the lens of female assistant superintendents in hopes of gaining insight into the factors that are contributing to this problem. The viewpoint of this population was chosen because this is an area where little research has been conducted, and it is a step below the superintendency, therefore, a part of the pipeline. The researcher conducted 12, face-to-face or telephone semi-structured interviews with female assistant superintendents. Participants received pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. A description of the participants is included in the narrative.

Following transcription of the interviews, the researcher utilized memoing and then conducted line-by-line coding, which yielded 40 initial codes, 12 axial codes/categories, and finally, 4 thematic codes or themes: “It’s okay”, Influence, Motivation, and Overcoming Barriers. Memoing was a technique used to further determine what the data revealed. The analysis and findings of the in-person interviews were reported in this chapter. All findings were aligned with the research questions. A grounded theory model was used to guide this study and allow theory to emerge from the data.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this final chapter was to expound upon the research findings and experiences of 12 female assistant superintendents, interviewed for this study in order to understand the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency from the neglected viewpoint of female assistant superintendents. The findings from the study can add to the literature on the career advancement of female assistant superintendents. This chapter offers a discussion regarding the research findings, a summary, and the ways the findings are applicable to social role theory and feminist standpoint theory. Also included in this chapter are implications for policy and practice and recommendations for future research.

This study provides insight into the lack of women in the superintendency in the United States. As reported, currently, 22.6% of superintendents are female—less than a 15% increase in the last 100 years (American Association of School Administrators [AASA], 2016). Despite advances for women in the last 30 years, there is still a pervasive problem that cannot be ignored (Sanchez & Thornton, 2010). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) contended that the number of qualified women is well below the number of women hired for the superintendency. This problem is present in other sectors aside from education, as evident in the studies conducted by Catalyst (2018a), revealing women continue to lack representation in positions of power even though they attain higher educational levels and constitute 50% of the workforce.
To better understand this issue, the researcher conducted a constructivist, grounded theory study framed within social role theory and feminist standpoint theory using semi-structured interviews with 12 female assistant superintendents in a metropolitan area. Three research questions were developed to examine what these women perceived as barriers, supports, and motivators on their journeys, as well as their relationship with producing and using power. This study created a theoretical model of four core categories or theoretical codes (themes) that contributed to the limited literature focusing on the female assistant superintendent. Through their individually shared experiences of the superintendency, the researcher was able to attain an understanding of the advancement of female assistant superintendents, including barriers, motivators, supports and their relationship with power.

Summary of the Study

Historically, more women than ever before are enrolling in doctoral programs and becoming credentialed for the superintendency (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011), yet men continue to gain this position at a rate of 3 to 1 over women (Kowalski, 2011). According to Bjork (2000), Blount (1999), Glass (1991), and Litmanovitz (2010), the office of the superintendent is considered the most gender-biased executive role in the country, and men have 40 times greater the likelihood of moving into this role than women (Skrła, 2000). Throughout history, women have made up most of the teaching profession but have held the lowest percentage of leadership roles, especially the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).
Because of the disparity of only 22.6% of the nation’s superintendents being female (AASA, 2016), there is a need for further exploration of this trend, and it is crucial to determine why qualified women are overlooked for this role (Polka & Litchka, 2008). Chingos, Whitehurst, and Lindquist (2014) suggested that recent trends in educational leadership require more of a collaborative leadership approach, which other research equates with female leaders (Eagly, 2013). The role of the assistant superintendent represents a gap in the literature, as there is a paucity of research regarding this role.

The following sections provide an in-depth look at the barriers, motivators, supports and relationships with power that these female assistant superintendents have encountered on their journey. Also examined are the factors and biases responsible for the continued marginalization of female administrators, as evidenced by the scarcity of females in the highest leadership roles and consistent with feminist standpoint theory. To accomplish this, the researcher developed three research questions to explore the supports, barriers, and motivators that female assistant superintendents faced as they advanced into higher leadership positions. They were also designed to explore these women’s relationships with power and the production and practice of power as well as gender stereotypes and bias in terms of feminist standpoint theory and social role theory. Thus, this study sought to respond to the following research questions from the perspective of female assistant superintendents:

1. What do these women perceive as the barriers and motivators for higher position aspiration?
2. How do these women describe the support systems for attaining a higher position?

3. How do female assistant superintendents view and describe the relationship between the production and practice of knowledge and power based on feminist standpoint theory?

A researcher’s charge is to evaluate data for themes, as well as interpret the data to determine meaning of the experience (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the researcher’s analysis and interpretation of this study’s data resulted in the emergence of four theoretical codes as consistent with constructivist grounded theory: “It’s Okay”, Motivation, Influence, and Overcoming Barriers. The following sections review each theoretical code in detail and relay interpretations to examine the conclusions drawn from the data.

Eagly (1987) stated that social role theory recognizes the historical division of labor: women are expected to handle the household responsibilities, while men work outside the home. These expectancies transfer to future generations, leaving us with divergent behaviors of men and women and sexual stereotypes (Williams & Best, 1982). Eagly and Wood (1991) posited that men tend to develop traits that are more agentic (independent, assertive, and competent), while women develop traits that are more communal (friendly, unselfish, expressive). According to Rudman and Glick (2001), gender roles and stereotypes dictate how men and women should behave.

Social role theory tells us that women typically assume the responsibilities at home; however, as women move into positions of power, these roles can reverse (Diekman, Goodfriend, & Goodwin, 2004), which is evidenced by the discussions with
the participants. Many of the women participating in this study and the men (husbands) discussed in this study had to violate these social norms in action and thought. The men had to fill a role not typically held by the male gender and help with household chores and responsibilities, including taking care of the children. Conversely, the women had to give up control in this area and become “okay” with doing so. The husbands had become a support system for the women when it came to taking care of the home and children.

Research shows that when women step out of the “norm” and violate social norms by taking on more agentic traits, there can be backlash (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004) in the form of being considered “witchy with a b” (Kolehmainen, Brennan, Filut, Isaac, & Carnes, 2014, p. 1276). Some of the participants state this concern explicitly. In the previously mentioned studies, the researchers found that women needed to temper being competent with being “nice” or communal. These participants also described “self-imposed barriers” as “not feeling good enough” with constant speculation about how others perceived them that was anxiety inducing. Women in the study mentioned having to think about how “it would land” when they had to give directives or orders, which is consistent with the research. A meta-analysis conducted by Eagly (1992) illuminated the fact that women with a more democratic style received better evaluations than those with a more directive (agentic) style; however, she also stated that gender roles and stereotypes have inescapable effects, which is also consistent with social role theory (Eagly, 1987).

The women in this study had to attempt to work within the confines of a variety of competing discourses (Barrett, 2005) in that they were trying to run both the home and
the office, which falls in line with feminist standpoint theory and feminist theory in general (Harding, 2004; Sherman, Munoz, & Pankake, 2008). They often saw it as their “job” to manage the home while simultaneously working on their careers and making sure that everyone in the family was okay with “mom taking on a bigger job.”

When viewed through feminist theory, Hartsock (1981) explained, “The power of the feminist movement grows out of the fact that it enables us to connect everyday life with the analysis of social institutions that shape that life” (p. 36). This is evident and clear in the case of these women, as they talked about how they made their everyday lives work, despite balancing life and a career. Feminist standpoint theory also works from the premise that standpoints begin to emerge when those who are marginalized and “invisible” are given a voice. In the case of this study, the marginalized are the female assistant superintendents.

Discussion of the Major Findings

This study resulted in four major findings: “It’s Okay”, Motivation, Influence, and Overcoming Barriers. The following sections discuss these findings in terms of the research questions.

Research Question 1

Research question 1 asked, “What do these women perceive as the barriers and motivators for higher position aspiration?” The participants’ responses provided data in the form of barriers, motivators, influence, and motivation.

Barriers. How these women overcame barriers was a major finding of this study, illustrated by the theme, Overcoming Barriers. Frequently mentioned as a barrier was
trying to balance work and home life and learning when to “go home”. Eagly and Carli (2007) claimed, “All and all, despite the weakening of the household division of labor, family responsibilities still take a much greater toll on the workplace careers of women than those of men” (p. 59). Most of the assistant superintendents mentioned family responsibilities as an area in which they struggled, and balance was difficult to achieve. Lisa shared she “hadn’t done the best job of work-life balance” and it was “very, very hard to achieve”. When asked about regrets, some participants provided answers focused on not spending time with their families and children. For example, Anne said that her only regret was “am I sacrificing too much time away from my family?” She added, “. . . doing what you have to do to stay competitive versus someone who doesn’t have kids.” These comments illustrate the conclusions of Hochschild and Machung (2012), who posited that all working mothers face the dilemma of work-life balance at some point in their careers. On the other hand, one participant noted she saw thought it was important for her children to see her working outside the home. These women highlighted their priorities, such as which family activities and events they could not miss. Jennifer talked about what she had to “adjust and negotiate and think through” in terms of her family’s schedule in conjunction with hers, as well as where she was “. . . okay giving something up” in terms of family activities versus work obligations. As Patel (2012) stated, work-life balance is one of the most difficult obstacles faced by women. Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006) suggested, “Today’s work culture, which expects workers to be present during workday hours as well as available and accessible beyond the regular work hours, extends to the superintendent” (p. 490). One participant,
Linda, even spoke of the hours she put into her career, which she attributed to leading to divorce and preventing her from having children. She said, “The higher up I got, and the more influence you get, it really had an impact for me in my personal life.” This supports the research of Derrington and Sharratt (2009), who found that some women reported facing “grave consequences when they pursue professional aspirations” (p. 2). These women had to become “okay” with the path they had chosen in life, whether that meant being divorced and not having children due to a career focus and aspirations, or being “okay” with the time away from their families and learning how to prioritize and ask for help. Most of these women were married and had children in spite of the difficulties that research suggests. Derrington and Sharratt (2009) reported that many women are finding balance between work, family, and expectations of society and are going on to become successful in the superintendency.

For others, barriers came in the form of being self-imposed and as Anne put it, feeling “not good enough”. Kowalski (2003) stated that self-inflicted barriers—including self-image, beliefs, attitudes and motivation—are attributable to the paucity of females in the superintendency. This study’s findings suggest that these self-imposed barriers may be bolstered by the violation of social roles because the participants’ constant speculation about how others perceived them was anxiety inducing. Derrington and Sharratt (2009) posited that to improve the ratio of women in the superintendency, it is critical that women recognize self-imposed barriers.

The literature notes lack of self-confidence as a trait of underrepresented groups (Isaac, Kaatz, Lee, & Carnes, 2012). In the case of women, the literature suggests this is
likely because women must prove themselves more in these roles than men must, since women are sometimes seen as being “lucky” (p. 507) rather than skilled (Swim & Sanna, 1996). In fact, in agentic sectors, research shows that work by females is rated lower (by males and females) when done by a woman; evaluators require more proof of women’s skill and competency than is required by men (Fredrickson, 2013; Heilman & Haynes, 2008; Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012). Ibarra, Ely, and Cobb (2013) stated that leadership can be difficult for women because they “must establish their credibility in a culture that is deeply conflicted about whether, when, and how they should exercise authority” (p. 5).

This leads to a barrier mentioned previously in which some of the participants felt they had to be very careful about reactions to certain situations, so they were not perceived as being overly emotional or “witchy” (Kolehmainen et al., 2014, p. 1276). Research shows when women express emotion, particularly anger, over an external situation, negative reactions can result because this violates social norms. Individuals typically perceive expressions of anger as character flaws for women, but situational factors for men, thus perpetuating the emotional stereotype of women (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). In line with this perception, Cecilia noted she found it more difficult to work for women supervisors, since they were typically more “emotional” than men were.

Such a perception is representative of the barrier of gender bias and stereotyping, expressed distinctly throughout the interviews. Eagly and Karau (2002) contended that stereotyping is a factor in the scarcity of females in leadership roles and the proliferation of women in feminized positions. McCabe (2001) found self-imposed gender-specific
expectations impact women’s career expectations. Kaatz and Carnes (2014) stated, “Gender stereotypes also operate to disadvantage women in day-to-day social exchanges and casual discussions that play a critical role in professional advancement” (p. 481). People are typically not aware of their bias and stereotypes, which can lead to negative and inadvertent judgment and consequences (Carnes et al., 2012; Valian, 1999).

Although Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) contended, “Women’s habit of listening carefully to what others say allows them to benefit from the added value of diverse perspectives” (p. 64), these participants found the reverse was not the case when it was their turn to speak. In fact, they noted feelings of not being heard when there was a “man in the room”. Research points to the “invisibility” of women in leadership (Katz & Carnes, 2014; Porter, Geis, & Jennings, 1983). For a Black woman, race and gender create an even greater “invisibility” when compared to White men and women and Black men (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Gracie’s statement supports this research: “Being a woman of color, you encounter . . . I don’t want to say there are two strikes, but there are two challenges. One, being a woman and then two, being a woman of color”.

Women are expected to lead and behave in a more collaborative, communal, and nurturing manner. Kaatz and Carnes (2014) argued that this type of leadership is effective, and it allows women to mitigate the violation of social norms. However, it may not be as highly valued or recognized as leadership because it stands in direct contrast with stereotypes of typical leaders (more agentic qualities) (Brunner, 2005).

For some of the participants, asking about barriers gave them pause. One of the women even stated that she had been “very lucky” and could not recall any barriers she
had faced as she moved up the career ladder into advanced leadership positions. While this may be the case for that particular woman, the fact of underrepresentation of women in the superintendency leads to the conclusion that there still is a problem. According to Rhode (2014), this is consistent with the “failure of women to recognize that there is a problem” (p. 9), also known as the “no-problem problem” (p. 6). Gracie had a differing viewpoint and said she believed “that (gender bias) is why there are so many superintendents that are male—because they are viewed very differently than females”.

Motivators. In terms of motivators, the interviewees talked about “helping others”, “making a difference”, “motivation”, “drive”, “competition”, “striving to be the best”, “empowering others”, and being “empowered by others”. Murphy (2009) constructed the Female Superintendency Aspiration Model, which brought forth factors that motivated women to move into challenging leadership positions. The main factors included “(1) a person of influence, such as a mentor and/or role model, (2) an innate drive to seek out challenging and competitive opportunities, and (3) enrollment in a doctoral program emphasizing superintendency credentials” (p. ix). These findings were consistent, overall, with this study, as well. The women spoke at length of motivators for moving into more powerful leadership positions, including influential persons in their professional lives “tapping them” to move into these roles. The third piece of the Female Superintendency Model addresses enrollment in a doctoral program; however, only one participant who did not hold a doctoral degree spoke of pursuing one. Interestingly, only 3 out of 12 participants held a doctoral degree.
The participants were motivated by being able to develop others, including students. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) stated women are “motivated by a strong desire to transform the learning conditions and opportunities for those who have been least well served by current educational policies and practices” (p. 11). This was evident as the participants spoke of “growing” and “developing” others via their leadership role. Several talked about being motivated by “making a difference”. One woman shared that leadership for her was a “mission for kids and helping kids to make their dreams a reality”. Some spoke of this work being “all about the kids” while Gracie spoke about being able to “transform lives”. After working in a low socioeconomic environment, Linda noted she realized the environment a child grew up in was crucial, and she wanted to be part of turning that around through education.

Research shows that women tend to be more centered and knowledgeable around instruction than men because of increased classroom experience before they move into leadership roles later (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Brunner & Kim, 2015; Lemasters & Roach, 2012). Therefore, influencing outcomes for students through instruction plays a central role in the motivators for these women to strive to higher leadership positions.

Influence. Influence played a major role in these women’s professional lives in two ways: influencing others and being influenced by others. In some instances, the women spoke of how others had influenced them. In other instances, influence was about how they were influencing, growing, and empowering others (male and female) on their own career advancement.
Many of the women spoke of how others had influenced them and “tapped” them for their next upward career move. While these women did not always see that they were ready for the next move, others saw their potential (when they did not) and told them it was time to “move up.” According to research, others tapping women for job promotion is logical, since women report lower levels of self-confidence and tend to underestimate their performance and skills (Cecha, Rubineau, Silbey, & Seron, 2011). These women needed mentors and leaders who inspired and motivated them to keep going and to realize their own potential as they were being “influenced by others.”

Influencing others was another major finding of this study. Audrey talked about “the thrill of developing others”. The participants talked frequently about influencing others—particularly as it related to power. For these women, power was not a term that they related to easily. To them, power was more about empowering and influencing others, rather than positional power. Throughout the interviews, the participants repeatedly discussed power in a collaborative, rather than dictatorial, spirit. According to Lemasters and Roach (2012), women tend to use a more cooperative approach to leadership as they have learned that others do not receive a more agentic style in a positive manner. In a contrasting viewpoint, Brunner (2005) stated that collaborative does not translate to competence and can mitigate the impact of a woman’s influence and power.

Motivation. Motivation weighed heavily in the discussions with the interviewees. The personalities of the majority of the participants drove their determination and ambition. Some of the participants knew what they wanted and planned for it, yet still
needed to be “tapped by others”. For some, this type of motivation, determination, and drive for perfection was part of the fabric of their childhood. Others spoke of the “drive for perfection, the winning spirit, the spirit of excellence” and the “pursuit of excellence”. Some of the women spoke of competition. Most of the time, consistent with research (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011), motivating factors included a social justice type of motivation to “make a difference”. This was clearly highlighted in Jennifer’s statement: “And the essence of me is centered around a mission. And for me, it's around a mission for kids and helping kids to make their dreams a reality”.

While motivation drove these women in attaining their goals and aspirations, being seen as ambitious can be construed as violating social norms and social roles in line with social role theory, while ambition is considered a more acceptable trait in men (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). Many of the women in this study were trying to determine how to balance their motivation and career aspirations with family life and work-life balance, while not violating social roles and appearing too aggressive or ambitious—a difficult balancing act.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 asked, “How do these women describe the support systems for attaining a higher position?” When asked about support systems, all participants cited the importance of families and husbands being supportive of “mom’s career”. The women in this study also spoke of support networks outside of their families, namely peer groups and mentors, a factor supported by Murphy’s (2009) Female Superintendency Aspiration Model in that a person of influence is critical to being successful. Bjork and
Kowalski (2005) suggested that building support systems in the form of mentoring is important in leadership and administration. Mentors have been noted as facilitator for successful women. Dana and Bourisaw (2006) found that women in education who have mentors move into leadership positions sooner than those who do not.

The participants understood mentorship as they stood “on the shoulders” of others, while they “pointed the way.” In contrast to literature on this subject, which cites lack of female mentors (Brunner & Grogam 2007; Sherman, Munoz, & Pankake, 2008; Wolverton & Macdonald, 2009), the women in this study spoke frequently of women who had lifted them up, groomed them, supported them, and helped them navigate leadership.

Research Question 3

Research question 3 asked, “How do female assistant superintendents view and describe the relationship between the production and practice of knowledge and power based on feminist standpoint theory?” Most of the participants responded that they did not like the term “power” or stated that they saw it as a negative term, which supports research highlighting that women are not comfortable with the term “power” (Brunner, 2000; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lemasters and Roach, 2012). Brunner (2000) stated that struggle with power creates an internal barrier for women. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) posited that female leaders in education tend to be ambivalent about their power and tend to use a more collegial, collective form of leadership. They explained, “Women conceptualize power differently and are likely to seek to expand everyone’s power. This approach has considerable impact on organizational behavior and change” (Grogan &
Shakeshaft, 2011, p. 6). However, according to Brunner (2005), collaboration does not always equal power, yet women instinctively use collaboration to achieve success and mitigate the violation of social norms (Carli, 1999; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

This notion was very clear in the interviews with these women. For the women interviewed, it was not about positional power or personal power; instead, it was relational power (Carli, 1999; French & Raven, 1959). For the women in the study, consistent with research, power was about power with rather than power over (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Hartsock, 1983; Hurty, 1995; Kreisberg, 1992; Shakeshaft, 1989). Power equaled influence for the respondents—how they could influence and empower others on their team or in their charge.

Conclusions

This study addressed the lack of females in the public schools’ superintendency as most educators are female, yet very few make it to the highest role in this field, the superintendency (AASA, 2016). This study examined leadership through the lens of the female assistant superintendent. The researcher sought to understand these women’s advancement into leadership positions through four theoretical codes: “It’s Okay”, Motivation, Influence, and Overcoming Barriers. In understanding the barriers, motivators, supports, and relationship with power, the literature supported the experiences of these women.

Because the superintendency is a male-dominated role despite the feminization of education, there is a need for support systems for these women. Research has shown that mentorship is critical to the success of the female superintendent (Banuelos, 2008).
Brunner and Grogan (2005) stated that the superintendency can be very isolating and stressful; therefore, networking is important. Glass (2000) suggested aspiring superintendents benefit from mentors like themselves; however, the dearth of females in the superintendency makes female mentors difficult to find.

Review of previous literature highlighted work-life balance and the sacrifices made for career. For the women interviewed, this meant becoming *okay* with the choices and sacrifices that they had made along the way. For some (although not most), that meant reconciling with the fact that they would not have children; for others, it meant sacrificing time away from their children, or alternatively, prioritizing their time and dividing it between work and family.

Implications

The serious disparity of females in the public schools’ superintendency is still a pervasive problem. Despite the legacy of Ella Flagg Young appointed the first female superintendent of Chicago City Schools in the early 1900s, current statistics still indicate that the majority of educators are female, and only a small percentage of superintendents are females. This has changed little in over 100 years (AASA, 2016).

School effectiveness has taken center stage in recent years, and there is a link between the efficacy of the superintendent and the effectiveness of the school system (Business, 2015; Waters & Marzano, 2006). As women make up nearly half (47%) of the total workforce and 59% of the college-educated workforce (Khairuzzaman, Ismail, Jafar, & Al-Taee, 2012), ignoring approximately half of the work force is not prudent. A one-sided, male majority view in decisions and policy-making impacts school systems and
most importantly, students. According to Grogan (2005), “Until there is a more equitable
distribution of women in the highest levels of educational leadership, we are sending a
message that says women’s leadership is still not much valued” (p. 26). By not giving
students and society the opportunity to see women in these leadership roles, we are
perpetuating gender bias and stereotypes. The findings and implications of this study will
be beneficial to policy makers, school boards, and women aspiring to the role of the
superintendent. Included in the following section are implications derived from the
major findings, literature, and conclusions of this study.

One implication for action is to create and embrace formal mentorship programs
and networking opportunities for women aspiring to higher leadership roles. This should
include not only professional mentors but social role mentors for women trying to
manage it “all”, including work-life balance. Wolverton and Macdonald (2009) found a
lack of mentors is a reason that highly qualified women choose to opt out of the
superintendency; however, in this study there was a contrast as these women noted that
other women had mentored them organically and this was a factor in their career success.
Holmes, Land, and Hinton-Hudson (2007) noted that mentorship is of particular
importance in higher-ranking roles in educational leadership. The women in this study
primarily mentioned being tapped and mentored by female leaders, however this is in
direct contrast to research which highlights a lack of female mentors. It is also critical
that women are afforded opportunities to seek out mentors and develop a diverse range of
mentors, including men, as the paucity of women in advanced leadership roles is scarce
(Boatman et al., 2011).
The development of formal mentorship programs is critical for these women to have a professional support network, outside of their families. This can be done at both the school-system level, as well as the university level where mentorship programs can be developed to support women in attaining their goals. Continuing to seek out and “tap” these women for career advancement is key, followed by support as they pursue advanced leadership roles. Secondly, it is critical to examine hiring practices of school districts and school boards to determine if reflective hiring practices for school boards and school districts are employed, for they are essential. Research shows that school boards continue to “want to hire results driven superintendents who conform to a leadership style not associated with transformational leadership behaviors” (Grogan, 2005, p. 26).

Explicit training on gender bias for school districts, school boards, and hiring firms is recommended, for research suggests most people do not recognize implicit bias in themselves (Carnes et al., 2012). These women noted gender bias as an obstacle to overcome. This study also provides more awareness of career barriers impacting women, including self-imposed barriers, which could be used to inform training and increase self-awareness of women aspiring to the superintendency. Implications from this study should inform leaders in terms of needed changes in hiring practices to support more women moving into this role, including understanding subtle biases.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research in the area of gender studies and cultural norms is necessary. Continued research could lead to more innovative and inclusive leadership and hiring
practices, which could increase the numbers of females in educational leadership roles, including the superintendency.

In terms of recommendations for further research, it would be prudent to interview male as well as female assistant superintendents to compare their lived experiences. Another recommendation for further research is to conduct a study to understand a school system personnel’s perceptions of women in the superintendency. Also enlightening would be to conduct a study on the rural superintendent’s path to the superintendency in contrast to this study set in a metropolitan area. Rural systems do not typically have assistant superintendent roles; therefore, it would be interesting to determine how women experience that setting. Another recommendation for future research is to conduct a study to determine why women do or do not aspire to the superintendency. Finally, a study comparing the leadership style of males and female superintendents and the effect of their leadership styles on their constituents could provide valuable insights.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of women assistant superintendents in an urban area in the southeastern United States. Although ample research from the viewpoint of the female superintendent exists, there is very little research regarding the public school assistant superintendent. In this study, the researcher sought to understand and explore female assistant superintendents’ barriers, motivators, perceptions, and relationship with producing and using power. Analyzing the qualitative data created a theoretical model with four core categories or themes, which
included “It’s Okay”, Motivation, Influence, and Overcoming Barriers. A constructivist grounded theory methodology was used to analyze how female assistant superintendents advanced in their careers, as well as the barriers, obstacles, and motivators they encountered while trying to find work-life balance and becoming “okay” with their choices. This analysis provided insight into how to inform practices to inform more women who wish to advance into the superintendency.

After interviewing 12 female assistant superintendents in a metropolitan area, collective trends were discovered within the data. First, analysis indicated that many of these women had to become okay with the choices they had made throughout their career. For some, this meant that they had to reconcile themselves with the fact that their career choices did not allow for a family, while others had to become okay with prioritizing their career before family in thoughtful ways. It appears it is difficult for women to have work-life balance because of the sacrifices.

These women appeared to have motivation and leadership qualities that were evident at a young age, with families who supported and motivated them. Wanting to “be the best” at whatever they chose to do is a concept that came up frequently. Some of the women mentioned that their parents expected the best from them, which motivated them. Others talked about their families, husbands, and children motivating them and pushing them to do their best.

Derrington and Sharratt (2009) stated four recommendations for women who have moved into demanding leadership roles, such as the superintendency. These four recommendations are resolve, balance, negotiate, and cultivate support. Overall, the
women in this study learned how to do all four of these successfully to be able to
influence others successfully and overcome barriers that result from work-life balance
and gender stereotyping.

However, based on the findings and the analysis of data from this study, it can be
concluded that cultural norms and social roles play a large part in the lack of women in
the superintendency, including external and internal perceptions of what a woman is and
is not capable of in a leadership capacity. According to Dana and Bourisaw (2006), this
remains a continual challenge for women, and the public perception of a man as
superintendent will not shift until women who rise into leadership despite disparity
confront these perceptions, social roles, and cultural expectations.
REFERENCES


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Morrison, M. (2012). *Gender and leadership: Educational leadership through feminine eyes: Have the barriers in acquiring administrative positions for women changed in the last fifteen years?* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 3505473)


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL
07-Feb-2018

Ms. Holly M. Brookins
Mercer University
Tift College of Education
Department of Educational Leadership
3001 Mercer University Drive
Macon, GA 30341

RE: WOMEN RISING: THE PATHWAY TO BECOMING A FEMALE SUPERINTENDENT IN A METROPOLITAN DISTRICT THROUGH THE LENS OF FEMALE ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENTS (H1801032)

Dear Ms. Brookins:

On behalf of Mercer University's Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, your application submitted on 19-Jan-2018 for the above referenced protocol was reviewed in accordance with Federal Regulations 21 CFR 56.110(b) and 45 CFR 46.110(b) (for expedited review) and was approved under category(ies) 6 and 7 per 63 FR 60364.

Your application was approved for one year of study on 07-Feb-2018. The protocol expires on 06-Feb-2019. If the study continues beyond one year, it must be re-evaluated by the IRB Committee.

Item(s) Approved:

New Student Application for a research study using a qualitative, grounded theory approach to extract the lived experience of 8-15 female assistant superintendents in a metropolitan public school district using Semi-structured interviews to explore the gender disproportionality in the superintendency in terms of barriers, motivators, and supports as perceived through the eyes of female assistant superintendents in a metropolitan area.

NOTE: Please report to the committee when the protocol is initiated. Report to the Committee immediately any changes in the protocol or consent form and ALL accidents, injuries, and serious or unexpected adverse events that occur to your subjects as a result of this study.

Respectfully,

Ava Chambliss-Richardson, Ph.D., CIP, CIM.
Associate Director of Human Research Protection Programs (HRPP)
Member
Institutional Review Board
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT LETTER
Dear Respondent,

My name is Holly Brookins. I am a doctoral student of Educational Leadership at Mercer University. I am conducting a research study about the lack of females in the superintendency through the lens of the female assistant superintendent (associate, regional, deputy, chief officer, etc) in terms of barriers, motivators, and supports. The title of the project is Women Rising: The Pathway to Becoming a Superintendent in a Metropolitan District through the Lens of the Female Assistant Superintendent”. I am emailing to ask if you would like to participate in an interview for this research project.

Mercer University’s IRB requires investigators to provide informed consent to the research participants. If you would be interested in participating in this study, please contact the Principal Investigator Holly Brookins by phone, 404.580.4498 or by sending an email to Holly.Brookins@atlanta.k12.ga.us.

If you have any questions about the study, contact the Principal Investigator Holly Brookins by phone, 404.580.4498 or by sending an email to Holly.Brookins@atlanta.k12.ga.us.

Mercer University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed study #H1801032 and approved it on 07-Feb-2018.

Questions about your rights as a research participant:

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant of if you are at any time dissatisfied with any part of this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Mercer University Institutional Review Board (IRB) by phone at (478) 301-4101 or by email at ORC_Research@Mercer.Edu.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation!
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT
Title of Project: Women Rising: The Pathway to Becoming a Female Superintendent in a Metropolitan District through the Lens of Female Assistant Superintendents

Investigator Name: Holly M. Brookins

E-Mail Contact Information: Holly.M.Brookins@live.mercer.edu

You are invited to participate in a semi-structured interview for a research project conducted through Mercer University. Mercer University’s IRB requires investigators to provide informed consent to the research participants.

The purpose of this online research study is to examine what female assistant superintendents believe to be the barriers, supports, and motivators that exist for females as they move up the career ladder to achieve the position of superintendent. Data will be collected via semi-structured interviews with female assistant superintendents who agree to participate in the study. You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

If you agree to participate

The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes of your time. You will participate in a semi-structured interview and will be given the interview questions in advance. You will not be compensated.

Risks/Benefits/Confidentiality of Data

There are no known risks which could cause you to feel uncomfortable or anxious. There will be no costs for participating. Although your participation in this research may not benefit you personally, it will help us understand what female assistant superintendents believe to be the barriers, supports, and motivators that exist for females as they move up the career ladder and may contribute to knowledge in the field of educational leadership. Your name and email address will be kept during the data collection phase for tracking purposes only. A limited number of research team members will have access to the data during data collection. All identifying information will be removed during data analysis including names and e-mail
addresses.

**Participation or Withdrawal**

Your decision to participate or decline participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question and you have the right to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal will not affect your relationship with Mercer University in anyway.

**Contacts**

If you have any questions about the study contact the investigator, Holly M. Brookins at 404-580-4498 or send an email to Holly.M.Brookins@live.mercer.edu. Mercer University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed study #H1801032 and approved it on 02-07-2018

**Questions about your rights as a research participant**

If you have questions about your rights or are dissatisfied at any time with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (478) 301-4101 or email at ORC_Research@Mercer.edu.

If you agree to participate in the research study, please email Holly M. Brookins at Holly.M.Brookins@live.mercer.edu.

Thank you in advance for your time and participation!

Please do not forward this e-mail to others.

Please print a copy of this document for your records.
APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. Describe your background
2. How did your background motivate and/or create you?
3. What is leadership to you and how has this changed over time? Why?
4. What actions have you taken that have created the leader you are today?
5. What interactions supported you in your professional and personal life? Do you have support networks?
6. What have been the barriers on your journey? Have these barriers turned into opportunities?
7. How has your thinking about leadership changed from earlier in your career?
8. Leadership is a hierarchy of power; describe your relationship with power. How do you produce and use power?
9. Do you feel women lead differently than men?
10. Describe a situation that best illustrates your leadership.
11. Do you have any regrets?
12. Have you changed your leadership style throughout your career as you have moved into different roles?
13. Is there anything you would like to add?