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An Analysis of Factors Leading to the Success of Female Superintendents in P-12 Public Schools in Arkansas

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AN ANALYSIS OF FACTORS LEADING TO THE SUCCESS OF FEMALE
SUPERINTENDENTS IN P-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN ARKANSAS

A Dissertation Submitted
to the Graduate College
Arkansas Tech University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in School Leadership

in the Department of the Center for Leadership and Learning
of the College of Education

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Title: An Analysis of Factors Leading to the Success of Female Superintendents in P-12 Public Schools in Arkansas

Program: School Leadership

Degree: Doctor of Education

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Date

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my heavenly father Samuel Rumph. From as far back as I can remember, he had stressed the importance of education to my sister and me. Although he was not alive to see me start my educational journey in college, I know that he would be so proud of the accomplishments that I have made. His motivation has caused me to motivate others in the same capacity. My legacy that I want to leave is to make other people's lives better because of knowing me. If I can enhance or build them up in any way, I have reached my goal in life.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the history of women in the superintendency and the best practices that they have used to weather challenging conflicts to remain in the position. The research question that guided this study was: To what do successful female superintendents in Arkansas attribute their success? This qualitative research ascertained the factors needed for female superintendents in Arkansas to have long-lasting careers in that role, if they desire. Creswell (2012) recommends that for qualitative research data analysis, the researcher should arrange and structure the data, code the data, and represent the data. The data collected for this study consisted of interviews that focused on five female superintendents in Arkansas who are employed and working in P-12 public school systems, and have been in the position for five years or more. Standardized open-ended interview questions were conducted with all participants. An analysis of the interviews revealed that having a strong support system and finding a balance between work and home were key components for their success and longevity in the position of superintendent. The findings in this study lead to further questioning on the successful impact that the female superintendents have in their public school systems, which could add to their longevity.

Table of Contents

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	vii
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Background of the Problem	2
Purpose of the Study	3
Research Question	3
Definitions of Key Terms	4
Significance of the Study.....	4
Limitations	5
Delimitations.....	5
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW	7
Introduction.....	7
Leadership Ability	7
Perceptions of Leadership.....	7
Educational Advancements.....	9
Female Department Chairs	10
Sociocultural Barriers	11
Women as Role Models	13
Medical Administration	14
Women in Education.....	14
Job Competency.....	15

Mentoring Need	16
Mentoring Systems	17
CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	20
Research Design.....	20
Data Sources	21
Data Collection	22
Data Analysis	22
Researcher Positionality.....	23
CHAPTER IV: REARCH FINDINGS	24
Themes	26
Cultural Influences.....	26
Developmental Impact	29
Support System	30
Pinpointing Leading Women	32
Obstacles	34
Initial Experience	35
Time Constraints.....	38
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	43
Discussion	43
Limitations	49
Delimitations.....	51
Conclusions.....	51

Implications for Practice	54
Suggestions for Future Research	56
REFERENCES	58
APPENDIX.....	64
Appendix A: Interview Protocol.....	64

Chapter I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Despite advances that women have made in society, women are still underrepresented at the level of a superintendent. It is more common for a woman to be serving in an educational leadership role at the building level or at a school district central office but not leading a school district (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000). Still, this under-representation is not only a problem in Arkansas, but across the nation. Women make up 76 percent of teachers, 52 percent of principals, and 78 percent of central-office administrators (Few Women Run, 2016), according to federal data and the results of a recent national survey. Yet they account for less than a quarter of all superintendents, according to a survey conducted in 2016 by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), the School Superintendents Association. With the modest number of female superintendents in the nation, it is no wonder that women lead only 15% of school districts in Arkansas. This phenomenon is important to understand if more female administrators who wish to achieve the superintendency are to do so.

There are many reasons why women do not attain the role of superintendent. Once they become teachers, many women are satisfied in that position and do not have a desire to further their career. According to Superville (2016), superintendents work long hours and have many extra duties and responsibilities that must be fulfilled for the position, and many women are not willing to make that sacrifice. They would much rather have time with family, hobbies, or time for vacationing. The politics that are involved with school boards can be tough, and many women do not want to endure the

agony and frustration of dealing with the opposition. If a situation in the school district sparks controversy, it is the superintendent who is scrutinized for the overall decision. When counting all the costs, many women find more peace in being a classroom teacher than facing the difficulties of the superintendency.

Background of the Problem

The office of the superintendent has remained predominantly male because, while many women are obtaining the certification to become superintendents, few are seeking the position. “Women have made significant gains in educational attainment in recent decades, better positioning themselves not only for career success but also for leadership positions” (Pew Report, 2015, p.7). Women currently represent the largest number in education within the teaching field. Men have been outnumbered, especially in the early childhood education area, in such significant numbers that scholarships and loan forgiveness are some of the advantages proffered to men to obtain degrees and begin careers in the field. While women outnumber men in most educational roles, there are more men than women serving in the superintendency. In Arkansas during the 2016-17 school year, there were 36 female superintendents in public schools compared to 202 male superintendents.

A woman’s ability to lead is often questioned in terms of whether she can handle the leadership role, how well she can handle it, and what characterizes her leadership style. There is a plethora of literature that suggests that women underrate their own leadership abilities and competencies in comparison to men in similar administrative roles. According to Sandberg (2013), if a woman pushes to get the job done, if she’s highly competent, if she focuses on results rather than pleasing others, she’s acting like a

man. In today's society, there seems to be a disconnect of "what is normal" when it comes to women in leadership positions that break away from orthodox thinking that only men can lead or that men are better leaders. Often, women find themselves trying to pattern their leadership behavior on a societal view of leadership that is centered on traditionally male leadership styles. Notwithstanding the ongoing discussions about who or what makes great leaders, more women are now electing to demonstrate educational leadership roles from the office of superintendent.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the history of women in the superintendency and the best practices that they have used to weather challenging conflicts to remain in the position. This investigation asks to what do female superintendents attribute their success - person or theory or practice.

Women have diversified roles in the home, workplace, and community, and their experiences in these roles impact their leadership style – not least, in the superintendency. Increasingly women in the educational leadership field are elevating to pursue careers as superintendents, but they encounter many difficulties that male superintendents do not face. "When they do get the job, women often face scrutiny men don't... They are told to smile more, their appearances are critiqued, and they can face harsh treatment when they assert their authority" (Few Women Run, 2016, para 16). Such hardship continues throughout the course of their careers.

Research Question

The issues that women in leadership positions face led to the research question that guides this study: To what do successful female superintendents in Arkansas

attribute their success? Additional questions that promised to yield better insight into the success of participating female superintendents were as follows:

1. What prevents more females from assuming the office of the superintendent?
2. How do women in the superintendency describe the support and mentoring that they experienced throughout their career paths?
3. What, if anything, do female superintendents do to identify other women with leadership potential in their districts?

Definitions of Key Terms

Success. For purposes of this study, and given that superintendents – both male and female – only remain in that role on average for five to six years, success will be defined as having served in the role of superintendent for at least five years.

Significance of the Study

By examining the career histories of those women who have enjoyed success as superintendents, this study yielded information that proved valuable not only to future women superintendents, themselves, but also to those who prepare and mentor aspiring women superintendents. Additionally, it may well provide an expanded view of successful leadership, whose definition to date has been based on an almost exclusively male population of leaders. The findings will help in aiding female administrators to become more successful superintendents.

Because I may one day become a district level administrator in the office of the superintendent in a public K-12 setting, I was compelled to conduct a study whose results may well serve as a road map for potential female superintendents. I expect the study to

enlighten other female administrators about the practices that are being implemented by female superintendents who have remained in that office for five years or more.

Most of the district-level administrators whom I have known have been male. Although there are women who aspire to the superintendency and who are attending programs to prepare for that position, the number of female superintendents still remains considerably low. I want to help others to achieve their goals, as well as, or at the very least, to better understand the hindrances that threaten to prevent them from doing so.

Limitations

As the researcher, I am the data collection instrument and will be working alone. All of the information in the research relies solely on my integrity as the researcher. Merriam (2009) said that the researcher is “the primary instrument of the data collection and analysis” and is “left to rely on his or her own instincts and abilities throughout most of the research effort” (p. 52). Reeves (2010) said, “We all do have biases, so the choice is not the presence or absence of biases but rather the extent to which we admit them forthrightly when the evidence fails to confirm our biases” (p. 76). I worked throughout the research process to accurately record, analyze, and report the data that I collected. I have also tried to make my decision making as clear as possible to my readers.

Delimitations

The participants for this study were female superintendents in Arkansas’ P-12 public school districts. Although there were more female superintendents than those selected, the participants had to have served in the position for five years or more. Several attempts were made to interview all of them, but only the participants who

responded were interviewed. The data that was used in this study was delimited to include only those superintendents.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the career histories of women superintendents in Arkansas who have served in that role for five years or longer. This literature review is organized to provide insight into the different career histories that women leaders have experienced.

Leadership Ability

In American school districts, there are many female professionals in the teaching profession, but the number of female superintendents seems to represent only a fraction of that population (Glass et al., 2000). This review of the available literature echoes that finding and will focus on what it takes for female superintendents to attain the office, and stay the course despite the hardships that female superintendents across the nation regularly experience. After outlining these hardships and obstacles, the review will address additional supports available to promote gender equity in the position of superintendent (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006).

In a 2000 study that Glass et al. conducted across the nation, there were 13,728 superintendents of schools of whom only 1,984 were females. The number of women in the office of the superintendent has not increased significantly over the years, and the number has peaked at approximately 20% (Glass et al., 2000).

Perceptions of Leadership

According to Tosi, Rizzo, and Carroll (1986), perception is a measure of creating an intrinsic portrayal of an extrinsic world. Most people's ideas about what leadership

should look like are based upon past experiences with almost exclusively male leaders. Keohane (2014) stated that gender roadblocks will keep women from having positive performance evaluations and getting a fair chance at success in the workplace. Because of this hindrance, many women appear to be unable to perform at a satisfactory level on their jobs because they are believed to be unable to make difficult decisions. This stereotype is based on the perception and idea that women are for nurturing and being kind and sensitive to the needs of everyone. For females in leadership roles, female administrators feel that they have to lead in the same way that a man does in order to get the same respect from their co-workers, even though different people have different leadership styles whether they are male or female. “When women in leadership roles do act tough, there is a backlash against them for being *too* tough” (Positions of Power, 2016, p. 2). This stereotype has caused many women not to seek the executive leadership role. Tomás et al. (2010) wrote that limitations are placed on women because of their gender, and these limitations discourage women’s enthusiasm toward leadership. They feel that the job is not worth the trouble of having to do more to prove themselves adequate in a field that they had thrived in for so long before making the decision to aspire to a higher role.

Kezar (2000) reported on contrary voices within college and university atmospheres. Kezar noted that “women and people of color tend to have nonhierarchical views of leadership, whereas those of white men tend to be hierarchical” (p. 8). Research on the reasoning of women becoming engaged in leadership implies that women who continue to be involved in leadership positions receive many accolades and accomplishments (Bond, Holmes, Byrne, Babchuck, & Kirton-Robbins, 2008). These

authors noted that community leadership many times results in raising interpersonal relationships, gaining personal growth, and becoming a change factor.

Educational Advancements

Derrington and Sharatt (2009a) expressed that public school administration suffers from persistent shortages of females (p. 3). Women are gaining strides in the area of educational administration compared to decades ago. In a 1992 report by the American Association of School Administrators, 13% of superintendents in the U.S. were female; and that number increased to 18% at the time of AASA's follow up study in 2003. The pipeline for female leaders seems to be widening because women are better positioning themselves for leadership roles, not only career success. Different perspectives on work and life motivate women to pursue elevation in their career fields. According to a study of leadership effectiveness, the authors suggested that effective leadership should be recognized in the aspect of leadership, although in various cases women are not as often recognized as leaders as men (Hogue, Yoder, & Ludwig, 2002).

According to Gibson (1995), as more women excel in the workforce and accomplish higher educational achievement, they are becoming more effective in a style of leadership that exemplifies women leaders. Even more women are venturing into the workplace in the worldwide setting, and this is creating diversity among all sectors of employment. Hiring and promoting women into leadership positions can be one of the most advantageous strategies an organization can accept to be successful in a growing, globalized, and unstable economy (Northouse, 2004). Even though there are many accomplishments that have been attained by having women in leadership positions, there still remain the barriers that the female administrators are faced with that negate an

opportunity of advancement. Kowalski (2003) suggested that gender discrimination will cause a large gap in the number of female superintendents that are able to be successful in that position if it exists on any level: individual or system.

Female Department Chairs

In a study including women in leadership positions in community colleges, several of the women surveyed stated that the biggest barrier to their advancement was an attitude at the college level that favored candidates who were suited for a male-dominated atmosphere. Images of males in leadership roles continue to prevail in discussions about what constitutes effective leadership. This idea concerning desired leadership styles also came up in a qualitative study that included female department chairs. Isaac, Griffith, and Carnes (2010) stated that biases in favor of masculine leadership behaviors persist despite the increasing number of women who hold leadership positions. The viewpoints on leadership styles tended to look at a collaborative, shared governing leadership style versus a more traditional direction to leadership (Sherman, 2005). The way women are looked at as leaders many times depends upon the manner in which the leadership style is presented.

Examining female leadership from the viewpoint of situational theorists, Eagly and Carli (2007) explained, “Features such as societal values, the culture of the organization, the nature of the task, and the characteristics of the followers determine the context of the situation and therefore the appropriateness of particular types of leaders” (p. 2). In a study in the field of academic medicine, Carnes, Morrissey, and Geller (2008) reported a togetherness among women leaders in academic medicine and an advancement in the health issues of women. Females in nine positions of leadership were actually

constructive to the health concerns of women patients. “Research on women’s issues was in the forefront, which it may not have otherwise been, save having women in positions of leadership” (Carnes et al, 2008, p. 1454).

Sociocultural Barriers

An image of sociocultural barriers to women entering leadership positions has come to the surface: feminine expectations, selection processes, family expectations, lack of mentoring for women, and societal ideology of women’s leadership abilities. As Brunner (2000) noted:

Underrepresentation of women in the position of superintendent of schools is well known. Depending on the year, between 88 percent and 99 percent of all school superintendents are men despite the prevalence of women in teaching positions.... Lack of role models, lack of support from networks and mentors, lack of experience in leadership positions in nongovernmental institutions, and the greater amount of family demands for women are among the many factors thought to contribute to such underrepresentation. (pp. 9-10)

Many female administrators and leaders alike perform self-evaluation practices, so that they can be more successful in their area of leadership. The way women administrators and supervisors communicate with their subordinates has a monumental impact on the working relationship and sets the climate in the working atmosphere. Kouzes and Posner (1995) explained that good leaders not only have good communication skills but also have good listening skills. Allowing subordinates, the opportunity to express themselves in a professional manner fosters an atmosphere of respect and rapport.

To earn and maintain quality relationships, our people need to know we genuinely care about them. By listening with an empathetic ear, by putting ourselves in their shoes, and by maintaining an open mind, we develop a culture of enthusiastic and energetic teamwork. Our conscious listening, which is listening to understand and learn, is our gift to others. (Keyser, 2014)

If the administrator hears what is beneficial to the staff member and learns about his or her individual aptitude, a reasonable solution can be established. Likewise, trust and confidence is invested, which allows the staff member to have more delegated responsibilities and roles for the betterment of the system. This gives the employer an opportunity to identify the leadership qualities in that workplace that will be beneficial to the success of the entire district. This kind of help provides for growth for the leader as well as the subordinate.

In research on school superintendents, Skrla (2000) showed that study subjects used diverse types of reversed communication. Feminine characteristics that were glorified in the social arena that had previously been labeled as weaknesses or faults for leaders were reclaimed as present strengths. Derrington and Sharratt (2009b) explained how working mothers who were in the position of superintendent were able to manage both responsibilities. In the past, women were expected to take care of their families first and to forgo or postpone any goals or careers. The fact that women are now able to do both shows a level of grit that was hidden from view in the past when women paused their careers lest they been seen as not fully taking care of their families.

To many in the general public, the word leadership simply means that a person has power, or conversely, a person with power is labeled a leader. If gender is connected

to the concept of leadership, another level is added to the idea of power. Chin (2004) revealed that leadership from a feminist point of view means promoting feminist principles and policies, changing organizational cultures to be more gender equitable, and empowering women as feminist leaders.

Women as Role Models

A study of women who had selected themselves for leadership roles pinpointed one main factor that may have swayed women's decisions to accept such roles: the presence of a leader model (Carbonell & Castro, 2008). Northouse (2007) credited the idea that leaders become role models to those who come behind them. By serving as role models, it is possible that women may shape how leadership is viewed, and may even encourage others to undertake it. "Transformational leadership creates a culture in which employees feel empowered and then encouraged to freely discuss and try new things" (p. 190). The idea is for those in positions of power to empower others to become committed members of the group, to provide inspiration for change through a shared vision that will benefit all members of the organization.

In a study that allowed women the opportunity to relay their stories, one participant explained that as the leader toils to generate the future, she must constantly help supporters comprehend how they fit into that future (Grady, Curley, & LaCost, 2008). This idea of reciprocity in leadership also emerged in a study conducted by Drago-Severson, Cuban, and Daloz (2009) in which she joined collaboration and leadership. The collaborative relationships among the women in the study supported their learning and leadership development. Using conversation was further investigated in a study about women in leadership by Wilkinson and Blackmore (2008), who decreed

that “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (p. 130). These pathways guide us in constructing women’s positions as leaders.

Medical Administration

In an article on the strengths and weaknesses of women in healthcare administration, Lantz (2008) stated, “subtle yet challenging aspects of social, gender, and family roles exist that influence women’s career progression” (p. 297). Lantz accentuated in her article on gender and career paths that “characteristics such as flexibility, work ethic, integrity, and effective communication skills are all factors leading to successful career advancement. Women must be committed to seeking out opportunities to strengthen these areas of their work style” (p. 270).

Women in Education

Even though more women are taking on the position of superintendent, it is still a male-dominated role. Wallace (2014) stated that with the proportion of females in the superintendency being 23% in 2012, and increasing by only 0.7% annually, it would take nearly 80 years for females to be proportionately represented in public schools. For example, 10% of school superintendents are women in Nebraska. Women make up the greater number of students enrolled in colleges and universities, but careers in higher education have not been a dominant area for women in leadership positions (Leatherwood & Williams, 2008). Are they striving to attain the office of superintendent or a similar role in k-12 leadership? Strengths often seen as feminine – instruction and human relations – are increasingly recognized as key to the work of the superintendent.

Fine (2009) noted that the drive to make a difference in the world is borne out in the career choices of highly driven women who prefer careers such as teaching, social

work, medicine, and human services. Grady et al. (2008) conducted a study that focused on female leaders who were at the highest points in their careers; they stated that “Complacency is the enemy of innovation. Leaders recognize that organizations thrive when they are able to adapt to new environments and demands” (p. 286). Even though up to date research expresses that women are able to lead efficiently, stereotypes and challenges persist and could impede the success of female leaders. For example, gender discrimination still blocks too many women’s advancement (Hopewell, McNeely, Kuiler, and Hahm, 2009).

In their study, the *American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study*, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) reported that the number of female superintendents was 24.1%, which represented an increase from the 13.2% figure that they had reported in their 2000 study. According to data collected by the Arkansas Association of Educational Administrators in Fall 2016, there are 238 public school superintendents employed in Arkansas, only 36 are female (32 Caucasian females and 4 African-American females). The percent of female superintendents in Arkansas (15.2%) is still lower than the national average of 24.1% (AAEA, 2016). Even though this is an increase of the number reported in 2006 (11%), this number remains markedly lower than the 50% that had been projected by Dana and Bourisaw (2006).

Job Competency

In a study exploring hardships endured by women, Eagly and Karau (2002) stated that women emerge less commonly than men as leaders because women have to exhibit more in order to be considered extremely competent. According to the authors, competency is not only the capacity to fulfil one’s job, but also the number of hours a

person is willing to work on that job. Women many times stated that they needed to work many more hours than their male counterparts in order to prove their competence.

In their study of female principals, Jones, Ovando, and High (2009) reported that participating principals suggested that they sought to be greater forces for the common good by acknowledging and reacting to the demands, appeals, and wishes of others. The researchers found that female leaders sometimes look out for the good of the overall organization and establish individualized relationships by not keeping their own interests at the forefront of their agenda. The driving force of a female career choice is a strong ambition to make sure that the needs of others have been met, and they will engage in caring personal communication (Fine, 2009). In a study by Wrushen and Sherman (2008), women leaders “spoke of leading with compassion and emotion because of a desire to maintain relationships” (p. 465). This style has tended to be discounted in a leadership hierarchy positioned largely on gender, and has served as a major barrier or obstacle in climbing the ladder of success for women. Women who displayed these qualities of compassion and emotion in their leadership have too often been viewed as weak and incompetent compared to men who had qualities of negotiating and networking (Fletcher, 2016).

Mentoring Need

Bjork and Kowalski (2005) explained that in order for mentoring to be effective, both the mentor and mentee must have a sense of willingness to make the mentoring relationship successful and engage in dialogue that is meaningful with specific feedback to increase growth. The mentoring relationship must be based on honest communication so that growth can occur through the pair’s actions as well as their expectations. The

mentor has an obligation to discharge the mentee when the opportunity arises, must be respected by his or her colleagues, and must be effective in his or her field in order to perform job duties that are ethical and proficient.

Kinsella and Richards (2004) described the importance of administrators having mentors if they are to make significant differences in the field of education. The skills that are taught during the mentoring sessions are crucial to the success and survival of the mentees in their new professional positions. When mentors are utilized properly, school leaders remain in their positions longer and perform at a high level of effectiveness. Mentors also derive a renewed commitment to their field through the experience of mentoring novices. Many times school leaders, including principals and superintendents, do not remain in their positions because of the lack of mentoring at their level of the profession.

Mentoring Systems

When mentoring women superintendents of school districts, there can be formal mentoring and informal mentoring. Informal mentoring is described as a relationship that develops spontaneously or informally without any assistance. Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) identified that informal mentoring experiences in their study were impromptu and free flowing. The guidelines for an informal mentoring program are substantially more relaxed and non-traditional than formal mentoring programs in that they exclude formal timelines, agendas, and criteria, thereby allowing a great amount of flexibility. Such flexibility helps to establish a comfort level between the mentee and mentor, as different topics could be examined at any time. On the other hand, formal mentoring is described

as a relationship that results from a structured program that contains specific criteria for implementation.

Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) studied female administrators and their mentoring experiences in higher education through a quantitative survey with women in Tennessee. Mentors were helpful to the women who were striving for leadership positions at the top level. Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) explained further that mentoring was more effective for the women when they shared similarities with their mentors, such as values, background, experiences, and outlook. The authors mentioned that informal mentor relationships that occur through natural interactions are generally more beneficial than formal relationships.

Interestingly, Dunbar and Kinnersley (2011) found that there were no differences in the career mentoring between women leaders in higher education with female mentors and those with male mentors. Nonetheless, participating women who had female mentors felt that gender was crucial and would have an impact on the success of the mentoring relationship. Positive relationship building between the mentee and mentor was recorded as important. Similarly, Kamler (2006) noted that friendship actions, such as reassurance, support, transparency, and availability were crucial components of mentoring. Additionally, race and gender were two vital variables to be considered in mentoring programs.

Brunner and Grogan (2007) noticed that the lack of mentoring and female professional networks contributed to an uneven professional community for female administrators. Women need support and positive working environments that are full of positive engagement and collegiality among coworkers in the field. There have been

studies on women in mentoring programs, but there have not been many that focused specifically on women administrators, and none that focused at the state level in Arkansas.

Sherman (2000) noted that one of the current shortcomings of mentoring for female superintendents is the lack of close relationships between mentors and mentees. One factor that is said to contribute to the shortcoming is the lack of available female mentors when compared with the number of available male mentors (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). When choosing a mentor, many feel more comfortable with those who most resemble themselves in order to gain insight of successful working traits and leadership styles (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006). Similarly, Sherman (2000) reported that a high percentage of male mentors prefer to mentor younger males whom they perceive as being miniature models of themselves; consequently, they put forth much effort in cultivating promising potential protégés. No such critical mass of female superintendents yet exists to do the same for candidates of their own gender.

Chapter III

Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the factors needed for female superintendents in Arkansas to have long-lasting careers in that role. The study explored specific obstacles women encountered prior to attaining the office of superintendent, in addition to other factors that had contributed to their success once they attained that position.

The following question guided the research: To what do successful female superintendents in Arkansas attribute their success? For purposes of this study, “success” defined as having served in the role of superintendent of schools for a period of at least five years total. The five years can be in one school district or five years at different school districts. Additional questions that promised to yield better insight into the success of participating female superintendents were as follows:

1. What prevents more females from assuming the office of the superintendent?
2. How do women in the superintendency describe the support and mentoring that they experienced throughout their career paths?
3. What, if anything, do female superintendents do to identify other women with leadership potential in their districts?

Research Design

The data collection method for this study consisted of interviews that focused on the participants’ experiences in, and leading up to the superintendency (Creswell, 2012). Standardized open-ended interviews were conducted with all participants. As Patton (2015) explained, in the standardized open-ended interview approach, the same interview

protocol is used with all participants, so that the same questions using the same wording will be asked of all participants, so that their results and responses will be easily compared.

Data Sources

The participants in the study were women who currently serve as superintendents in Arkansas' K-12 public school districts, and who have been in the position of superintendent for at least five years.

The email addresses of all of Arkansas' female superintendents were obtained from the list in the Arkansas Public School Computer Network. Introductory emails were sent to all of these individuals explaining my study, requesting their participation, and arranging time for interviews.

In the 2016-17 school year, there were 238 superintendents in the state. Of the 238 superintendents, 36 were female. My study was geared toward the 10 that had been superintendent for five years or more. Fortunately, I was able to interview five of the ten female superintendents in the state of Arkansas with the required years of service.

Questions that were included on the interview protocol were designed to elicit participating superintendents' descriptors of their leadership styles and their thoughts about how their approach to leadership made them successful. The interview questions were sent to the dissertation committee members for review before they were used with participating superintendents. Other questions surfaced during interviews that provided clarification or allowed participants to expound upon their response to earlier questions.

The interviews were audio recorded for accuracy to make sure that participants' responses were transcribed thoroughly and accurately. A copy of the transcript was sent

to the respective participant to check for accuracy and to give the participant the opportunity to add additional information, change information given, or totally retract a statement from use in the study.

Data Collection

For this study, I primarily collected data using standardized open-ended interviews with participating superintendents. In the introduction phase of the research, I emailed letters of introduction and consent forms to all of the potential participants explaining who I am and what I would be doing. Once I received responses from potential participants, I scheduled mutually agreeable times to interview them.

Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2017. I took notes during each interview to make it progress smoothly and to keep it on track. The interview protocol delved into areas of interest concerning women and the superintendency, including background information about family, preparations that were made in their career, challenges or barriers that were faced throughout their career, experiences that helped to encourage them to remain in their career, and participants' views about why there is a significantly lower number of females in the office of superintendent than males.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2012) recommended that for qualitative research data analysis, the researcher should arrange and structure the data, code the data, and represent the data. The data were collected from participating female superintendents through interviews. The interviews were conducted using a standardized protocol, so that common information could be asked of the superintendents. I took notes during the interviews and allowed codes to come forth during my transcription of the interview recordings, as

described by Creswell (2012). The emerging codes reflected common themes from the interviews. None of the participating female superintendents are identified throughout the research study. Each is referred to by a letter to protect her anonymity.

Researcher Positionality

I, as the qualitative researcher was the instrument both of data collection and data analysis. I conducted all of the interviews and transcribed the audio recordings. I analyzed the various transcripts, looked for patterns within the multiple participants' responses, coded them accordingly, and allowed themes to emerge.

I have been in public education for 13 years, and I have a love and passion for education that began when I was a child. When I was growing up, my dad placed an emphasis on education that I did not understand at the time, but he instilled in me the value of an education. He graduated from high school, and my mom finished the eighth grade before having to drop out and go to work, so the idea of continuing education after high school had never been a goal of mine. As I began higher education for the first time, I ran across a teacher who sparked the same love and passion that my father had begun. As I climbed through my education as a teacher, and now as an administrator, the goal of becoming a superintendent is a desire that I would like to fulfill. I write this because, according to Creswell (2012), my past experiences, background, and bias must be forthrightly acknowledged to strengthen the integrity of the data analysis and reporting.

Chapter IV

Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to analyze factors that have led to the success of female superintendents in P-12 public schools in Arkansas. In order to delve into the background and career experiences of female superintendents who have served in the position for at least five years or more, the data was collected using interviews that were audio recorded. Five female superintendents in Arkansas consented to participate in this study. Interviews with these educational leaders provided insight into some of the experiences that female superintendents endure as they forge the future of our schools. The themes that emerged were guided by the research questions that steered the study.

Number of years of experience for the participants:

- Participant A – 12 years
- Participant B – 5 years
- Participant C – 12 years
- Participant D – 8 years
- Participant E – 10 years

Before the formal interview questions were asked, the participants gave background information about family and career preparation. All of the participants that were in the study were Caucasian. Participant A was the youngest of three children with two older sisters. Her father was a minister, and her mother was a schoolteacher. She was married with two children: a son and a daughter. She began teaching in 1976 and taught English and history. She spent 14 years in the same school district teaching and climbed the ranks of administration to junior high principal, Federal Programs and

Curriculum Coordinator at central office, and assistant superintendent. She spent twenty-nine years in the same district before moving to another district as superintendent.

Participant B was the older of two children. Neither of her parents attended college, but they were always supportive of receiving a quality education, and they had high expectations of her and her sister. She is married, and her husband is a teacher as well. She has one son, who is an attorney in California. She was in the same school district for the bulk of her career and moved to a neighboring district to become superintendent.

Participant C started out in college and took a “life break”. She married at 19 and had a child at 20. It was not until she divorced and remarried that she was able to continue her education. Once she had gone back to school, she did not stop until she received her doctorate degree. At that time, there were not many doctoral programs, so she attended out of state, sometimes driving two times a week. She began her educational career as an elementary teacher for four years and advanced into administration as a K-6 principal, as well as a half-time teacher of the gifted and talented program, compensatory education director, and Title I coordinator in a small school district. She advanced to assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction in a different school district, and has served in the capacity of superintendent for 12 years.

Participant D has only one son who is a college senior studying Criminal Justice. She began her career as an elementary teacher for four years and advanced to P-6 principal for two years. She was curriculum coordinator for one year, and then she was appointed as superintendent and has remained in the position for eight years. Her entire career has been in the same school district.

Participant E is married with two grown daughters. One is an educator, and one is not. She began her career as an elementary teacher for eight years before elevating to multiple administrative positions: building level administrative positions, central office curriculum director, and assistant superintendent. All of these positions were held in the same school district. She moved to a neighboring school district for one year as an assistant superintendent and was appointed superintendent. She has served for ten years.

Themes

- Cultural influences
- Developmental impact
- Support system
- Pinpointing leading women
- Obstacles
- Initial experience
- Time constraints

Cultural influences. The participants who were interviewed felt that the school districts in which they had the opportunity to work certainly impacted their leadership opportunities – some for better; others for worse. Participant A attributed her advancement to opportunities that had been given to her in her district, even though she was late moving into administration. She loved the classroom and had never really thought about any other position. When she ultimately moved to the northwest part of the state, she was already a superintendent.

Participant B thought that her own leadership opportunities were advanced depending upon who was in leadership positions at a given moment. There were times

when people who served in leadership positions did not encourage her to move forward; there were other times when she was encouraged by others in those same positions. She thought that being a woman had some influence in the discouragement because women were rarely encouraged to become superintendents in 1976. They faced different challenges and perceptions by the public and by the school board.

One of the questions that she was asked when she was interviewed for the position of superintendent was, “Can you make hard decisions?” Her answer was that she believed that if they did a thorough check into her previous employment, they would find not only that she could, but that she had. Describing circumstances that she had confronted, she said, “This is what I consider as one of those hard decisions, and this is what I am recommending”. The district had never had a female superintendent. When she applied there, she was at a point in her career – and had had enough experience in education – that when she applied for positions or interviewed, her gender was not even something that she thought about because her two previous superintendents had both been women. They were the only people under whom she had worked in administration, so it did not even occur to her that gender would be something that potential employers would consider as an issue. After she joined her new district, several people approached her to say that she was the first female superintendent that they had had. She recalled an incident of a gentleman in his 90s who worked mowing lawns for a few hours in the summers. When he first came in a few days after she was hired, he told the bookkeeper, “I came in to meet the new superintendent. I hear it’s a girl, and that she’s not bad to look at either.” Participant B explains that she laughed at that, but thought that there

were going to be other people who were going to want to come by to meet her just because they heard that she was a female.

Participant C believed that being from the area and people knowing her helped her chances of advancement because they knew she was a hard worker. When she received her doctoral degree in 1993, she was the only person in the district to have one. She had her doctorate degree long before she was promoted to a central office position. She was passed over twice for men who had master's degrees. She was the only female elementary principal when she was hired into the school district, and when she became superintendent, she was the only female superintendent that the district had employed as well. After she was hired, several other local school districts hired women. After only one year, many retired or went to other things and had been replaced by men.

Participant D sensed hesitation from some in the community who were not used to female leadership. She feels that the tables have since turned. She believes that the superintendency is still a male dominated field, but there seems to be much more acceptance now than when she started eight years ago.

Participant E noted that she was alternately advanced and inhibited in her leadership opportunities. Early in her career, she felt that there were many leadership position opportunities for females. As she moved further up the ladder, it was a little more difficult at the highest level. She thought that if she had stayed at her previous district, she would not have been considered for a superintendent's position. She moved to a district that she felt was a little bit more progressive-thinking and subsequently moved into a superintendent's position.

Developmental impact. When asked the question of who had the most impact on her development as a leader, Participant A stated that it went all the way back to her parents. Her father was a strong influence in her life, in that he set very high expectations, instilled in her the belief that she could do whatever she wanted to do, and conveyed that nothing less was expected. In her chosen field of education, different principals in the early years of her career put her in leadership roles as a faculty member, and some of those principals encouraged her to complete coursework in educational leadership and to move into administration.

Participant B had two superintendents whom she worked under when she moved from the classroom into central office. One of the female superintendents gave her the opportunity and recognized leadership qualities in her from some other things that she had done in the district and encouraged her by giving her a free rein in responsibilities to find her wings. A second female superintendent following the first superintendent that she had worked very much side by side with her in decision making. She taught her to talk things through. Both encouraged her to grow professionally and to set higher goals for herself and allowed her to reach those goals.

Participant C could not think of any one person who had the most impact on her development as a leader. The superintendent who hired her probably had the most influence on her because he had been her high school principal.

Participant D named her former principal as having helped to form her as a principal. Her modeling as a principal gave her something to aspire to become in life. Her recently retired board president, a former educator, also impacted her as a

superintendent. That individual inspired her to be a strong leader and provided consistent guidance and support throughout the years.

Participant E identified two different individuals with whom she worked who most impacted her development as a leader. One gave her the first administrative job that she has held. This individual was an innovator who allowed her to try new ideas. If things did not work out so well, the individual taught her to back up and do something else. In addition, this participant worked under a superintendent who really encouraged and promoted trying new things. He was very influential in her being a risk-taker and willing to not do things the ways that they had always been done.

Support system. Participant A described having worked with different administrators who told her that she had leadership skills, and that she needed to pursue her license to become an administrator. Being in a small community, she knew most of the people there, and she found out that some board members encouraged the superintendent to use her in leadership roles because they thought that she had leadership skills. She was neither seeking nor aspiring to be a superintendent, but later changed her mind because of the encouragement.

The principal with whom Participant B worked for several years during her last classroom assignment was very encouraging. He allowed her to have small leadership roles that helped her to grow. When she went back to get her master's degree, the cohort of people with whom she was in the program all became close because they were all going through the same classes together. They depended upon each other and stayed in touch with each other after the completion of the program. The networking that she was

encouraged to do and the organizations that she was encouraged to belong to with leadership roles had helped her to develop.

Participant C was given some central office duties early on in her career. She faced some discouragement when she was passed over twice for men who had fewer qualifications than she had. She thinks that the superintendent felt uncomfortable with a female assistant superintendent. His background was mainly in facilities and management, while her doctorate was in curriculum and instruction. The first person he hired was from outside of the district, and he was not successful in the position. The second male hired for the position was a high school principal, and while he was good at curriculum and instruction, he did not have the credentials that Participant C had for the position. He ended up leaving at the end of the semester, and she was moved over as half-time assistant superintendent and half-time principal. She worked more hours doing those two jobs than anyone in the district.

Participant D attributed her success to her son's being her greatest source of support and encouragement, and his having walked the path with her every step of the way by being a college student himself. She had to work hard and spend many long nights and weekends working and studying to get to the office of superintendent. He had and still does motivate her to do more and more often telling her how proud he is of her.

Participant E had strong support from her former superintendent. She had strong support from the school board, and then she felt that she had a lot of support from her colleagues in her fellow principals who supported her in her leadership role. As a superintendent, she believed that she had a lot of support from the administrator association of fellow superintendents. She became a superintendent before

superintendent mentors were formally assigned, and she considered a great many superintendents her mentors because they were only a phone call away and helped her in the decision making process. In her first year as superintendent, she thought it was critical to reach out to other first year superintendents. She felt like they were a safe place to ask questions and present problems but also were in that same learning process so they could understand.

Pinpointing leading women. When pinpointing women with leadership potential in her district, Participant A would go into the various classrooms to see teachers and their leadership potential and abilities. For example, one teacher was very strong in literacy and knew how to incorporate literacy in all content areas, so she moved her into the role of literacy facilitator. Participant A later told this literacy facilitator that she really needed to go to obtain her administrator license, as she had leadership abilities. That individual took her advice and later applied for a job in that same district. Participant A took herself out of the interview process, and the literacy facilitator was hired as a principal before ultimately leaving to pursue other career opportunities.

Participant B has tried to pass on the same encouragement that had been given to her Director of Federal Programs, and the director now serves on the board of one of her professional organizations. Participant B has nominated people for awards and honors in their areas of expertise. She also employs two female principals, one of whom has just finished her third year at the state's Leadership Academy. This was something that Participant B encouraged because she felt that the more a person is involved in those types of activities, the more that he or she was going to grow as an individual. Since she was the first female superintendent in her district, she did not only pinpoint women to

support and encourage in the leadership career path. That was certainly something that she had in the back of her head, and she always tried to encourage women to move forward if they had that desire, but she also pushed some gentlemen in the district to set their sights a little higher.

Participant C did not focus on the gender issue when it came to what constituted a good administrator. She thought a good administrator was a person who had good interpersonal skills and common sense, along with the credentials. She taught adjunct administration courses for 20 years and saw many good administration candidates of both genders pass through.

Participant D always looked for leadership potential in her district, whether it was in male or female educators. She believed that finding leaders from within was a great way to nurture leadership from co-workers, and it also would build school culture. Both of the curriculum coordinators whom she hired in the past eight years have now gone on to serve as building level leaders.

Participant E currently has two assistant superintendents who are both female. One really recruited her to the district and has been a colleague for many years, while Participant E recruited the other one. Participant E explains that about 50% of the administrators in her district are female. She wanted to move more into the role of being supportive of other women as they enter the profession of superintendency. However, she did not look at gender or race, but preferred to look at who the best person was for the position. She did not let gender or race get in the way of promoting someone who was the most capable, the most prepared, and the best candidate.

Obstacles. At times, Participant A did not know that she had faced any particular obstacles, but explained that she has run into those who had wondered whether she could handle the given job because she is female. She was asked by some school board members to apply and interview for the high school principal's job when she was moving up. She did not get the job because some school board members wanted to move her to the central office. They did not want to give her the position of the high school principal and have to hire someone new in a couple of years. Participant A did not know at that time, but there were rumors of people in the community expressing that they probably needed a male for a high school principal. When she was younger, she did not really think about gender playing a role in any of her future positions.

The biggest obstacle that Participant B faced was the preconceived notion that women do not know about athletics and facilities. She explained that she was comfortable with the facilities part, but acknowledges that athletics is an area of weakness because she neither coached nor played any major sports. In general, she thought that when a woman follows a couple of women in the district, with a predominantly male school board, the school board sometimes looks to change things up. She thinks that when there is a male superintendent, the school board does not necessarily look for a female superintendent. In her own case, she does not believe that gender played any role with her school board. They were just looking for the person that they thought would fit in and be the best fit. She does not think that being male or female influenced them one way or another. She also does not note that when she leaves, they will look for a specific gender to fill the position.

Participant C expresses, “I think it’s still a man’s world but is changing some,” adding that women are just looked at differently as leaders. She thought that she has made a good reputation for herself, but women and men are perceived differently. She said that if the former superintendent went to look at a construction project, he was working. When she left to do something, she thought people wondered what she was doing, and why she did not get a man to do that. Her former superintendent left every day at 4:00 p.m., but she is usually in the office until 5:30 or 6:00 p.m. before heading off to an extracurricular activity.

Participant D said, “Almost everything in life can cause a person to face obstacles/challenges, but it’s about finding ways to make things happen. It’s about having drive and wanting something badly enough to put in the work to make it happen.” As a single parent to her son, she had to find ways to balance work and school in order to complete the additional degrees that she needed to advance her career. Her son was supportive, and she said, “It was worth it in the end.”

Participant E did not notice that she had any obstacles. One challenge that she faced was that the majority of the school board members were male. She sensed that trying to find her place in establishing some relationship with those male school board members was more challenging as a female. It was not an obstacle necessarily, but it was something that she had to navigate her way through. She went into the superintendency as a 42-year-old female, and she had to find a way to build that relationship.

Initial experience. Participant A had worked in central office and moving up in the school system that she was in, she knew it backwards and forward. She was not from that area, but she had married a man from there and lived there for many years, as well as

working in that school district. The year before she became superintendent, the district that she worked for consolidated with two other districts. As the assistant superintendent, she had been in charge of meshing those districts and trying to move people and trying not to lay off anyone who had been there for a short period of time. There was a lot of resentment from the consolidating school districts, so it was difficult to bring them all together. After consolidation, the two superintendents of the smaller districts were taken on as assistant superintendents. When the superintendent of the consolidating school district left, the other two who had already been superintendents felt like one of them would be selected as superintendent, but the school board did not hire either one of them. They chose Participant A, and the other two assistant superintendents, who were former superintendents, opted to leave the district during the summer. The first year Participant A had no assistants, but her experience was helpful in getting through the tough time, in addition to the many hours spent at the office. Even with the prior experience and many hours, the job was overwhelming. She did have a superintendent in a district about 25 miles away that had a lot of experience, and she really respected him so she picked up the phone and called him. He was her unofficial mentor because mentoring was not established during that time.

Participant B describes herself as having been elated immediately after obtaining the superintendent position. The community was so welcoming and provided any help that was needed. It is still a community that has very strong parental involvement. She tried to take some time to watch, listen, and learn about what was important in the area and the school district because she felt that from the interview with the school board, she had a clear picture of what their expectations were, and the goals that they had. They had

set certain goals financially from a facilities standpoint. They were looking to pass a millage and build a new school. They were looking to move forward in technology, and they had a school that was a focus school. A focus school is a school that has room for improvement in areas that are specific to the school: low graduation rates, largest within-school gaps, or lowest subgroup performance. The school board wanted to move them out of the negative status. The staff wondered how a new person was going to be when they came in, and there was a time of getting to know each other. The district that she came from and the one that she went to were very different. One was in the north part of the county, and the other was in the south part of the county. Even though they were different districts, they were both farming areas. One was larger in population with more businesses and industry, and the other was more traditional, and they liked things traditional, but they wanted to be excellent in what they did. The two communities had some similarities, but they also were very different in the way that they approached things.

Participant C had a very negative first experience because she was offered a one-year contract by the school board. To her, this was a slap in the face from a school district that knew her, and in whose district she had worked for 19 years. They knew that she would work hard to be successful, but there were a couple of members on the school board who doubted that a woman could be in charge, and they wanted to be the driving force. She had been successful in every role that she had held, and she had won regional and state awards. After her first meeting as superintendent, she met with every school board member individually and told them of her disappointment. The second year, they gave her a two-year contract, and the third year, they gave her a three-year contract. She

thought that if she had been a man, they would have given her a three-year contract her first year.

Participant D realized that what she had learned in school was only a tip of the iceberg. She did not have instructors who provided realistic, hands-on experiences/assignments, and the job was very overwhelming at first. She learned what she really needed to know about the job through the experience that she gained in the position. She learned to find many good mentors, so that she had someone to go to with questions on various topics when she needed guidance. She found the contact number for the school attorney to make sure that he was available for questions, as well as issues.

Participant E had a great first year. The school district passed a millage within the first year or two that she was appointed superintendent. The district converted from a traditional elementary school to magnets and saw a tremendous amount of growth in the enrollment. She just had an overwhelmingly positive experience early on, and it continues. She remembers one time someone said, "You're still in the honeymoon period." If she saw that same person today, she would say that she has enjoyed a ten-year honeymoon. Even though there had been struggles and negative events along the way, the initial experience was primarily positive.

Time constraints. When mixing family and professional obligations with all of the time restraints involved in being a superintendent, Participant A said that she probably did not do a good job when her children were at home. She spent a lot of time on school business and probably not enough time on family. At the same time, she grasped that her children were pretty resourceful. She did not feel that she necessarily hurt them, but she did have some regrets because she had had to learn a balance. When

she left her home school district before she became a superintendent, she had just stayed at the office and thought she had to take care of everything. This almost burned her out mentally and physically. When she went to her next school district, she told herself that she was not going to do that. Her husband was actually working in Little Rock, and he only came home on the weekends. She thought that when he came home on the weekends, she was going to be home and not stay at the office. She made the determination that she was going to find that balance. She is now fortunate in the school district that she is working in as a superintendent. She has lots of help and a lot of activities that she attends. She rarely takes work home nor does she work all weekend. She stated that she had to find her balance in order not to burn herself out. She noted that moving into the position of superintendent and being new in the position, the first year or two will be hard because the balance has to be found.

Participant B had empty nest syndrome, so she went back to school. Her husband was very supportive of that, and he changed professions in that timeframe too. Most of her time was spent at the school. For a mom with small kids, it would have been difficult, especially without a support system in place, but she did not have that to worry about. When she went to her school district as superintendent, she felt that it was important to be seen and supportive, and she still feels that way. She is at everything that she can possibly be at as far as activities that involve students. With her professional obligations, she works long hours. She actually moved and rented a house in the district that she is serving and lived pretty much apart from her husband for four years, even though they were just 30 minutes away. She goes home on the weekends, and she spends two or three nights in the town of her school district. She is in the process of moving out.

She is going home and will drive back and forth. That was one of the questions that the school board also asked when she was interviewed, “Do you plan to move here?” She said that she had her home that they had for over 20 years, and she planned on renting and being in that district most of the time during the week. She would go to her home town for church and family affairs. She would just drive down on Sundays, but they had told her quite some time ago that they did not care where she slept. It was very obvious to them that she was involved in the activities in the community. She is actually president of the Chamber of Commerce. Looking at it from a financial standpoint and all, she and her husband decided that she was going to give up the house and drive back and forth. There are some trade-offs. There are late nights and community events that she needed to be involved in, and that made it difficult. Her husband was very supportive, and he attended every football game, basketball game, and band concert that there was there, so that people knew that they were a couple, and she was not just there for the job.

Participant C said that there had been some times in her career that she had missed important family experiences because she was working. She really regrets that now. She makes it a point to prioritize things so that she can put her family first. She has six grandchildren, and she tries to attend their events.

Participant D said, “It takes years and experience to find the right balance.” It takes prioritizing what is important in her life, but also realized that although her family is number one, there are times that “school will need to come first.” With that being said, when she chose education, it was not a job; it was truly a life choice, and her family had to understand that. She invited her family to go along with her to the ball games and

events when it was something that they could attend. She involved them because the time and laughter that she shared with them was the biggest source of her stress relief. She also knew that at the end of the day, and when her time was done there, and she “hit that rocking chair on the front porch to finally get some rest” for the remainder of her days, her family was who she would have to love and sustain her until her final breath.

When asked how she mixes family and professional obligations with all of the time restraints, Participant E stated, “It was quite a challenge. I’m pretty good at separating when I’m at work. It’s school and business.” She did not have many night time obligations. She thought that she had fewer night time obligations than a superintendent in a small school district, but the expectation for her to attend all of the activities is just not there like it is in a small district. “I don’t take work home with me. I take work home with me on the computers; I don’t mean like that. I don’t go home, and my husband and I discuss what happened during the day. I just kind of separate that.” She thought that she had to have boundaries, and she had to say to herself that she had left the office, and she had let it go. She thought the only way that she could do that and have a life and also do the job of the superintendent was to have trust in the people that she employed. She could not micromanage and worry about whether the bus made it home from the ball game the night before. That was job of the transportation director to worry about it. She had to let go of what she was not immediately supervising and over. When people would come and ask her a question that she did not handle, she was very confident to say that she did not have any idea about that. She was not immediately over that. She told them that they needed to call the transportation director to see if there were

any problems on that trip back home. He could definitely answer the question for the both of them. That was what she had to do.

Chapter V

Conclusions, Discussion, and Suggestions for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to examine the history of women in the superintendency in Arkansas, and the best practices that they have used to weather challenges and conflicts to remain in the position. Brzenzinski (2010) explains that one could easily argue that women have made impressive gains over the past fifty years. Despite the advancements that women have made in other areas, there is still a shortage of women in the position of superintendent. Bowles (2013) adds that there are many that believe the job of the superintendent is for the male. In a field that has more female teachers, why are there not more female superintendents? Glass et al. (2000) reported that there were 13,728 superintendents in the public schools at that time, and only 1,984 of them were female. What is surprising is that at that time, 72% of the teachers were female. In their study, the *American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study*, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) reported that the number of female superintendents was 24.1%, which represented an increase from the 13.2% figure that they had reported in their 2000 study.

Discussion

Johnson (2011) suggested that we choose the most competent and qualified leaders to move forward and not get distracted by the gender of the individual. If that individual is a woman, the work that is done should be evaluated for its merit instead of being discarded because of the gender of the person doing it. “Women administrators are likely to introduce and support strong programs in staff development, to encourage innovation, and to experiment with instructional approaches” (Grogan & Shakeshaft,

2010, p. 30). These attributes would be beneficial to any entity, but the main focus is providing the best quality education to all students in a public P-12 school system.

The importance of this study was to examine the career histories of women who have enjoyed success as a superintendent, and to yield information that would prove valuable not only to future women superintendents, but to those who prepare and mentor aspiring women superintendents. “Mentorship and sponsorship are crucial for career progression” (Sandberg, 2013, p. 75). In every field or profession, the new employee can always benefit from having a mentor. The mentor provides leadership in a way that is constructive from experience that has been gained by doing the job. In the position of the superintendent, the mentor will have gained knowledge on the best practices for that position, and the insight that would be shared among the superintendents will promote the welfare of the districts that are involved.

Mentoring and sponsoring relationships often form between individuals who have common interests or when the junior members remind the more senior members of themselves. This means that men will often gravitate toward sponsoring younger men, with whom they connect more naturally. (Sandberg, 2013, p. 80) Likewise, if there is a female superintendent who has had to endure difficulties because of gender, that mentor would be able to provide observation to help the mentee to be a successful superintendent.

Women can be successful in the position of superintendent and in leadership. The main focus must be on the achievement of the students. “Women educational leaders often make decisions based on the priorities of student learning” (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010, p. 32). That is the driving force behind a sound institution or P-12 public school

system. The competence of women as leaders helps them to work with staff members in order to gain the desired results.

The women who were most successful in the early days of women's educational leadership were those who provided a narrative, an explanation for why they were leading differently from their male predecessors. These women explained that they understood the command-and-control approach but that they felt it demeaned the professional role of teachers. They taught their staffs that a patriarchal leader diminished followers, reducing them to children. These women expected more from their staffs, and by expecting more, and explaining why, they received it. (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010, p. 96)

The relationship has to be conducive for both the women administrators as well as the staff to ensure success in the district. There cannot be a breakdown in communication because one will not listen to the other. Results will not get accomplished that way. There will only be discord. "The ability to listen is as important as the ability to speak" (Sandberg, 2013, p. 89).

One stereotype that has hindered many women from choosing to aspire to the position of superintendent is that she would not be tough enough. There is a mothering instinct in many women, and some people feel that it would be a handicap when it comes to leadership positions for women.

There has been considerable resistance to examining the relationship between maternal or mothering skills and leadership in schools. These qualities – nurturing, organizing, motivating, and listening – have often been overlooked and

in some cases marginalized and diminished with respect to leadership. (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010, p. 97)

In looking at the aforementioned qualities, they would benefit a P-12 public school system rather than hinder it. They would help the female superintendent (or individual) to be well-rounded to be able to lead the staff and employees and meet their diverse needs. By using effective leadership, she would be able to authentically communicate the desired results that she hoped to accomplish with them. “Authentic communication is not always easy, but it is the basis for successful relationships at home and real effectiveness at work” (Sandberg, 2013, p. 86).

Participant A had different administrators who she worked for communicate to her that she had leadership skills, and she needed to become an administrator. The communication between the leadership and Participant A was such that she trusted her administrators and took their advice. Once the idea was suggested to her, and she acted upon it, she took the necessary path to the position of superintendent and has been in that position for seven years. Participant B even remembers the school board members questioning her ability to “make hard decisions”, but once she communicated to them that she was capable, and they were able to examine her abilities, there was success in the relationship that has led her to be in the position for a number of years. Participant C had a negative experience with communication between her and the school district administrators that she worked for because they did not authentically communicate to her why she was not getting promoted to positions that she believed that she had met the qualifications for the position. The superintendent’s work with the faculty – whether that superintendent is male or female – is the foundation to a strong educational system.

Fear is a barrier or obstacle that hinders some women from trying to attain the position of the superintendent. Coming up the ranks in a school system could provide all of the necessary competencies for the job description, but the outlook of the public could cause a female superintendent to think that she will not be successful, regardless of her qualifications for the position. Participant A and C had no inhibitions about moving up the ranks because of the support and encouragement from the community and school districts. Participant A moved up the ranks in the same school district, so she was very comfortable and without fear of the job duties, as well as in her competencies for the job. Participant C was also from the same school district, and the familiarity helped her to climb up the ranks without anxiety or concern, although she was the first female superintendent that the school district had employed. Being the first female superintendent did cause some unease because she did not have a former female superintendent to seek for advice in issues that she felt were gender related. She had to make her own way. Participants D and E had doubts because their experiences were not as welcoming. Participant D was fearful because of the hesitation from some members in the community who she felt were not used to female leadership. Despite the fact that there was initial doubt, she has remained in the position for eight years. Participant E faced fear because of the difficulty of moving up the ranks to superintendency in her school district. She had to leave in order to feel a sense of security in the superintendent's position.

Fear is at the root of so many of the barriers that women face. Fear of not being liked. Fear of making the wrong choice. Fear of drawing negative attention.

Fear of overreaching. Fear of being judged. Fear of failure. And the holy trinity of fear: the fear of being a bad mother/wife/daughter. (Sandberg, 2013, p. 33)

A female superintendent has to trust in her abilities and not always the people that are around her. Sometimes she can be her own worst enemy. She must move past the fear and move forward to the accomplishments that she has aspired to make. In the study, Participant C was discouraged because she had been passed over for the position of superintendent twice, and she knew that she met the qualifications for the position. Even when she did get the opportunity to become the assistant superintendent, she had to serve as part-time principal as well. This caused her to work a strenuous amount of hours to effectively and efficiently perform the job duties for the two positions. Even though she was not elevated to the position that she aspired to by her supervisor, once she attained the position of superintendent, she held it for twelve years. On the other hand, Participants A, B, and E were confident in their abilities because of favorable people in their districts and communities. Participant A was in a district and community that was very supportive of her, but she did not feel that she had the leadership to be a superintendent. Many of her administrators encouraged her to go forth in the position of superintendent because of the potential that they saw in her. She was not aspiring to be a superintendent because she was comfortable being a teacher and had taught for 24 years, but she credited the encouragement that she experienced to be a motivation for her to aspire for the higher position of superintendent. Participant B was positive about becoming a superintendent because even though her district had never had a female superintendent before, she had two previous superintendents who were both women. From an administrative standpoint, they were the only superintendents who she had

worked under. Because of the experience that she had working with them, she did not doubt that she could accomplish the same goals in becoming a superintendent.

Participant E was not fearful because she moved through the ranks expeditiously to the position of superintendent. As a result of her expedience, she acquired strong support from her superintendent, school board members, fellow superintendents, and colleagues, when she was in a lesser role and as she moved forward.

Limitations

The researcher was the data collection instrument for this study of women superintendents; no one was working with me. Merriam (2009) wrote that the researcher is “the primary instrument of the data collection and analysis” and is “left to rely on his or her own instincts and abilities throughout most of the research effort” (p.52). I have worked hard to report the interview data faithfully.

Reeves (2010) stated, “We all do have biases, so the choice is not the presence or absence of biases but rather the extent to which we admit them forthrightly when the evidence fails to confirm our biases” (p. 76). I must admit that going into the research, there were biases that I held based on my experiences as an educator and as a woman. My bias was that I sensed that women did not move into the position as superintendent as quickly as their male counterparts, even if they had been in the same district for the entirety of their career.

As a public school administrator, I started this research from the point of view of a female assistant principal/principal that may one day seek the position of superintendent. I have worked with many female administrators that have striven to be superintendent, but it seemed as if the glass ceiling was still intact, or one fell victim to

the “good-ol’-boy” system. Regardless of their qualifications, work ethic and habits, or education, it seemed as if women were always being looked over and falling short to their male counterparts. Even with the experience and personal knowledge that I had, I went forward with the research in order to ascertain whether or not this was a south Arkansas problem, or if it existed in other parts of the state as well.

I was disappointed at the lack of participation of some of the female superintendents in the state whom I had tried to contact to set up interviews. I made numerous calls that were not returned, sent numerous emails that went unanswered, and endured broken promises of these who had earlier agreed to participate. However, I continued to wait and remind and resend information to move the interviews along. I ended up only interviewing five of the ten female superintendents who had been identified as having served for five years or longer. Only later, I discovered that the state’s women superintendents have been approached repeatedly of late to participate in research studies because they are so few in number.

This study was to examine the characteristics of female superintendents that helped them to last in the profession for five years or more. I wanted it to be a road map for any of the other female educators in the state to gain insight if aspiring to go into the position of superintendent. I understand that only interviewing half of the senior female superintendents in the state limited the research, and more knowledge would have made the research that much more rich. Nevertheless, I believe that the information that the five participating female superintendents shared is of enormous value to other women educational leaders who aspire to the superintendency.

Delimitations

The participants for this study were female superintendents in Arkansas' P-12 public school districts. Although there were more female superintendents than those selected, the participants had to have served in the position for five years or more. Several attempts were made to interview all of them, but only the participants who responded were interviewed. The data that was used in this study was delimited to include only those superintendents.

Conclusions

The participants of the study were five female superintendents in the state of Arkansas who are employed and working in P-12 public school systems and have knowledge and experience in climbing the educational ladder to the position of the superintendent. In the background of the participants, there was a variety of foundations: some of the participants came from a home of at least one educator, and some came from a home with no educator, but in which their parents stressed the importance of education. Likewise, in their own families, some of the participants had children that followed in their educational footsteps, and some did not.

The biggest influence with the female superintendents was their support systems. While in different districts, almost all of the participants had a supervisor, principal, superintendent, school board, or community members who saw qualities of leadership in them. Once that person or those people invested the time to either encourage them or train them for the position, they felt the desire to move forward in attaining it. As they continued in their leadership endeavors, many of the female superintendents knew that they could advance where they were, or that they would have to go to another district.

Being the first female superintendent in a district, Participant B was really breaking the glass ceiling. Even though this advancement was made for her, she did not seek out other women to consider for the position once she moved on to another school district. She looked for capable individuals, whether male or female, whom she recognized as having the leadership qualities that would be most successful for that district. On the other hand, some of the other participants did seek out other women to encourage into leadership positions that would lead to the position of superintendent. Some of those that were groomed in the leadership area went on to other districts to attain the position.

One potential obstacle for a female superintendent is finding a balance between work and home so that one area is not lacking because of too much time spent in the other area. “Women leaders strive for balance between responsibilities at work and at home” (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010, p. 33). Being a new superintendent is hard to balance because it is a new position that the female leaders had not had the experience of. If she moves to another district, that becomes a greater obstacle because now not only does she have to learn a new job, but she also has to learn a new area, new staff and faculty, new student body, and maybe a new community. The demands of the job require much time to deal with issues, plan for an entire district, and solve problems that arise along the way. These job duties cannot always be completed during the normal work hours of the day. The period after the faculty and staff leave may be the best time to mentally sort through matters to find the ideal solutions. If a female superintendent has a family to take care of (husband and/or children), this task can be even more difficult. What is the cut-off point for work?

Participant A did not believe that she did a good job of keeping a balance between work and her family. She thought that when her children were smaller and at home, she spent more time on school business and not enough time on family. Even though her children became resourceful, she regrets that she did not find a balance early along because she almost burned herself out trying to take care of everything. In the district that she is currently serving in, she has more responsibilities, but she also has more help from her staff. Participant C also noted that she was not proficient in balancing work and home, and she missed important family experiences because she was working. She is regretful and tries to compensate by attending as many events for her grandchildren as she possibly can. Participant D is likewise regretful because she was a single mother when she began, so all of the responsibility of raising her son was on her. She worked hard and had to spend many long nights and weekends working in order to advance to the position of superintendent. Her career has been very fast paced, acquiring the position after only seven years in education. On the contrary, Participant B did not have that problem because by the time she became a superintendent, her children had left home, and her husband was self-employed, so there was plenty of flexibility. They even lived in separate cities, so that she could carry out the professional duties for her job, and they adjusted to the separation quite well and connected whenever necessary because they were not too far apart. Participant E additionally did not experience much imbalance between work and family because she learned early in her career to separate the two, so when she became superintendent, she adjusted well to the scheduling. She also learned how to delegate responsibilities to the appropriate people who were in those positions.

With so many professional demands of time and responsibilities, most female superintendents look for a balance in order to be successful.

For many men, the fundamental assumption is that they can have both a successful professional life and a fulfilling personal life. For many women, the assumption is that trying to do both is difficult at best and impossible at worst. (Sandberg, 2013, p. 32)

Women have the demands of being a good wife and mother. Many times, those responsibilities will be too challenging to be able to fulfil a position as a superintendent because the job requires the same time for daily and extracurricular activities. Sometimes, more time is spent on the job than it is at home. Finding that balance is a key component to success and longevity. A female superintendent must know that the balance is crucial to her well-being.

Implications for Practice

The findings in this study lead to further questioning on the successful impact that the female superintendents have in their public school systems, which could add to their longevity. Additionally, Silverman (2004) pointed out that there continues to be outside barriers to prevent females from becoming superintendent.

By nature, when meeting the demands and obligations for the job, the female superintendent is sometimes stereotyped and said to be a mothering type because she is a woman. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010) stated that the mothering skills most often associated with female leadership are attention to relationships, encouragement, protection, and support. These are key factors when working in a P-12 public school system with children, faculty, and staff. The relationships that are formed are most

important in ensuring the success of the students. Sandberg (2013) explained that professional advancement depends upon people believing that an employer is contributing to good results. As long as the female superintendent uses those “mothering skills” in the advancement of her school district, it is a win-win situation for all that is involved.

The path to the position of the superintendent is a difficult path to acquire with education and experience, and a woman that is seeking that position must understand that she will sometimes have to experience more scrutiny than a man would have to do. Her actions can be misconstrued if she is not hard enough in her decisions, and if she is too hard, she may be seen as acting like a man. “If a woman pushes to get the job done, if she’s highly competent, if she focuses on results rather than pleasing others, she’s acting like a man” (Sandberg, 2013, p. 50).

Participant A had an experience at her school district in missing out on a high school principal position because it was rumored from people in the community that the district needed a male for a high school principal. She did not think that the rumor was meant to be blatantly insulting, but it was rumored just the same. Participant B described that having a mostly male school board could be a hindrance if they feel that a male superintendent would be a better candidate for running a school district. Participant C was reminded of a couple of instances where she was passed over for men, even though she was more qualified than they were by having her doctorate degree and more experience, whereas they only acquired master’s degree with less experience as administrators. After she did attain the assistant superintendent position, she was still required to perform another administrative position simultaneously, which caused her to

feel that she worked more hours doing those two jobs than anyone else in the district. Neither of her predecessors had been required to do this. Additionally, her school board offered her a one year contract her first year as a superintendent, even though she had worked for that same school district for nineteen years. Participant E believed that if she had stayed employed with her former school district, she would not have had the opportunity to become superintendent because she did not think that they were sufficiently progressive thinking to promote a woman as superintendent. Furthermore, she expressed that forming a relationship with a school board that was predominantly male posed itself as a challenge.

After interviewing the participants, I felt that even though they faced difficulties as women superintendents, they focused more on doing a good job in the position rather than on trying to break the glass ceiling.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study was one of many that have been done about female superintendents in Arkansas. Many of the questions that have been asked have been answered in the various research studies, but there are more research questions to be explored. Even more importantly, educational institutions should focus on the research to prepare incoming superintendents of the glass ceiling mentality that could be a hindrance if not addressed early on.

The superintendent mentoring program that has been established by the state has been working to provide mentors for first year superintendents. A question that was inspired from the research is whether or not there is a program similar to the Arkansas superintendent mentoring program that could be used to seek out female leaders who

could become female superintendents in the future. It would be interesting to investigate the effectiveness of the state's Leadership Academy in promoting potential female leaders who might attain the position of the superintendent.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Background Information about family and career preparations.
2. Did the culture of your schools advance or inhibit your leadership opportunities?
3. In your experience, who had the most impact on your development as a leader:
Can you describe briefly how or in what way?
4. How did you receive support and encouragement on the path to the district office?
5. What role do you play in pinpointing women with leadership potential in your district?
6. What obstacle(s), if any, did you face in becoming a superintendent? If so, from where/whom?
7. How would you describe your experience immediately after obtaining the superintendent position?
8. How do you mix family and professional obligations with all of the time restraints?

