

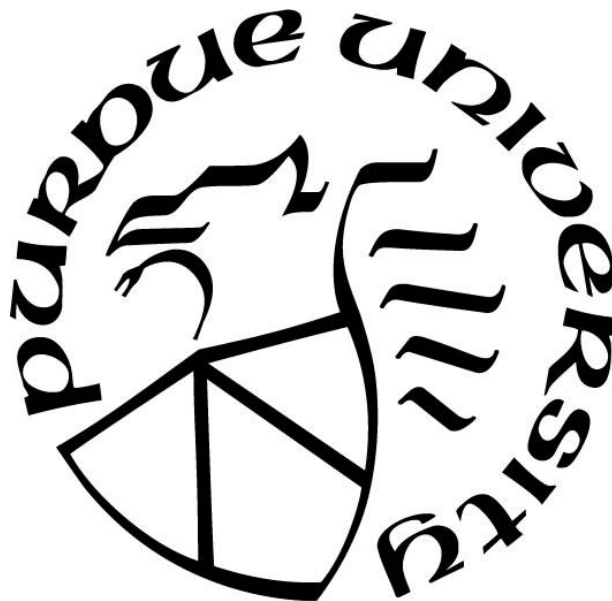
**THE PATH TO ADVANCEMENT:  
THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN EDUCATIONAL LEADERS'  
MOVEMENT INTO SUPERINTENDENCY**

by  
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*This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, James. You have always supported me and my dreams. Through you, I find my strength. This dissertation is also dedicated to my children, Tommy and Audrey. Thank you for always believing in me.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe and understand the experiences of superintendent-certified women educators who reside in Indiana and are seeking the position of superintendent. Using a qualitative descriptive design [QDD] and open-ended, in-depth interviewing, I attempted to understand and describe the absence of women superintendents leading Indiana's public schools. This study allowed me to immerse myself in the lived experiences of current superintendent-certified women educators with the goal of understanding what their job search and leadership experiences meant to them and identify common themes that emerged. The conceptual framework of my qualitative study was based on the ideas that women's pathways to the superintendency are more complex than men's and are influenced by both internal and external factors. Four women who aspire to be a superintendent, reside in the state of Indiana, and hold an educator's license with the content area of District Administrator License: Superintendent were interviewed. Qualitative data was collected through use of synchronous, online, audio and video recorded interviews. The analysis of participants' responses caused five themes to emerge – geography, family or career, mentors, grooming, leadership is “male”/gender bias. The five themes supported the development of three assertions. As women educational leaders continue their path to advancement and pursue the superintendency, maintaining, and preferably improving, their work-life balance is a requirement. Where a superintendent's position is located, and how the location of this position may impact perceptions of balancing both family and a career, impacts women educational leaders' decision making. Women educational leaders' movement into superintendency is greatly influenced by other educational leaders who are in positions above them.



## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Who is teaching and leading our nation's public schools? There is a plethora of women who serve public schools as teachers and principals. In fact, women outnumber men in both professions. According to the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], during the 2017-2018 school year 24% of public-school teachers were male and 76% were female. During this same year, NCES found 46% of public-school principals were male and 54% were female. Based on the percentage of women serving as a teacher or principal, there does not appear to be an issue with gender equity. Women are teaching in classrooms and leading our nation's public schools.

Who is serving in the top school leadership position of our nation's public schools? Based on women being the dominant gender of the K-12 teacher and principal workforce, we would expect to see women serving in these top school leadership positions in the same way. According to the American Association of School Administrators [AASA] decennial studies, the percentage of female superintendents across the nation over the last 30 years - 13.2% (2000) 24.1% (2010) and 26.68% (2020). Women continue to be disproportionally represented in the top school leadership position, superintendent.

How do women and men's participation in the education workforce compare to the overall labor market? According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], in 2018, 57.1% of all women participate in the labor force compared to 69.1% of men. Despite men participating more than women, a significant number of women continue to be involved in the labor market.

Who is serving in the top leadership positions of our nation's labor market? Whether holding the top K-12 school leadership position or top positions in other professions, similar statistics are consistent for women across the United States. Women are substantially behind men in holding top executive offices. According to the Center for American Progress [CAP] (2018), 5%

of Fortune 500 CEO's and 7% of Fortune 100 companies top executives are women. In 2019, Catalyst reported that women made up 44.7% of Standard and Poor's [S&P's] total employees but only 5.8% were CEOs.

Women are underrepresented in top leadership positions at colleges and universities despite earning more doctorate degrees (53%) during the 2016-2017 school year than men. CAP (2018) reports that 32% of full professors and 30% of college professors are women. Even though more women have been awarded degrees at the highest academic level, this does not appear to impact their presence in top positions in higher education.

Many women hold jobs in both the legal and medical fields. CAP (2018) found 45% of legal associates and 40% of physicians and surgeons are women. Comparing this to 19% of women who represent legal equity partners and 16% of permanent medical school deans is astounding. Women's presence in the legal and medical fields does not guarantee equal representation in top positions.

Even in United States politics, women fail to make gains in representing top positions. According to the Center for American Women and Politics, in 2020 nine women served as governors. Many of the largest states, such as California and New York, have never had a woman governor. In addition to this stunning fact, more than 20 states have never had a women governor. The United States government has been led by 46 Presidents. Over 200 years ago, the first President was elected in 1789. Despite the breakthroughs women have made over the years in politics, they have been unsuccessful in electing a woman to the top position, President. The 2021 elections are the first time a woman has served in one of the top two leadership positions in our country, Vice President. Women obtaining these top leadership positions mirror that of our nation's public schools.

Superintendent-certified women educators seeking the top K-12 school leadership position encounter a diverse range of experiences as they navigate through the superintendent search and selection process. Their unique experiences provide useful knowledge to other women in the field who are seeking this same position. Understanding how gender inequity affects their experiences, as well as other potential barriers that women may face and men do not, will assist with inspiring other women educators to pursue the role of superintendent.

How women view their own educational leadership experience, and how they feel school boards or search firms view it, may reveal why women apply or do not apply for desired superintendent positions. Better understanding women's self-efficacy related to leadership experience, and how it impacts the attainment of the position of superintendent, can assist in altering individual beliefs and increase the pool of women candidates for the job. More women need to be inspired to lead in education and serve in the top spot.

This study is based on a qualitative descriptive study which examines women educators' experiences to the superintendency. Four women educators, with superintendent certification from Indiana, who want to obtain the top K-12 school leadership position, superintendent, participated in this study. Data was collected through use of open-ended, in-depth interviews.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The number of women in top leadership positions, both in the field of education and in the entire labor market, is alarming. Why more women are not present in these top spots, and the enormous gap that exists with only a small number of women holding these positions, seeks to be understood. Why are women significantly behind men in representing these top leadership positions? For this reason, it is important to understand the reasons why women are limited in their opportunities to serve in top positions. Are these opportunities limited based on gender? Are

women being treated unfairly or are opportunities being suppressed? It is of utmost importance to address the gender equity gap that exists. A lack of equity and access, and a need to increase the number of women serving in the top school leadership position, requires our attention. By addressing this problem, women in top leadership positions will be viewed as the norm rather than the exception.

When reviewing national data on the characteristics of school superintendents, it is evident that gender inequality exists. A national survey conducted in 2016 by the AASA found “Women make up 76 percent of teachers, 52 percent of principals, and 78 percent of central-office administrators. A mid-decade survey conducted by the NCES, Association for Supervision, Curriculum, and Development [ASCD], and AASA revealed results from the 2011-2012 school year that indicate a K-12 “glass ceiling” exists with women outnumbering men in every level of public-school positions except the superintendent. These positions include teachers, principals, and central office administrators. Yet they account for less than a quarter of all superintendents.” (Superville, 2016). Similarly, the Indiana Department of Education [IDOE] 2019-2020 school directory reports 31% of superintendents are women.

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights enforces Title IX, which protects people from discrimination based on sex. All public schools receive federal funds, which requires them to abide by this statute. One key area included within this statute is employment. With women accounting for less than one-third of all superintendent positions both nationally and in the state of Indiana, compliance with the law and how it pertains to women educators seeking top K-12 school leadership positions, needs to be further examined. How our nation’s public schools continue to ensure well-qualified women have equal opportunity to the position of superintendent is of utmost importance.

## **Women's Rights: A Historical Perspective**

The United States of America has a reputation of providing freedom and opportunities for all. To support this idea, the Declaration of Independence declared that “All men are created equal.” History proves that men, specifically white men, were prioritized by being given privileges that were granted by the Constitution. In the past, the Constitution, supreme law of the United States of American, did not include women as citizens or provide rights, such as voting or the ability to serve in the top position of President. By understanding the history of how women were guaranteed rights in the United States, we can identify areas of advancement but also recognize the ongoing challenges women continue to face.

When we learn about history of women, it is important to note that this history often centers on the experiences of White women. Women of color occupy a different space when looking at laws, policies, and practices that influence women's history. Given that my participants are White women, this history does apply to them, and I have just used “women” in the literature review. However, I acknowledge that this history marginalizes women of color. For a more complete history of women's rights, it is important to consult sources on Black<sup>1</sup>, Indian, and Alaskan Native women<sup>2</sup>.

### **Women's Experiences in the Legal System**

The original Constitution and Bill of Rights did not include the right to vote. Who can vote in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? United States Citizens who are 18 years old on or before Election Day are given the right to vote. Americans must also meet their state's residency requirements and

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<sup>1</sup> *The African-American Mosaic: A Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of Black History and Culture* (1993)

<sup>2</sup> *Many Nations: A Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of Indian and Alaska Native Peoples of the United States* (1996)

be registered to vote by each state's voter registration deadline (USAGov, 2020, "Who Can and Can't Vote in U.S. Elections."). Current voters in America are not excluded by sex. However, women have only been included as voters for about the last 100 years.

In 1769, women were not seen as individuals when they chose to enter a marriage. Both the husband and wife became one, which allowed for the husband to serve as a representative on behalf of both of them. While married, a woman did not have the same legal rights that her husband did, which included the right to vote. Almost ten years later in 1777, all women whether married or not, lost the right to vote in any state. A clear division between men and women and the right to vote was officially decided through state laws. In 1866, almost 100 years after all states denied women's right to vote, the Constitution, through the passing of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment, defined "citizens" and "voters" as male. (National Women's History Alliance, 2019, "Timeline of Legal History Of Women in the United States").

Political equality on the right to vote was addressed in the passing of both the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> amendments of the Constitution. The 15<sup>th</sup> amendment ensured citizens in every state the right to vote by not denying it on account of race. (National Constitution Center, 2021, "The Fifteenth Amendment") Due to women not being included in this amendment, states continued to exclude women's right to vote. The U.S. Supreme Court *Minor v Happersett*, 88 U.S. 162 (1875) upheld women as "persons" but encompassed them in a separate category of nonvoting citizens. It wasn't until 1890 that the first state, Wyoming, allowed women the right to vote in all elections. Thirty more years would pass before the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment guaranteed no citizen could be denied the right to vote based on sex. (National Women's History Alliance, 2019, "Timeline of Legal History Of Women in the United States").

The rights of citizens in the United States of America did not originally include women. Most rights, including the right to vote, were granted exclusively to white men. Excluding women from this right demonstrated how men, and being male, was superior in the power of decision making across a nation. With women only recently being included in the nation's right to vote, their voices and opinions are only beginning to be heard.

Throughout the United States of America, individual states were able to pass laws pertaining to women's rights that were independent from each other. A woman's geographic location, specifically the state she resided in, determined which rights she had. Marital status also impacted the legal status of women. Unmarried women had the right to live anywhere, work in occupations not granted exclusively to men based on license or degree and enter into contracts. Married women were not accounted for as individuals and instead were viewed as "one" with their husband. Husbands were in control of all assets and decisions, which did not allow for women to own property (The Glider Lehrman Institute of American History, 2009-2019, "The Legal Status of Women 1776-1830").

It was not until 1839 that the first state, Mississippi, granted women the right to own property in their own name. However, this right was only granted with a husband's permission. In 1848, the Declaration of Sentiments was signed by both men and women with the goal of ending discrimination against all women. The signing of this document was significant in helping to bring equality to women's rights. However, it wasn't until 1900 that married women were granted some control of their property and earnings in all states (National Women's History Alliance, 2019, "Timeline of Legal History Of Women in the United States").

## **Women in the Workforce**

According to the BLS (2018), 57.1% of women participate in the labor force compared to 69.1% of men. The largest number of women participating in the labor force was 60% in 1999. Over the past 100 years, there is evidence that women have always participated in the labor force. However, their participation has been ever-changing. According to Goldin (2006) women's participation in the labor force can be described in phases, from evolutionary to revolutionary. The changes that occurred throughout the history of women in the workforce demonstrate the impact made to present day decision-making, static versus dynamic, and identity, job versus career. The shift in women becoming more active versus passive in the household and labor force is evident.

Goldin (2006) identifies Phase I occurring from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1920 when single, uneducated, poor women entered the workforce. Women in the workforce participated in manufacturing or service jobs that were often viewed as dirty, dangerous, and required long hours. If a woman who was working became married, she exited the workforce due to the expectation of married women staying home to oversee household responsibilities. Beginning in 1910, more women began serving as teachers and clerical workers which caused growth in the labor market.

According to the United States Department of Labor [DOL] the top two occupations in 1920 for employing women were "other domestic and personal service" and "teacher." Overall, women made up about 20% of the labor force. During this time, the DOL established the Women's Bureau. This federal agency was established to create standards and policies for women on issues where inequities existed, such as wages and working hours. The Women's Bureau continues to operate today with the power and authority to investigate and report all matters to the DOL related to the welfare of women in industry.

Golden (2006) recognizes Phase II occurring from the 1930's to the 1950's when married women's participation in the workforce doubled due to a demand for more office workers. More



women became educated and attended high school. Clerical positions were abundant and offered more jobs to women. Despite this, women's participation in the workforce was negatively impacted by the amount of salary her husband made. The more money men earned the less women needed to work outside of the home. Marriage bars, which prohibited the hiring of married women in school districts and offices, disappeared by the early 1940's. The addition of part-time work in the 1940's allowed women more flexibility in participation and work hours.

According to the DOL, the top two occupations in 1940 for employing women were "operatives and "private household workers." Overall, women made up about 24% of the labor force. During this time the Women's Bureau focused on modifying state labor laws surrounding employment in war industries, such as aircraft production.

Golden (2006) finds Phase III occurred from 1950 to the mid to late 1970's when married women in the workforce grew even when a husband's income increased. The disappearance of marriage bars, acceptance of married women participating in the workforce, and the availability of part-time work that allowed women to work fewer than 35 hours per week, all contributed to an overall increase in the number of women working. Even though more women were participating in the workforce, when compared to men, they were the secondary earners in households and had small increases in wages. At this time women did not view work as something long term, like a career. They also did not pursue college with the goal of enhancing their education but rather as a mean to meet a spouse.

According to the DOL, the top two occupations in 1960 for employing women were "clerks and "salesmen and salesclerks." Overall, women made up about 32% of the labor force. During this time, the Women's Bureau focused on women college graduates. The agency worked hard to create programs and policies that increased women's participation in daily life, which resulted in

substantial changes, such as the passing of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Golden (2006) identified Phase IV began in the late 1970's and carries into present day. It is important to note the change in the participation of women in the workforce over the past 100 years. According to the DOL, this change from Phase I - 20% (1920), to the beginning of Phase IV - 37.5% (1970), to the present - 57.1% (2020). Golden feels the upward trend in women's workforce participation does not account for other indicators that demonstrate a social and economic revolution occurred. The changes of the labor force of the twentieth century prove women transformed from family and household centered to career oriented. Women are now planning and creating their own identity.

Golden (2006) described women planning for their future by viewing jobs as careers. Women seek their own identifies when they strive to make a name for themselves before considering taking the name of another. Looking toward the future causes women to take more college preparation courses, attend college, and graduate. According to the BLS, women ages 25 and older account for more than half (50.2%) of the college educated workforce. Striving to fulfill an overall satisfaction in life is at the essence of the change in women's participation in the labor force of the twentieth century.

Throughout history, women in the workplace have been at a severe disadvantage due to discrimination against working women. This discrimination includes differences in hiring and promoting women, gender wage gap, and a lack of government policies to ensure workplaces are supportive of working women. By better understanding the labor laws that focus on improving women's rights, we can learn of successes but also the challenges that still exist for women in their ongoing struggle for equity in the workplace.

Protection against wage discrimination based on sex is covered under the Equal Pay Act [EPA] of 1963. The DOL defines “equal” to not be identical in job duties or title. However, they must be similar enough in skill, effort, responsibility, and working conditions. All compensation is included as “pay” and may not be unequal in wages between men and women. Paying some workers lower than others solely on the basis of sex is illegal (DOL, 2021).

Despite efforts to reduce compensation discrimination, the United States Census Bureau [USCB] reports the gender pay gap grows larger between women and men based on the more education women receive. When comparing women and men with a bachelor’s degree, women earn 74 cents for every dollar men make. This may not appear significant until women’s earnings are compared to men who are working without college degrees who earn 78 cents for every dollar (USCB, 2019).

The 14<sup>th</sup> amendment sought to give all Americans the right to life, liberty, property, and equal protection of the laws. This statement of equality did not clearly define who, beyond men, were guaranteed these rights and protections so additional laws were created. According to the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC] the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended segregation and employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 enforces the constitutional right to vote and prevents discrimination, including people with disabilities. Title VII protected women from sex discrimination and banned jobs previously designed to only include men. Despite laws created to provide equal rights to Americans in the workforce, a greater percentage of men (69.1%) continue to participate more than women (57.1%) (USBLS, 2018).

Title IX, which is enforced by the Office of Civil Rights [OCR] protects individuals from being discriminated against on the basis of sex in all areas of education. This law applies to any

educational program or activity that receives federal education funds. Additionally, Title IX has increased the number of women who participate in athletic programs due to them being encompassed in the term “educational programs and activities” (USDOE, 2015).

### **Supreme Court Decisions**

During the 1970’s the first violations to both the Equal Pay Act and Title VII were found due to women being treated differently than men. Whether women were pregnant or had children contributed to how they were viewed in the workplace. Gender was also found to be the sole reason why some women were being paid less than men when participating in the same work.

Perhaps the most well-known Supreme Court case to be decided was women’s right to privacy and abortion (*Roe v. Wade*, 1973). This decision found women to have a “fundamental right to an abortion and that a state could not interfere. Women being granted the highest level of constitutional protection to make their own decisions regarding pregnancy was a monumental decision in supporting women’s rights.

Women seeking to participate in the workforce were not hired and discriminated against due to having young children (*Phillips v. Martin Marietta*, 1971). This act of discrimination violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act due to women being treated differently than men solely based on the reason of having children. A National Education Association Survey in 1970 found most school districts enforced policies that terminated teachers or forced them to take unpaid leave. These policies also included no guarantee that a teacher would get her job back after giving birth. Additional violations were found when women were required to take unpaid leave from work during their pregnancy. Based on a woman being pregnant, it was determined she could no longer work (*Cleveland Board of Education v. LaFleur*, 1974). In this same decision, the court further

protected women's right to return to work after giving birth. It was found to be unconstitutional to require women to not return to work until their child was three months old.

Women continued to seek equal rights when being turned away from unemployment benefits before and after birth (*Turner v. Department of Employment Security*, 1975). Women also sought the ability to return to their jobs at the current level they left to take leave. Women being demoted while on pregnancy leave was also found to be a violation of Title VII (*Nashville Gas Co. v. Satty*, 1978).

When it was determined that wage differences occurred between women and men performing the same work, the court found a violation of the Equal Pay Act (*Corning Glass Works v. Brennan*, 1974). This is the first time the Court considered a claim of an employer paying women differently than men. This decision created hope that future employers would treat men and women equally when paying their employees. However, women still do not achieve equal pay when compared to men.

During the 1980's women continued to be treated unequally when compared to men. Women began to appear on the same playing field as men when making decisions, being hired, and provided benefits. Most notably, a women's work environment could be determined "hostile" if a woman was discriminated against based on sex (*Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson*, 1986).

When a husband sought to get rid of a property that he owned with his wife, it was found to be unconstitutional for him to do this without her being in agreement (*Kirchberg v. Feenstra*, 1981). By providing husbands with more, or exclusive rights to decisions regarding property ownership, this was found to violate women's constitutional rights under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment's Equal Protection Clause.

Title VII was further defined and upheld when women sought fair and equal access to the same benefits offered to men. When a state found women's choices of employer provided benefits to be valued lower than men's, it was found to violate women's rights (*Arizona Governing Committee v. Norris*, 1983).

To increase the number of women underrepresented in traditionally sex-segregated jobs, it was found that women could be promoted to a position over a man. Even if proof of achievement, such as a test score, supported the hiring of the man over a woman, she could still be given the job due to the reason of trying to fix this issue. This decision supported by Title VII allowed an employer to take sex into account when hiring and seeking to desegregate positions that favored one sex over another (*Johnson v. Transportation Agency, Santa Clara*, 1987).

During the 1990's, Title IX extended protection to students when being harassed at school. States were given the right to evaluate restrictions on abortion. Women were provided equal opportunities to the same education as men and needed less burden of proof when claiming sex discrimination at the workplace.

Title IX was extended beyond the traditional work environment of adults and allowed students to seek claims when sexually harassed and abused by school staff. Monetary damages were awarded when the court found no action was taken to stop abuse of a student. (*Franklin v. Gwinnet County Public Schools*, 1992). Additionally, when a school is aware of sexual harassment is taking place by a teacher to a student they must take corrective action of the conduct (*Gebser v. Lago Vista Independent School District*, 1998).

Restrictions on the ruling of *Roe v. Wade* were sought, including spousal notification to have an abortion. The court replaced *Roe* with "undue burden" in order for states to evaluate restrictions and ensure no substantial obstacle prevented a woman from obtaining an abortion

(*Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, 1992). This ruling upheld women's rights in making decisions regarding pregnancy.

Regarding equal access to educational opportunities, a court found women were discriminated against by a policy that prevented them from attending the same school that men were only allowed into. Despite an equivalent program created to provide equal educational opportunity to women, they were seen as being discriminated against (*United States v. Virginia*, 1996). Women have the right to the same schooling choices and opportunities that men do.

When women claimed sex discrimination at the workplace, the burden of proof was redefined to show the employer acted with malice or with reckless indifference. No longer were women required to prove the employer's conduct was outrageous to be granted punitive damages (*Kolstad v. American Dental Association*, 1999). By decreasing the requirements, more women could claim sex discrimination without worry of not being able to meet prior standards of the burden of proof.

During the 2000's, women encountered discrimination in employment based on their age, sexual harassment by employees, and discrimination in pay. Also, compensation to women for discrimination was challenged to increase the amount of relief awarded. Despite gains made prior to the 2000's in increasing gender equality in the workplace, discrimination against women continued to exist.

When women are discriminated against for employment and no reason other than age is found to be true, the court found this violates the Age Discrimination in Employment Act [ADEA] (*Reeves v. Sanderson Plumbing Products*, 2000). When women are in a supervisory position and determined to have been sexually harassed by employees, the courts found "front pay" versus compensatory damages is unconstitutional. Employment discrimination under Title VII allows for

compensatory damages to not be capped in relief that is awarded (*Pollard v. E.I. Dupont Nemours Co.*, 2001).

In order to protect the right of someone to make a discrimination claim against their employer, the court found that indefinite suspension without pay is unconstitutional. Under Title VII this is viewed as illegal retaliation (*Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway Co. v. White*, 2006) The court sought to remedy a delay between when a discrimination violation occurred and when a claim was filed. A woman in a supervisory position who was compensated less than men caused the President to take action and extend the time someone can file a claim of discrimination to 180 days after their last paycheck by passing the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act (*Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire and Rubber*, 2007).

During the 2010's the courts further defined who is considered a supervisor in sexual harassment cases and implementation of the same job accommodations for pregnant and non-pregnant workers. The court further defined a "supervisor" in sexual harassment under Title VII. A supervisor is said to be someone who hires, fires, or fails to promote an employee. The supervisor must be able to make a tangible employment action against an employee in order to be considered a supervisor (*Vance v. Ball State University*, 2013).

The court found that women who are pregnant should be provided the same on the job accommodations as other employees who are not pregnant. If pregnant employees are similar in their ability or inability to work, employers should provide the same job accommodations. This protection for pregnant women is found under the Pregnancy Discrimination Act [PDA]. (*Young v. Parcel Service*, 2015).



### **Significance of the Study**

Statistics prove that women are underrepresented in top leadership positions throughout the country. This data supports a problem for women who are planning to seek top leadership positions in their careers. Analyzing the personal stories of women educational leaders, who possess similar qualifications and work experience as men, will assist us in confronting and overcoming barriers to the development of their careers. Whether these barriers are external, internal, or a combination of both can provide useful information on how to guide women on how to take charge of their own growth and success.

K-12 school boards and search firms are tasked with the responsibility of recruiting and hiring outstanding candidates to fill the top school leadership position, superintendent. The ideal candidate must fulfill the expectations of not only the school board but also the entire school community. The search and selection process of school boards and search firms varies significantly, which is why studying the experiences of women educators applying and interviewing for the superintendency is desired. It is imperative to examine the experiences into superintendency to assist women educators in identifying desired criteria and preferences that are shared among stakeholders.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study is to focus on the lived experiences of superintendent-certified women educators who reside in Indiana and are seeking a superintendent position. I seek to better understand women educational leaders' pathways, and internal and external factors that may influence them. Their experiences and perceptions of the job search process allows me to explore why women are underrepresented in this top school leadership position.

Previous studies sought to understand women's aspirations (Katz, 2006; Kowalski et. al, 2011) and preparedness (Brunner & Kim, 2010) for the position of superintendency. Additional studies shared preferred career pathways for educators acquiring the superintendency, which differs by gender (Davis & Bowers, 2019) and how unique backgrounds, such as special education, may assist in obtaining these positions (Grossane & Tatum, 2019). Recent research has found gender biases continue to be prevalent for women superintendents (Bernal et. al, 2017). Despite previous studies examining women and educational leadership, little focus has been on investigating why women educators are far less likely than men to become superintendents. It is important to understand how to take action on breaking down barriers that stand in the way of women obtaining the top school leadership position, superintendent. This gap in the field of educational leadership creates a need to examine the unique experiences of women and their movement into the superintendency.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions addressed in this study are:

1. How do superintendent-certified women educators perceive or make meaning of the superintendent job search process?
2. How do superintendent-certified women educators describe the role of leadership experience in the superintendent job search process?

### **Limitations of the Study**

The delimitations of my research study were due to the boundaries I established. The focus of my study was on participants who are superintendent-certified women who reside in the state of Indiana and are seeking the top school leadership position, superintendent. Not all

superintendent-certified women who reside in Indiana and are seeking the superintendency are represented in this study. The scope of my research study was also a delimitation. By narrowing down the area in which I explored, women's experiences during the superintendent job search process, I further defined the parameters of this study. Further limitations of my research study include my own potential biases, which may impact the analysis of my research findings. This limitation exists due to me being a superintendent-certified woman who resides in the state of Indiana and may potentially seek the top school leadership position, superintendent, in the future.

### **Summary**

This chapter has provided an overview of this study. Women and leadership, and their lack of presence in top positions throughout our country, identifies a significant problem that has yet to be overcome. In addition to seeking to understand the barriers and obstacles women face when aspiring to top school leadership positions, how to confront them and achieve gender equity is desired.

This study sought to understand the experiences of superintendent-certified women educators during the superintendent job search process. Due to women continuing to be underrepresented in this top school leadership position, superintendent, by better understanding the lived experiences of women who aspire to these positions, the future can be paved for generations of women leaders. Ultimately, the goal is for all women in the field of education to be inspired to lead, and see themselves serving in any position, including the top spot.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study is to better understand how women educational leaders access the top school leadership position, superintendent. By exploring how women leaders overcome barriers and grow their careers, we can assist women who aspire to acquire these positions. I framed my data collection and analysis on my research questions which sought to understand women's experiences in the superintendent job search process. In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature, which identifies my conceptual framework. Women's pathways to the superintendency are more complex than men's and are influenced by both internal and external factors.

### **Women's Pathways**

According to the IDOE, to hold a license with the content area District Level Administrator, and serve in the top school leadership position, superintendent, you must be able to meet the following requirements – pass an approved content licensure exam, complete an Ed.S. degree or higher, complete an approved district administrator superintendent program, hold a professional educator's license, and have a minimum of two years of experience as a teacher. Both men and women seeking this license in the state of Indiana are expected to meet these same requirements. Looking beyond the requirements to hold a District Level Administrator license, men and women seeking the superintendency vary in their career pathways. When analyzing the common career pathways of educational leaders prior to obtaining their first superintendency, men and women differ. Women have more complex versus direct pathways to the superintendency.

## **Superintendent Preparedness**

Credentials, experience, knowledge, and skills are considered when administrators aspire to obtain the top school leadership position, superintendent. It is important to understand how an educational leader's preparedness may influence their ability to obtain this position. Preparedness does not differ by gender and is important to consider when identifying who is qualified to fill potential openings.

When analyzing formal preparedness, Brunner and Kim (2010) found that about half of educational leaders seeking superintendent certification are women. Women are equally pursuing advanced degrees, such as specialist or doctoral. An overwhelming number of women serving in central office positions (93.5%) have already obtained or are currently working on superintendent certification. Even though we have enough data to support an equal number of women earning superintendent credentials as men, we are lacking information regarding how many women are simultaneously earning superintendent certification and a doctoral degree.

Davis and Bowers (2019) found doctoral degree holders are more represented among new superintendents than among educators obtaining certification. Women holding advanced degrees are viewed at an advantage when seeking the superintendency. Whether women educational leaders hold a doctoral degree when seeking a position as superintendent may increase their chances of obtaining the top school leadership position when compared to other potential candidates who do not hold this same advanced degree.

Regardless of whether women hold required credentials for the superintendency, it is also important to determine how many aspire to serve in this role. Approximately 40 percent of women who hold a central office leadership position desire to be a superintendent (American Association of School Administrators [AASA], 2007). When comparing this statistic to the percentage of

women who have already obtained or are currently working on their certification, it is evident there are other reasons why more women are not becoming superintendents.

Experience in business management is a trait often sought in superintendents. The financial experience, or lack thereof, of an educational leader may influence whether they appear qualified for a position. Current superintendents' beliefs about why they were hired often do not include this reason. In fact, women superintendents find dissatisfaction with the part of their job that requires them to manage finances. The uncertainty of state funding and how it impacts their districts while requiring them to work with the local government is frustrating. When viewing this role and responsibility, overseeing finances, they feel it takes away from students and instead shifts more focus on politics (Bollinger & Grady, 2018). Still women continue to believe that school boards are seeking leaders with financial backgrounds and experience and that without it, they are at a disadvantage during the hiring process (Munoz et. al, 2014a).

Not only do women believe they are hired to be superintendents based on specific desired requirements, they also feel their knowledge and skills contribute to these decisions as well. Connell et. al (2015) found current and former women superintendents believe their knowledge of instructional leadership, along with their ability to collaborate with and support teachers, is important in being able to positively impact student achievement. Additionally, relationship building with employees, board members, and the community assists in establishing trust and accomplishing shared goals. The ability to solve problems and find effective solutions was also seen as advantageous to the position by assisting in the management of legal issues and student matters.

Grossane and Tatum (2019) found that woman who served as special educator directors were able to acquire skills that were transferable to the obtainment of the position of superintendent.

The requirements of the position as special education director sometimes included additional responsibilities, such as overseeing transportation or assisting with hiring and human resources. These opportunities, which extended beyond their regular job responsibilities, allowed women to gain experience required of other district level positions. Additionally, political insight was developed through the experiences special educator directors had with regular and direct interactions, with parents, community members, and outside agencies. The ability to interact with a variety of stakeholders mirrors what is traditionally expected of most superintendents.

On the contrary, Connell et. al (2015) found there are knowledge and skills that women feel are required of a superintendent they did not possess when hired and first serving in these positions. Board governance, interacting with and managing issues of a school board, was not something both current and former women superintendents felt prepared to handle. Learning how to work with school boards was acquired through on the job training. School construction and financing, the addition or improvement of facilities, was also an area most women did not feel prepared for. Leading the process of bidding for design and construction services was viewed as a challenge they had to overcome. Working through these gaps in knowledge and skills was accomplished through peer networks, in which women superintendents were able to seek support and be provided with resources.

### **Common Pathways**

When working toward the superintendency, understanding the common career path can be advantageous in acquiring this position. Analyzing the career paths of both women and men administrators can allow us to identify shared patterns and beliefs while also recognizing differences. In comparison, women tend to have a more complex career path which involves acquiring more positions prior to entering the superintendency.

According to Brunner and Kim (2009) women seek the same educational leadership opportunities that men do. However, women's educational work experience differs greatly than men by levels, elementary versus secondary. Potential leadership roles within these different levels can also limit or increase opportunities. Most women (58.2%) began their educational careers at the elementary level but most women superintendents (65.3%) have experience at the secondary level (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Comparing the leadership roles available for teachers at each level, it is evident that working at the secondary level provides more opportunities, such as assistant principal and department chairs. An additional role most often held by males in secondary teaching positions, coaching, further develops their career towards positions in educational leadership. 63% of male superintendents have had coaching experience prior to acquiring their positions (Brunner & Kim, 2009).

In the same way, Brunner and Kim (2010) studied educational leaders' work experience and found it includes more than identifying which levels they have experience working with. Analyzing pathways from entry to acquiring superintendency allows educational leaders to see how some pathways lead more directly to the position than others. Pathways for women include additional roles that most men do not obtain, such as director or coordinator. These additional roles, which are most often held by women, appear to provide additional barriers to acquiring the superintendency. If men are able to bypass these roles due to other roles they are obtaining, then I feel women do not have equal opportunity in accessing the top school leadership position of superintendent.

Davis and Bowers (2019) found preferred characteristics and pathways of superintendent-certified educators seeking their first superintendency. They found educational leaders who are employed in high school or district-level roles at the time of becoming superintendent-certified,



have greater representation among those entering the superintendency (63.4%). It was also found that most superintendent-certified educators enter the superintendency during the academic year immediately following when they received their certification. The most common pathway for first time superintendents was becoming superintendent-certified while in the principalship and then being hired out of that same position and into the superintendency (36.94%). When analyzing pathways by gender, women start and stay within the assistant superintendency (23.83%), closely followed by starting and staying with the principalship (22.2%). The most common pathway for men is earning their superintendent-certification during the principalship and being hired out of this position directly into the superintendency (41.32%).

Alternatively, Grossane and Tatum (2019) explored how current women superintendents with prior experience in special education felt about the attainment of the superintendency. Their career pathways and educational attainment prior to entering the superintendency were almost identical. All women had earned their doctoral degrees and served as assistant superintendents immediately prior to entering the position of superintendent. In addition to this, all women previously served in leadership positions in the field of special education. Their unique pathway, which may be viewed as more direct versus complex when compared to women serving as superintendents without a special education background, allowed them to acquire knowledge and skills they felt were needed to serve in this top leadership spot. They believed relationship building within the school and community, as well as developing innovative strategies and techniques to promote student learning, assisted in the preparation for them to serve in the role of superintendent.

Munoz et al. (2014b) conducted a study on school central office leaders who reside in Texas to better understand their career aspirations. They found women do not apply and interview for the position of superintendent as many times as men do. Surprisingly, over half of

superintendent certified women have never applied for a position of superintendent compared to less than a quarter of superintendent certified men. Of superintendent certified women who applied for a position of superintendent, approximately 35% have participated in at least one interview compared to approximately 75% of superintendent certified men. Accordingly, the success rate of attaining the position of superintendent is almost 40% greater for men.

Ultimately, the experiences of administrators who seek superintendency do make a difference in who is preferred to fill these roles. The identified pathway for hiring and promoting to superintendent is - secondary school teacher, assistant principal/department head, and secondary school principal/central office position (Brunner & Kim, 2009). Due to more men than women moving through this same pathway, gender and its effect on leadership opportunities is limited. Unless the normal pathway begins to include more women working in secondary education, or they approach their work in a different direction, there will continue to be unequal opportunities for women to become superintendents.

### **Internal Factors**

Women educational leaders face challenges and obstacles that may cause them to doubt their abilities or success. Whether these challenges and obstacles are self-imposed can be further explored by examining Imposter Phenomenon, family and career choices, and how leadership is “male.” When seeking to better understand women’s movement into the superintendency, it is important to consider their unique feelings and experiences to determine if the cause is a personal challenge or a systemic problem. By identifying the causes of why some women educational leaders’ pathways may be influenced by internal factors, we can attempt to find solutions to increase the number of women pursuing and obtaining the top school leadership position, superintendent.

## **Imposter Phenomenon**

Throughout women educational leaders' careers, it is likely they may question their abilities, despite evidence of success. The cause of this doubt may be attributed to women feeling like they are experiencing Imposter Phenomenon [IP], which not only causes doubt of their abilities but also fear of being found out by others to be a fraud. This feeling of not belonging creates self-doubt. At the same time, the question of whether this problem exists due to labeling women as having IP, or whether workplace culture and gender bias are to blame, continues to be debated. I will provide an overview of the history of IP, ideas and strategies on how to overcome IP, and research that challenges its existence.

The term Imposter Phenomenon [IP] was first used by Clance and Imes (1978) to describe women who appear successful on the outside but never feel successful on the inside. Outside success can be observed in high achieving women who have earned advanced degrees, acquired leadership positions, received awards, and are recognized by colleagues. Yet, this objective evidence does not alter women's feelings that they are "imposters" and have fooled others into believing they are intelligent. Women who identify with IP feel their success has been obtained through accident, luck, or an overestimation of their true abilities. This lack of "true" success is threatened and causes women with IP to be anxious in wondering when they will be discovered as a "phony." In addition to the anxiety that most women experience, other symptoms attributed to IP include depression, frustration, lack of self-confidence, and an inability to meet self-imposed standards.

Clance and Imes (1978) found men and women differ in how they view the attainment of their successes in life. Men attribute their success to their abilities, which are consistent and reliable. On the other hand, women attach their success to luck or effort. At the same time, men link their failure to the difficulty of the task or luck while women connect failure to their lack of abilities. IP

identifies a need for women to find explanations for their success other than luck or effort. Despite women's repeated successes, they continue to not be able to tie their accomplishments to their intelligence. High achieving women who experience IP experience long-term, deep embedded beliefs of inadequacy and eventual failure.

Similarly, Hawley (2019) found imposter attitudes are developed from negative past-directed, future-directed, and competence-directed experiences and beliefs. A negative attitude toward competence, in conjunction with the fear of being "found out," are at the core of how people who experience IP feel about their success and achievement. People who experience IP lack a belief in their own adequacy, but this belief is mistaken and inappropriate. These mistaken and inappropriate beliefs confirm the existence of an "imposter."

Slank (2019) used statements from IP scales to classify beliefs into three groups – *talent*, *fit*, and *desert*. When considering *talent*, people believe their success is based on luck and that how others view them, especially superiors, is more talented than what they really are. Beliefs surrounding *fit* are people fearing the idea of being found to be an "imposter" and not belonging with others in a group. When classifying a belief as *desert*, people feel they are not deserving of positive acknowledgment they receive by others for their success and accomplishments.

Despite Clance and Imes' (1978) research focusing on women experiencing IP, Slank (2019) cautions against generalizing that IP is more prevalent among women. By associating IP with women and potentially other marginalized populations, this may further negatively support stereotyped beliefs that women are not able to handle competition and achievement. Slank believes IP portrays women as being afraid of success and failure, which is why they have been traditionally viewed as not being able to attain the same accomplishments as men. Rather, IP should be viewed

as a phenomenon that negatively impacts a significant number of people despite whether they belong to marginalized groups.

Despite IP being recognized over 50 years ago, and mostly attributed to high achieving women, Simons (2019) challenges the idea of feelings of self-doubt being connected to defects with people's psyches. The discomfort that women have been convinced is imposter syndrome is not a psychological affliction but a common response to being female in a society with gender discrimination. Even though women have made significant gains in gender equality in the workplace, she argues that labeling women with IP sends the message that women are perceived as less than their male colleagues and femininity makes women less worthy of respect. Instead of focusing on how to assist women work through IP and self-blame, she believes women should acknowledge its gender bias and not IP.

Slank (2019) looks beyond individuals' life experiences and includes how environments may contribute to IP. She considers how members of an organization view intelligence, culture of genius, and how this effects individuals behaviorally and cognitively. Murphy and Dweck (2010) studied various environments and people who wished to join them, such as through interviewing. When an environment displayed a belief that intelligence is fixed, people focused on their academic achievements. When an environment displayed a belief that intelligence can be shaped or grown, people focused on their desire to learn. What people perceive to be valued by an organization may affect one's self-concept. When people are working within these different environments, they may be influenced to pursue goals based on the beliefs of the organization. Organizations that believe intelligence is fixed may promote performance goals. Organizations that promote growth and development may promote learning goals.

Dweck's (2016) concept of mindset can also assist women who identify with IP by helping change their beliefs. Dweck classifies mindset into two groups – growth and fixed. She believes intelligence is not fixed but instead something that can be developed. By choosing to believe in one mindset, growth, over the other, can greatly impact people's lives. Instead of spending so much time trying to prove intelligence or personality, a growth mindset believes that through effort you can improve your qualities. A growth mindset promotes development and learning.

On the contrary, Denworth (2019) explained how other researchers, Bates and his student Yue Li (2019), replicated Dweck's study (1998) of praise and its impact on growth mindset, and showed it caused no effect. Their overall findings concluded that mindset has no impact on school performance, reaction to challenge, or goal preference. Evidence on the impact of praise and growth mindset conducted by Dweck and Yaeger (2019) continue to be limited to results based on participants who are adolescents and students versus adults.

Similarly, Mullangi and Jagsi (2019) believe organizations are not seeking ways in which to further promote women to leadership positions. Issues related to IP within organizations are caused by women lacking female role models or mentors to emulate and leadership pipelines excluding or having bias that affects candidate pools. By being proactive, organizations can be transformed to increase equitable representation of women as leaders.

In order to assist women in overcoming these beliefs, it is important for them to connect with other women who feel the same way. High-achieving women hearing other women's experiences with IP, can provide relief and feelings of not being alone. Sherly Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, and author of *Lean In*, shared her own experiences of feeling like an imposter as both a college student and woman in the business world. Despite her achieving a high level of success, she experienced doubt and worry that she would be found out to not be as

good as others believed her to be. In order to combat these feelings, she encourages women to focus not on what women can't do to what we can do (Sandberg, 2013). By becoming aware of the shared beliefs associated with IP, and replacing them with positive ones, behaviors can be transformed. Beliefs, such as failing, can be replaced with the idea of success. Removing self-doubt, or predicting failure, prior to the participation in life activities, such as job interviewing, is important to increase success. This takes conscious, intentional effort, in order to create new habits and behaviors that are truly believed.

Hutchins (2015) studied higher education faculty and found they relate IP to emotional exhaustion and job burnout. Psychological factors, such as the application of emotional resources toward performance, increases emotional exhaustion. Experiencing “imposter” thoughts and the inability to see or feel personal achievement, impacts job satisfaction career longevity. Hutchins found mentoring assisted in reducing imposter thoughts through provided support, recognition of success, and modeling positive behavior.

Lacey and Parlette-Stewart (2017) studied academic librarianship and how they manage IP. A common factor for those who experience IP was being new and young to the profession. They identified useful strategies on how to successfully cope and manage IP – acknowledge and share feelings of being an imposter, develop supportive relationships with colleagues (mentoring), identify and monitor goals, and recognize successes.

IP prevents women from seeing their intelligence as something positive. Instead, women who identify with IP fear their intelligence and attribute their successes to luck and hard work versus their own abilities. If women are to overcome this “imposter” they must recognize it, talk about it, change the way they think, and implement new behaviors that attribute their success to their strengths and abilities.

## **Family or Career**

Women educational leaders' interest in seeking the superintendency may be influenced by the perceived choice of family or career. This choice may be shaped by women being rewarded at work differently than men, how society views working women, and women trying to balance the load of work and life. I explore how these ideas may influence women's career choices as they navigate down their own unique pathways to the superintendency.

Munoz et. al (2017a) found women administrators who aspired to be superintendents shared the same beliefs regarding gender and leadership roles that men do. These beliefs stemmed from identified barriers and expectations. Women leaders viewed their desire to serve in a leadership role as a sacrifice to their family. This idea of family abandonment, which included reasons such as children, a spouse, and potential relocation were not viewed as something they were able to maintain or be successful at while also serving in the position of superintendent. Women leaders struggled with the belief that they were making a choice – family or career. This choice led to women leaders' disinterest in continuing to pursue this position due to family being a top priority in their lives.

Furthermore, Kelsey et. al (2014) believes that women do identify conflict between work and family. The time commitment that comes along with serving as a superintendent causes women to delay seeking their first superintendent position until their children are older and more self-sufficient. In addition to this, a supportive spouse is needed to address women's feelings of being able to meet the expectations of both work and home. When determining when to pursue the superintendency, Kelsey et. al found women needed to view this decision as being "right" for their family versus themselves. Women indicated the need to make sacrifices, such as in the quality of meals their families would be provided, in order to successfully balance work and family



responsibilities. It was apparent from women's responses that seeking a balance would ultimately lead to a balance that negatively impacted the home.

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010) connect mothering skills to female leadership and the positive qualities women display that can be advantageous to their role. Women leaders who display abilities, such as nurturing, encouragement, and listening are viewed as relational and authentic. On the other hand, women who display these qualities can be viewed as less than a leader and more as someone who attends to children. The association between mothering and a women leaders' careers can foster relationships and support. Women leaders who are viewed as collaborators, versus men who may be seen as more of a facilitator, foster shared leadership that can transform decision-making.

Lumby and Azaola (2014) believe that parenting is more closely associated with women than men. They further explain how for women to take on the role of a leader, they must remove themselves from what it means to be a woman in order to fit the idea of a model leader. Despite women challenging strict stereotypes, Lumby and Azaola found they do not change due to the stereotypes themselves being fixed. Women will display qualities that are either viewed as masculine or feminine, and unless mothering can be viewed as a strength to leadership instead of something that should be diminished, women will be ineffective in shifting this paradigm.

### **Leadership is "Male"**

Throughout history, leadership is often viewed by society as "male" versus "female." Gender equality in educational leadership continues to be an issue. Gender roles, and the behaviors that are associated with them, are different for women and men. I explore research that proves a glass ceiling continues to exist for women in education.

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) found women educational leaders believe they need to look and act differently, “like a man,” to endure a long career in school administration. Women found they were unsuccessful when they displayed skills and abilities most often associated with being a woman. Women were advised to hide their emotions, wear a suit, and act tough. Despite women working hard to take on a “male” leadership style to ensure their success, Grogan and Shakeshaft found women struggled to sustain this act and were most successful when laying a foundation that provided an explanation for why they were going to be leading differently.

Sperandio and Devdas (2015) found women’s own perceptions of themselves as well as those who hire superintendents, such as school boards, create gendered barriers that are based on society’s standards. These standards believe that leadership is a role that is classified as “male.” Both men and women perceive leadership in this same way, which explains why less women are encouraged to pursue the superintendency and most often do not. These gendered barriers, held by both women and men, appear to be of greater importance to the hiring process than job candidate’s education, credentials, and experience. The most concerning issue that arises from these gendered barriers is the rate and number of applications showing no improvement for women seeking the superintendency. Women’s personal gendered beliefs cause them to be their own barrier to overcome in understanding they are meant for leadership, too.

In fact, many women do not create goals that are focused on seeking the top school leadership position, superintendent. Kelsey et. al (2014) found that when current women superintendents reflect upon their professional goals in the field of education, they see themselves attaining and ending in the same position, Principal. Serving as a teacher, teacher leader, and principal were shared goals by almost all women. However, not one woman who currently serves as a superintendent set a professional goal of obtaining the top school leadership spot,

superintendent. Due to women educational leaders working toward and earning their superintendent certification through university preparation programs, Kelsey et. al sought advice from women currently serving as superintendents on how to better prepare young women. Mentoring and working alongside other women leaders was prevalent in their beliefs.

### **External Factors**

The pathways of women educational leaders may include the influence of external factors. Preferred superintendent qualities, gender bias, motivating factors, and mentors are external factors that may increase or decrease women's interest in serving in the top school leadership position. By analyzing how external factors impact women as they seek to move into the superintendency, we can better understand how to support women educational leaders, so they continue to apply and interview for these positions as often as men do.

### **Preferred Qualities**

How women educational leaders view preferred qualities of superintendents may influence their decision making on their career pathway to the superintendency. Whether or not these perceived preferred qualities match those who interview and hire superintendents is important. By better understanding what school boards and search firms prefer in qualities of job candidates, can assist women educational leaders in preparing to fill these top spots.

Bernal et. al (2017) interviewed both women and men superintendents to compare their ideas of preferred qualities successful superintendents possess. Qualities identified between both women and men were very different. Women's responses included overlapping themes that focused on personal leadership qualities while men's responses were unique and centered around an organization and its accomplishments. In order to make change or achieve success, women

superintendents found the manner in which they spoke to others and created relationships was vital. Open communication, targeting specific types of language to different groups of stakeholders, and being effective in getting your point across assisted in doing a good job.

On the other hand, men's responses included the ability to make important decisions swiftly and be adaptable to unforeseen issues that may arise. A commitment to the organization was also noted as well as the consistency within a position in order to make positive change.

Although both women and men were able to express their thoughts about preferred qualities of successful superintendents only women superintendents shared concern with issues they felt were exclusively connected to women in leadership roles, such as being a leader while also serving as the family caregiver, needing to prove themselves by being more of a "boss", and being evaluated in additional areas that men are not – dress attire.

Bongiorno et. al (2014) found women leaders, and whether they display tentative or assertive behaviors, impacts how both men and women perceive them as being likeable and influential. When compared to assertive women, women who appear tentative are viewed as less likeable and influential. When comparing both women and men who are tentative, women are still described as less likeable and influential than men. Assertive women leaders were viewed equally likeable and influential as assertive male leaders. These findings prove that women who fail to display assertive behaviors in leadership positions may be viewed as unlikeable and uninfluential. If women deviate from male stereotypical standards, they may be negatively viewed as ineffective leaders.

The hiring of a superintendent is primarily overseen by a school board. School boards may choose to collaborate with search teams to assist them throughout the hiring process. When approximately 3,000 school board members were asked which leadership role they preferred

superintendents to possess, 41.3% chose education leader (curriculum and instruction) and 33.4% chose managerial leader (general management, budget, and finance) (Brunner & Kim, 2010). Despite these data, and women traditionally holding these preferred roles (curriculum and instruction), more men are serving as superintendents. School board's preferred superintendents' roles do not match the traditional career paths that most current superintendents traveled through.

Tripses et. al (2015) identified school board presidents' perceptions of the knowledge and skills superintendents should possess. Characteristics preferred were establishing and communicating high expectations for effective teaching and student learning around the district's instructional goals. Valued skills included expertise, especially team leadership and interpersonal skills. Although school board presidents identified preferred knowledge and skills of superintendents, Tripses et. al found women school board presidents showed differences in how they rated these preferences. Women board presidents rated all areas related to knowledge and skills higher than male board presidents. Significant differences centered on a superintendent's level of self-confidence and transparency. Also, establishing and modeling high expectations, effective teamwork, and devoting resources with focused development.

Although there are identified preferences of ideal superintendents, school boards also expect women job candidates to persuade them on how they will be able to balance family and work expectations. If a woman is married and has children at home, then an additional requirement, not imposed on men, will be to explain how they will manage their professional life and household responsibilities (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). In order for other requirements of the superintendent position to be considered, women must overcome this potential negative characteristic of leaders, family and non-work related responsibilities, in order to be viewed as a sound candidate that can be considered similarly to men.

## **Gender Bias**

Due to more men currently serving in the role of superintendent, and the unbalance of gender in this position, bias is often seen as an obstacle in which women must learn to overcome. By identifying and describing women leaders' potential barriers, gender issues, feelings of inequality, and the unique struggles women may face when seeking the top school leadership position, superintendent, they can be better understood. More women need to be empowered to progress on their journey to the superintendency.

Bernal et. al (2017) found women superintendents encountered feelings, actions, and advice that demonstrated bias. When describing what a woman felt was required of her on a daily basis, the pressure to do more and perform better than her colleagues expressed the need to prove herself as capable and equal. During an evaluation, a woman's work attire was addressed despite this not being included in men's evaluations. When receiving advice from a mentor, a woman was advised to not seek a secondary position due to the evening responsibilities required and the time it would require of her. She believes this advice was given to her due to her outside of work responsibilities as a mother with young children.

Connell et. al (2015) identified the community as the least supportive of hiring women as superintendents. Community members, as well as outside contractors and vendors, doubt the competence and abilities of women to lead and make decisions. Women's prior work experience was also questioned by the community, especially in the area of athletics. If a woman did not hold a position as coach prior to obtaining her role as superintendent, then this may be perceived by community members as her not being in support of athletics.

Despite community members demonstrating gender bias, women currently and formerly serving as superintendents, felt school boards and other superintendents supported them in these roles. However, colleagues, other superintendents, felt there was a lack of interest by women

wishing to serve in these positions. The underrepresentation of women at superintendent meetings and other gatherings of leaders in these top positions supported the idea that women were not interested in the superintendency.

Conversely, school leaders working under the supervision of women superintendents questioned their ability to carry out the responsibilities of the job. The idea of “working for a woman” was not desirable and in one circumstance was a reason why a principal shared he would rather leave his position and retire. This supports the idea that barriers continue to exist for women aspiring to be superintendents. Kelsey et. al (2014) found women currently serving as superintendents believe these barriers to be – stereotypes of women and the good ole’ boy system.

Katz (2006) found that when women superintendents pursued the superintendency they felt they needed to challenge the process and take a risk. Current women superintendents viewed other women leaders as collaborative, not driven by the idea of holding power or control over others and being good listeners. Considering how important mentors are to women in educational leadership roles, having the ability to turn to others whom they trust with questions and advice is not surprising. These feelings were supported by their inability to see a woman in this position. Many women in this study were the first women superintendents in their district. With no women superintendents to emulate, gender discrimination was a shared barrier they felt they needed to overcome.

By contrary, Munoz et al. (2014b) found the top two reasons why women pursued the superintendency were for leadership opportunity and sense of achievement. To demonstrate how differently women perceive pursuing this position, the study also gathered responses from men who indicated their top two reasons to be sense of achievement and salary. With regards to gender discrimination and its impact on gendered perceptions, women also shared a drive for perfection,

which included the need to work long hours. This lack of confidence was further supported by women feeling that men superintendents already held a level of confidence that took women years to develop.

Munoz et al. believed that although gender may have been viewed as a challenge, it was also described as a strength, once the position was acquired. Women's traditional career pathways to the superintendency, which includes elementary teaching experience and central office roles of curriculum and instruction, provided them with confidence in their knowledge as a leader. Personal roles and responsibilities held, beyond work experience, also contributed to these beliefs, such as women serving as head of household and managing their families.

### **Motivating Factors**

Women who seek the position of superintendent hope to find satisfaction in their job. Which parts of this position women find most satisfying can attract more candidates. Likewise, recognition of women's strong leadership qualities and encouragement by others to pursue this position can further increase the number of women leaders aspiring to the superintendency.

Bollinger and Grady (2018) found women feel job satisfaction in the superintendency when they are able to see the big picture and create a vision. Additionally, areas involved with carrying out a vision, such as strategic planning, was also found satisfying in leading and communicating ideas that led to their district accomplishing goals. Superintendents found they enjoyed fostering relationships and facilitating communication between a variety of stakeholders.

Robinson et. al (2017) found women leaders value working with others, such as their staff and communities. They value collaboration, seek input from stakeholders, and build relationships. They strive to carry out the best ideas for their organization without worry of whether they are their own.



Bollinger and Grady (2018) also found the role of instructional leader was also preferred due to many women having prior leadership experience related to curriculum. Being able to continue accessing classrooms, teachers, and students was key to the satisfaction they found in their job.

An instructional leader versus managerial position was emphasized in how they led change being made by assisting teachers to grow professionally. The complexity of the position and amount of responsibilities required proved to be satisfying. Each day being ever-changing proves to present new challenges female leaders enjoy working through.

In fact, Robinson et. al (2017) found that women educational leaders prioritize student learning and their ability to focus on instruction so much that they will leave the position of superintendent if not able to dedicate their time and attention to it. Many women feel they were hired into the superintendency due to their knowledge and experience in curriculum and instruction. They identify as instructional leaders and want to positively impact student achievement.

Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) found that women educators may not have intentionally sought out educational leadership. Despite whether it was their intention to pursue a position as a leader, women found meaning in their decision to lead and make a difference in improving the education of children. Women leaders are motivated by the desire to make change and challenge traditional methods of leading. They seek to serve others and are often described as reformers. This social justice perspective keeps student learning in the forefront of what motivates them to lead.

Bolinger and Grady (2018) also found superintendents seek to create opportunities for others that further develop their careers. By providing professional growth and leadership to teachers they felt they were also indirectly impacting students. The development of others extends

beyond school employees and also carries to the school board. By assisting board members in their roles and recognizing the importance and responsibility of ensuring they learn how to do their work well, superintendents found this to be one of their most important roles.

It was also found that external factors, such as location of a position and whether it is in close proximity to a woman's home, is motivating. When striving to achieve work/life balance and weighing this with the demands of the job, women desire to limit their mobility. They prefer to seek superintendent positions within their current school district or one within a reasonable commuting distance to their home (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015).

## **Mentors**

Women educational leaders' ambitions for top school leadership positions may be influenced by their ability to see other women serving in these roles. Data proves that women educational leaders will struggle to be what they cannot see. The absence of women serving as superintendents, and potentially mentors to other women aspiring to serve in these roles, creates gender stereotypes that negatively impact women's future career choices. I discuss the importance of mentors and how they influence women seeking the superintendency.

According to Munoz et. al (2014a) women leaders are more motivated to seek the superintendency when they receive support through networking and mentorship. Through networking, women leaders felt they had access to leadership positions they otherwise would not have been able to obtain. When navigating through potential gatekeepers to top leadership positions, building a network of individuals to assist in preparing for interviews, new responsibilities, and potential challenges built confidence needed to acquire these positions. Similarly, mentorship assisted women leaders with not only acquiring leadership positions but also remaining in them. Women leaders identified specific individuals who they recognized as mentors

that encouraged them to pursue higher degrees and seek new positions. Women leaders reported that mentors have proposed the idea of applying for a position even before they considered it. Having others, as well as themselves, being able to view them in this top position was highly motivating to women aspiring to become a superintendent.

Despite mentorship proving to be beneficial and motivating to women leaders seeking the superintendency, it is challenging to find mentors for women who are also women leaders currently serving in this top position. Women leaders did not struggle with identifying mentors who held a variety of roles. However, women leaders' mentors were predominately men. The unique experiences of women leaders serving in these roles are critical in continuing to motivate and inspire more women to seek the superintendency and remain in these positions.

In the same way, Connell et. al (2015) found women who are currently or were formerly serving as superintendents all identified mentors who encouraged, assisted, and supported them in finding, applying, interviewing, and obtaining a position. Almost all women did not intentionally seek out a mentor or were provided one through a formal mentoring program. Mentors were described as men who held top educational leadership positions that were viewed as influential. Even after acquiring a position, women often found mentors continued being involved in their professional lives.

While many women do not appear to seek out mentors or are provided one formally, Copeland and Calhoun (2014) discovered a combination of both formal and informal mentoring to be preferred by women currently serving as superintendents. Formal mentoring was viewed as more structured due to women receiving assistance centered around a specific purpose or topic and with established timelines. When women superintendents were asked to rank areas important to an effective mentoring program, the top three were – school board relations, personnel matters,

and budget and finance. This is not surprising due to these areas being identified as knowledge and skills that women feel are required of a superintendent they did not possess when hired and first serving in these positions (Connell et. al, 2015). However, mentees also being given the ability to reach out to their mentors and seek advice or ask questions appears key to relationship building and attributed to an overall positive mentoring experience.

As a result of most current and former women superintendents' mentors being men, Copeland and Calhoun discovered that women sought out female mentors. Even if women superintendents were currently working with a male mentor, they felt there were unique challenges that women face that can be best supported through a mentor who is of the same gender. Women superintendents seeking other women superintendents support and guidance through mentoring is important in better understanding how some issues associated with the superintendency may not be perceived as the same for both genders.

Connell et. al (2015) shared that mentors prepared women for the role of superintendent. Women found mentors created opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills. They were able to take on additional roles and responsibilities, such as overseeing a budget, in addition to managing curriculum and instruction. Acquiring this experience allowed women to grow professionally and add to their resume while seeking the position of superintendent.

Mentors beliefs, encouragement, and guidance were persuasive to women seeking superintendent positions. Which positions to apply to, which interview questions to prepare answers to, and which questions they should ask during an interview, were all ways in which mentors further assisted women in acquiring the job of superintendent. In other words, to assist women aspiring to be superintendents, they need encouraging, mentoring, and other women educational leaders to serve as role models for others (Kelsey et. al, 2014).

Connell et. al (2015) also found that women feel mentors can influence school boards and others in top school leadership positions to recruit or interview women. Mentors would go out of their way to recommend and persuade others to hire their mentees. By providing school boards with information related to candidates' competence and skills prior to interviewing, women felt they were assisted by mentors in acquiring these positions.

Informal male mentors helped women make connections within school communities. Being part of a supportive network with others who share similar experiences assisted women when encountering new experiences or challenges. This was especially true when women were hired to serve as superintendents within a community they were unfamiliar with. Being introduced to people and learning the history of a new school community was easier to access and learn through the assistance of a mentor.

### **Summary**

Current research proves there is a plethora of women leaders who have obtained the necessary requirements to fill the top school leadership position, superintendent. Discussions surrounding women leaders' interest and aversion to this position were found in this literature review. I seek to better understand why women's pathways to the superintendency include navigating through more complex career paths, which include the influence of internal and external factors. Women need to apply and interview for the position of superintendent as often as men do. This study addresses the gap in the research by exploring the relationship between the number of women seeking the superintendency and motivating factors in growing the number of women leaders aspiring to serve schools in this role. This study aims to find ways to ensure that women leaders will continue to seek the top school leadership position, superintendent.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

Using a qualitative descriptive design [QDD] and open-ended, in-depth interviewing, I attempted to understand and describe the absence of women superintendents leading Indiana's public schools. This study allowed me to immerse myself in the lived experiences of current superintendent-certified women educators with the goal of understanding what their job search and leadership experiences meant to them and identify common themes that emerged. This chapter begins with identifying the purpose of the study and corresponding research questions. Next, I include the design of the study, which includes the selection of participants. Then I discuss the methods of data collection and analysis. After that, I share the limitations of my study, which includes both delimitations and potential researcher bias. Finally, I share my conclusions, which summarizes my research methodology.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe and understand the experiences of superintendent-certified women educators who reside in Indiana and are seeking the position of superintendent. Their experiences and perceptions of the job search process allowed me to explore why women are underrepresented in this top school leadership position. Due to me being a future superintendent-certified women educator who resides in Indiana and will someday pursue this same position, I felt it was of utmost importance of me to conduct this research. My dissertation committee was comprised entirely of women who share my same passion and interest in better understanding the pathways to top leadership positions in the field of education.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions addressed in this study:

1. How do superintendent-certified women educators perceive or make meaning of the superintendent job search process?
2. How do superintendent-certified women educators describe the role of leadership experience in the superintendent job search process?

## **Research Design**

My approach to my qualitative research study is QDD. I chose this design due to it not setting limitations on my ability to describe the experiences of my participants. Kim et. al (2017) found that researchers chose this type of design because it provides clear and thorough descriptions of the data without the intrusion of much interpretation. Participants are studied in their natural environment without manipulating experiences in order to discover rich data and to describe and understand a phenomenon that is not easily measured. Colorafi and Evans (2016) agree that this approach provides low-inference descriptions which presents findings that are direct, factual, and agreed upon by numerous researchers. QDD is flexible and not limited in the techniques used for data collection, such as conducting individual interviews that use open-ended questions. The ability to include multiple sources of data, such as taking field notes during recorded interviews, allowed me to achieve a more thorough understanding of the experiences of women educational leaders' movement into the superintendency.

Part one of my qualitative research study identified participants who were willing to participate in open-ended, in-depth interviews. An email was sent to superintendent-certified women who reside in the state of Indiana. This list of identified recipients was created through

assistance provided by the Indiana Association of Public School Superintendents [IAPSS] and Women Educators Leading Learning [WELL].

Part two of my qualitative research study involved the use of in-depth, phenomenological based interviewing. Seidman's (2019) method primarily uses open-ended questions with the goal of focusing on the lived experiences of participants and making meaning of their experiences. By implementing this method, I was able to make meaning of the lived experiences of superintendent-certified women educators from their point of view - how they lived, experienced, and created meaning through leadership in the superintendent job search process.

Seidman's structure and techniques used for interviewing are based on four phenomenological themes he identified to assist researchers. This interview structure is important because it allows me to discover the meaning of my participant's experiences in the framework of their own lives. Theme one focuses on participants making meaning of their lived experiences. Theme two looks at the lived experiences of participants from their point of view. Theme three seeks to provide access to participants reconstructed lived experiences. Access is granted through the use of language, interviewing – spoken words and text. Theme four emphasizes reflection as a method to make meaning of participants' lived experiences.

For participants to make meaning of their lived experiences, I conducted a two-interview structure, which combines Seidman's first and second interviews into one. This variation to Seidman's three-interview structure and process allowed me to meet my research goals and answer my research questions. Even though the structure and process of in-depth phenomenological interviewing is not absolute, I did establish an allotted time for each individual interview and provided space between them. To create focus and a chronological beginning middle, and end for each interview, I used Seidman's suggestion of a 90-minute format. The two interviews were



spaced out approximately one month apart. These closely, spaced out, multiple interviews assisted in creating a relationship between the participants and me. The spacing also supported the goal of participants and researchers making meaning about what was shared in the first interview. However, the goal of both interviews was for participants to make meaning of their lived experiences in leadership and the job search process (Seidman, 2019).

The structure of each interview was focused and strived for open-ended, in-depth inquiry. This openness, but focused structure, allowed the participant to provide details that were related to a specific purpose. The details and information provided by the participant in the first interview were intended to help guide the focus of the second interview. The purpose of interview one was to learn about each participant's life history and experiences related to the topic of superintendent certified women aspiring to the superintendency. Interview two sought to make meaning of participants' experiences they shared in interview one. See Appendix A for a list of questions used in the two separate interviews.

Conducting multiple interviews allowed me to focus on each participant's experiences, details of their experiences in context, and reflection on the meaning of their experiences. This process allowed me to not limit openness, such as through the method of observation. My in-depth interviews allowed me to conduct multiple meetings that were carried out based on my guiding research questions. Conducting interviews allowed me to engage in open dialogue with each participant.

### **Participants**

All potential participants in my study needed to meet two basic requirements – 1. Be a woman. 2. Be a superintendent-certified educator who resides in the state of Indiana. To identify potential participants, current superintendent-certified women educators who reside in the state of

Indiana, I utilized a list of identified recipients that was created through assistance provided by the Indiana Association of Public School Superintendents [IAPSS] and Women Educators Leading Learning [WELL]. They provided me with a list of contact information for all potential participants.

Selecting participants for part one was accomplished by making contact through email. Through this initial contact to potential participants, I was able to explain the nature of the study, all parts of the study, and what would be expected if they agreed to participate. If during part one participants indicated that they would be willing to participate in part two, they were informed of the consent document.

The size and appropriateness of the selection of my participants was considered due to random selection not being an option in this research study. Random selection does not allow me to select participants that would provide information rich data related to my topic. All participants need to possess knowledge and experience related to being superintendent-certified women seeking the superintendency. Once potential participants were identified, four women were chosen through Patton's (2015) purposeful sampling techniques. Participants participated in part two, in-depth phenomenological interviews. Seidman (2019) emphasizes the selection of participants and purpose of in-depth interviewing to not be making generalizations of a research study to a broader population. The goal for qualitative researchers engaging in this method, in-depth interviewing, is to understand and effectively communicate the lived experiences of participants for others to understand and make connections with.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to conducting this study, approval was sought and obtained from Purdue University's Institutional Review Board [IRB]. Participants were identified through a list of women provided by the Indiana Association of Public School Superintendents [IAPSS] and Women Educators

Leading Learning [WELL] – Women who reside in the state of Indiana and hold an educator’s license with the content area of District Administrator License: Superintendent. Through use of this identified list of participants, participation was sought via email.

Once participant contact information was received, an email was sent to all potential participants explaining the purpose of the study, all parts of the study, along with an invitation to participate in interviews.

Data collected was based on Seidman’s in-depth, phenomenological interviewing, three-interview structure, to better understand and create context of each woman educator’s life. Interview one was designed to gather background knowledge about each participant’s life and to collect details of each participant’s present experiences related to the research topic. Interview two was intended to create meaning of each participant’s experiences. The primary purpose of the second interview was for participants to reflect upon the information shared in their first interviews to create understanding of where participants are in their lives now. Seidman’s three-interview structure, which I adapted and designed as two interviews - Interview One: Life History and Lived Experience and Interview Two: Reflection of Lived Experience. See Appendix B for a list of questions from each interview.

Throughout interviewing, identified techniques and skills were utilized in order to elicit participants’ responses. Seidman (2019) described good interviewers as those who are active. They understand when to be quiet and when to interject to produce a response. They are focused and organized while monitoring time passed and remaining throughout the interview as well as what content has been covered and what is still left to address. To facilitate active listening throughout the interview process, I implemented the following techniques and skills before, during, and after interviews:

Before: Review questions and identify timing of the interview questions

During: Audio-record each interview and take notes; listen with minimal interruption  
except to clarify or hear more about a topic

After: Transcribe each interview recording; begin to identify themes

### **Data Analysis**

Data from each interview was collected through audio recordings before being transcribed. Transcriptions were verified by the participants to confirm accuracy. Then the transcribed interviews were coded with the goal of eliminating bias. The method of analysis I chose to use was Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which sought to identify patterns or themes from the data.

In order to assist with identifying patterns or themes from the data, Braun and Clarke utilize six phases in which researchers can navigate back and forth through during analysis. Phase 1 is to familiarize yourself with your data. Familiarizing means to read and reread the data. I became familiar with my data throughout the process of transcribing. Taking notes on important ideas throughout transcribing and rereading assisted in identifying patterns from the data. Phase 2 is to generate codes. This required me to create a system of single words or short phrases to summarize important information. This system was applied consistently throughout transcribing and rereading so that the data was well organized and concise. Phase 3 is to search for themes. This phase required me to group codes by patterns, which led to the creation of each theme. This was a fluid process that was adapted throughout the analysis to ensure identified data was applicable to each theme. Phase 4 is to review the themes created. Reviewing the phases prior to this phase allowed me to trace the creation of themes and revise them if necessary. Phase 5 is to define and name each theme. During this phase, I cross-checked themes to prevent overlap of information that would

make definitions and names unclear. Phase 6 produces a report. A complete and final analysis took place which I related back to my research questions and literature.

Throughout my application of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, it is important to note that patterns or themes identified were not dependent upon the number of times they occurred but on the importance of them in relation to my research questions. This allowed me to preserve flexibility in how I coded data as a pattern or theme. Codes were assigned to each unique theme and a master list of codes was created to ensure consistency was applied throughout coding text data. Identification of themes throughout the coding process further assisted me in comparing participants' experiences.

### **Quality and Goodness**

To provide credible qualitative research, I applied criteria to assess the trustworthiness of my study. Due to many people being unfamiliar with qualitative research, using these criteria assists in determining the validity and reliability of my study. The criteria I utilized was Tracy's (2010) "big tent" for conducting excellent qualitative research. Her eight criteria include:

1. Be on a worthy topic; be conducted with
2. Rich rigor
3. Sincerity
4. Credibility; that the research
5. Resonates with a variety of audiences
6. Makes a significant contribution
7. That it attends to ethical considerations
8. That the study has meaningful coherence

My research topic is significant to the field of educational leadership. Women continue to be disproportionally represented in the top school leadership position, superintendent, both at the national and state levels. According to the AASA decennial studies, the percentage of female superintendents across the nation over the last 30 years - 13.2% (2000) 24.1% (2010) and 26.68%

(2020). Similarly, the Indiana Department of Education [IDOE] 2019-2020 school directory reports 31% of superintendents are women.

My study is rigorous as I considered the appropriateness of my research design. Multiple interviews provided sufficient time, 90 minutes each, to ensure the collection of rich data. Each interview was spaced out a month apart for me to have sufficient time to transcribe, ensure accuracy, and allow time for reflection to create meaning. An explanation of my methods for organizing and analyzing the data demonstrated transparency.

The sincerity of my study was proven in my ability to recognize bias and address it. Member checking reduced bias by having my transcriptions verified by the participants to confirm accuracy. Additionally, I recognized my own potential personal bias by engaging in reflection and discussion with my research committee and colleagues.

The credibility of my study was demonstrated through reflection and “showing” the data versus “telling” readers what to think. I transcribed my own recordings and took careful detailed notes to gather both verbal and nonverbal interview material. By providing thick descriptions of the data, readers can make their own conclusions based on the material shared.

My research resonates with a variety of audiences due to the ability of readers to make *naturalistic generalizations* (Stake and Trumbull, 1982) in which they make choices based on their own understanding of the data versus being told what to do. By providing rich data, and based on readers’ personal experiences and feelings, this will lead to improved practices. Readers will recognize and reflect on the significance of this study and women in educational leadership.

My research makes a significant contribution to the field of educational leadership by extending knowledge on why more women are not applying and obtaining these positions. Improved practices, such as the creation of candidate pipelines, will increase the diversity of

applicants. Finally, ongoing research in the field can assist in addressing additional areas of concern, such as identifying female mentors for women.

Ethical considerations were made through the procedures used in developing my research design. Prior to conducting research, I sought approval from Purdue University's Institutional Review Board [IRB] to ensure no harm and deception would occur to participants throughout my research. I also acquired informed consent and upheld privacy and confidentiality for all participants. Relational ethics were also focused on through the recognition of my ethical self-consciousness where I fostered mutual respect between myself and the participants.

Meaningful coherence was achieved while considering the purpose of my study in which I set out to describe and understand the experiences of superintendent-certified women educators who reside in Indiana and are seeking the position of superintendent. My research questions were answered through in-depth interviewing that allowed me to explore women's experiences on the pathway to the superintendency. The conclusions I made were directly tied to the literature I reviewed, which addressed the complex pathways of women seeking the superintendency and both the external and internal factors that influence them.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The delimitations of my research study were due to the boundaries I established. Patton (2015) shared the sampling approaches to qualitative research require purposeful, small samples. The focus of my study was on participants who are superintendent-certified women who reside in the state of Indiana and are seeking the top school leadership position, superintendent. Not all superintendent-certified women who reside in Indiana and are seeking the superintendency are represented in this study. The geographical location of where participants reside, Indiana, is

specific to one state. My small sample was intentional and comprised of data from a total of eight interviews, two interviews for each participant.

The scope of my research study was also a delimitation. The perceptions of women who are actively seeking the superintendency and those who are not but would agree to serve in the position if offered or recruited, are specific to the experiences of this sample group in this study. By narrowing down the area in which I explore, women's experiences during the superintendent job search process, I further defined the parameters of this study.

Further limitations of my research study include my own potential biases, which may impact the analysis of my research findings. Due to me being a superintendent-certified woman who resides in the state of Indiana and may potentially seek the superintendency in the future, I minimized this limitation by engaging in reflection and discussion with my research committee and colleagues. I was open to the possibility of others having experiences that were different than my own. I strived to make meaning of participants' experiences that was gathered throughout the process of data collection and analysis.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explained the methodology of my qualitative research study in which I attempted to understand and describe the absence of women superintendents leading Indiana's public schools. The research design I selected to use was intentional and considered the purpose of my study. By utilizing qualitative inquiry, I was able to gain information-rich data from each participant.

The purpose of my research study was well-defined by my two research questions, which sought to explain women's experiences in the superintendent job search process. The selection of



participants was intentional, which created a small sample that distinguishes my qualitative inquiry approach from qualitative sampling techniques (Patton, 2015).

My research design, QDD, allowed me to be flexible in my approach but also allowed me to collect multiple sources of data through interviews (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). Data collected through interviews, was based on in-depth, phenomenological interviewing, three-interview structure, allowed me to create meaning of each participant's life experiences (Seidman, 2019).

The qualitative analytic method I used, thematic analysis, was a flexible approach in which I used to analyze my data. Based on the rich data collected, patterns were identified, and themes were created. This thematic analysis made connections across my qualitative data and sought to provide answers to my research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Overall, this study allowed me to immerse myself in the lived experiences of current superintendent-certified women educators with the goal of understanding the phenomenon of the absence in superintendent-certified women educators leading, or seeking to lead, our nation's public schools.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **Introduction**

The research for this study was conducted in September and October of 2021. Four women who aspire to be a superintendent, reside in the state of Indiana, and hold an educator's license with the content area of District Administrator License: Superintendent were interviewed. All participants are currently serving as assistant superintendents of public-school districts in the state of Indiana with total student populations between approximately 2,000 to 9,000. Prior to serving as assistant superintendents, all participants held five or more additional positions in the field of education and served in a director's role. To maintain participant confidentiality, each assistant superintendent will not be identified. Instead, the results of this study were analyzed and interrupted as a whole.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

Qualitative data was collected through use of synchronous, online, audio and video recorded interviews that strived to resemble face-to-face interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) found that conducting this type of interview was advantageous in being able to accommodate participants' schedules and remove the potential challenge of geography. By using audio and video recorded interviews, I was able to further explore and review interviews, which allowed me the opportunity to pay close attention to nonverbal cues. To minimize ethical issues and ensure that confidentiality was not compromised, I utilized Box, an online cloud-based tool for secure file storage of all audio and video recorded interviews, as well as written transcriptions.

Following Seidman's (2019) method of conducting in-depth, phenomenological based interviews, I utilized open-ended questions with the goal of participants reconstructing their

experiences and making meaning of them related to my research topic – women educational leaders’ movement into superintendency. This model of conducting separate, spaced-out interviews, allowed me to meet with each participant twice, using a 90-minute format, so that they had time to reflect and make meaning between their interviews. In between each interview, and immediately following the second and final interview, participants were asked to review their transcriptions to confirm accuracy.

Upon completion of each set of audio and video recorded interviews, I transcribed them and created text-based files. Through the creation of text-based files, I was able to work with my data and utilize coding to analyze my interviews. I focused on using Saldana’s (2021) method of coding to create codes, form categories, and develop themes. By analyzing my qualitative data using Saldaña’s method, I was able to continue adjusting my coding as my study evolved and I collected more data from each interview.

I applied the method of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis to identify themes in my data based on importance and relation to my research questions. Through use of this process, I looked for patterns in the data, attempted to narrow my focus, and defined and named my themes. Once I identified themes, I was able to begin my interpretive analysis of the data, determine how each theme fit together, and discuss what they say about the data collected.

### **Themes**

Preliminary coding began during data collection through use of my field notes and while transcribing interviews. I jotted down words, phrases, and codes knowing I would continue to reference them in the future. In addition to this, I created an outline of my jottings to not solely rely on my memory. I transformed my raw data, transcribed interviews, into preliminary codes,

and continuously referenced my research topic, questions, and theoretical framework. Multiple readings of the transcriptions assisted me in generating codes, patterns, and themes.

The following themes emerged from the study:

1. Geography
2. Family or Career
3. Mentors
4. Grooming
5. Leadership is “Male”/Gender Bias

For purposes of this qualitative descriptive study, participants’ quotes were used to support the themes I identified during analysis.

## **Geography**

When determining whether to pursue the superintendency, location of the position is one of the greatest factors considered by women educational leaders. If a position is located outside of the community they reside in and are familiar with, or if additional time would be added to their commute, it is viewed as undesirable. Women educational leaders are more willing to apply and accept positions that are in close proximity to their home. Sperandio and Devdas (2015) attribute this decision making to women striving to achieve work-life balance. Women currently serving as assistant superintendents limit the positions they apply to due to gendered roles society traditionally attributes to women, such as domestic responsibilities. Women who are qualified for the superintendency do not feel the demands of the job allow them to also support their family’s needs, which could be comprised by a long commute.

The geographical location of women educational leaders' homes influences how they and others may perceive their ability to carry out the work of a superintendent. A strong preference of superintendents living and working in the same community was shared. As one assistant superintendent stated,

I want to be a part of the community I lead. And I don't see myself being able to lead a community that I'm not a part of. And this is my home. And I do feel very much a part of this community, a loyalty to this community.

This connectedness can also bring unwanted expectations from community members. This leads women educational leaders to view working outside of the community they reside in as more appealing due to the separation it creates between work and their lives. Another assistant superintendent shared her struggles with living in the community she works in by saying,

The hours and things like that don't bother me. I just live down the street. Sometimes I wish I had a longer commute and sometimes I can see the advantages of not having grown up in the school district that you work at because everybody thinks that they should have direct access to you and then be able to fix things or not ask for things, because, you know, you should do things out of the goodness of your heart.

When an assistant superintendent reflected on her experience of applying and interviewing for a superintendent's position, she felt living and working in the same community was a requirement, even if it wasn't shared with candidates prior to seeking the position. In addition to this, she felt this requirement, which the interview team directly related to a superintendent's job performance, was one of the most important factors considered when choosing to fill this role. Her thoughts included changing the belief of requiring a superintendent to live within physical school boundaries to analyzing their involvement within the community they work in. She shared,

I can only live in one place. It is completely illegal to ask if you are going to move into the district but there are many communities where that is still held to some sort of belief in your ability to do the job.

When asked to expand on her thoughts related to where she resides and how this impacts other's perceptions on her ability to serve as a superintendent she elaborated by saying,

People have a bias and believe that you need to live here to do the job. You can live in a community and not be part of the community and you can live outside of a community and be very involved in a community. And to me that should be flipped to what is your community involvement, not where your address is. In breaking that bias down for people, I think it's hard and I think that it goes back to people are still living with ideas about education from the 1950s and 60s. Where you didn't have global communication, your school system was your town and your county, and people weren't traveling or comparing or going places and you weren't exposed to things. When you didn't have school choice and your boundary of your world at your job and education was your school corporation.

The impact of the decision to apply for a position of superintendent extends beyond women educational leaders own needs and wants and includes family, especially their children. As one assistant superintendent explains, "Family wise, you know, my husband works in the district, and our kids go here, so I feel like I'm not stealing my loyalties, living in one place with my family, but working somewhere else." Another stated,

I have four children and they are all still in school. So some of the other opportunities that I've had would cause me to leave this area, which is just not realistic. And so location is definitely a prime factor. Right now I live less than 10 minutes away from work and home and am close to all of the kids schools so I can still be there for them and take them to school every morning.

Women leaders weigh the pros and cons of applying for and accepting positions not in close proximity to their home. Factors that influence their decision include buying/selling a home,

whether their income will remain the same or increase, and time spent away from home. An assistant superintendent emphasized these challenges by saying,

I fail to understand this obsession with that belief that unless you reside there that's going to make you a quality person for the job. There are still a lot of school boards who believe that. I feel it is very misguided. If you look at the longevity of a superintendent being typically three years, I don't want to sell my house every three years. I don't want to move and go upside down especially in today's real estate market."

When another assistant superintendent shared what would influence her decision to apply for a new position she stated,

Well, I can't take a pay cut. So honestly, I would have to be making as much, but preferably more money, particularly if I have to drive wherever it is, and if we don't move, I will be spending more time away from home.

In conclusion, when women educational leaders determine whether to pursue the superintendency, much consideration is given to the location of the position and how it compares to their current one. All four participants are more likely to move into the position of superintendent if it does not require them to leave the community they currently reside in. When living in the same community they work in, they expressed an overall more positive work-life balance, which includes increased time with and availability for their families. Each participant evaluated how moving into a new position could impact their family, such as their spouse's job, children's school, time away from home, and buying/selling a home.

Lastly, the idea of where a superintendent resides and if this directly relates to their job performance was discussed. A strong link between these two factors was expressed by the participants, whether they agreed or disagreed with the idea. Their beliefs in the possibility of

being offered a superintendent's job and their willingness to accept a position are strongly related to geography – where the position is located and where they currently reside.

### **Family or Career**

When women educational leaders aspire to the superintendency, they feel as if they must make a choice – family or career. Kelsey et. al (2014) found that women's feelings of having to make a choice between the two delays them seeking their first superintendent position. Women are torn between deciding when the “right” time is for themselves versus their family in making a career move. Women consider the time commitment associated with obtaining the position of superintendent and how this may impact being able to meet the demands and expectations of both work and home. Women seeking a position of superintendent felt they were making sacrifices to their family, which led to home life being negatively impacted. These feelings began early in women's educational careers. As one assistant superintendent stated,

Well, I intentionally held off trying to get my toe into superintendency until my child was out of high school because he was a very involved kid. I felt like as my career expanded, he got shortchanged along the way with my time schedule and whatnot.

Another assistant superintendent spoke about how she delayed advancement as a leader early on in her career when saying,

So I stayed in the assistant principal role for so long partly because we had children. I didn't want to become a principal until they were in school. I didn't think it was fair to the school, my children, my husband, or the dogs.



Another assistant superintendent expressed how this feeling of making a choice, family or career, began when she was serving as a teacher. She felt this choice was not only for her family, but her students, too.

I started my masters at (name removed) University and decided that I could not start having a family and teach at the same time. My students were so in need of consistency that walking out in the middle of the year could be problematic for them.

Munoz et. al (2014a) further stressed the importance of women leaders feeling like they were successful at both home and work and how this impacts their decision to remain in or seek a new position. The idea of “family abandonment” greatly influences whether women continue to aspire to or seek new leadership positions. An assistant superintendent stressed this importance by saying,

So I would say short term, the biggest factors are my family and just ensuring that I can still be present for them. I feel like I've been very blessed that I can still be a good mom and I have very supportive boss, you know, who helps me to balance work-life balance. So I would not leave my current position unless I could guarantee that same thing.

Whether or not women educational leaders feel a school board supports their personal priorities, family, can also influence their decision to pursue or accept a superintendent's position. One superintendent stressed this priority by saying,

Biggest thing to evaluate whether to accept the position is gauging board support and what that would look like. Ensuring the board doesn't have an interest in micromanaging or shifting the direction we are heading and believing in me personally. They have not shown strong support of female leaders. I would need to see evidence and assurance that that was the case- understanding and acceptance of where I am at in my life with my children and that my children are a priority.

Kelsey et. al (2014) found that women educational leaders need a supportive spouse to their feelings of being able to meet the expectations of both work and home. Three of the four participants' husbands work in the field of education. Working in the same field may create a better understanding of challenges faced and the increased ability to communicate using a common language, which may allow for more opportunity to seek solutions and support for potential problems. An assistant superintendent shared, "My husband is an educator. He is a (job position removed) and we talk shop at home." Another assistant superintendent stated,

You know, talking to my husband is a really big part of that influence because he sees things from a unique perspective. While he's not an administrator here, he's a smart guy and he asks great questions. He knows me well enough to know.

When continuing to inquire about influences on her decision to pursue a position as superintendent, she elaborated by saying, "My husband will be a big part of that. But if it meant moving from here he has said he doesn't mind wherever we move for my job."

Similar work schedules and vacation time also contribute to the increased support of a spouse. One superintendent stated, "My husband's a coach, so we're just always at school. It's just kind of part of our life and who we are."

Therefore, all participants have made career decisions that are influenced by whether they perceive themselves as making a choice, family or career, and whether they feel their current or future role is supportive of their choices. These decisions appeared early on in participants' educational careers, while teaching. As participants continued to advance and climb the ladder in the field of education to leadership positions, such as assistant superintendent, career decisions have become even more challenging, and women shared a consistency in how they managed their choice between family and career – delaying advancement of their careers.

The greatest influence on whether participants pursued or accepted a new position, is how supportive they view their spouse is in helping them achieve work-life balance. Both a spouse's physical and emotional availability were identified as factors that assisted women educational leaders in feeling they could pursue and obtain a new position without making a choice, family or career. Similarities in participants' responses showed spouses who also work in the field of education allowed for shared communication and understanding at home as well as the ability to share a similar work and vacation schedule. The overall idea of a good work-life balance decreased participants' feelings of having to make a choice, family or career, and assisted in motivating women to pursue leadership positions, such as the superintendency.

## **Mentors**

As participants revisited their journeys to their current position, assistant superintendent, they acknowledged specific individuals who encouraged them to obtain advanced degrees and seek new positions. Mentors, both informal and formal, presented opportunities that participants themselves did not identify or consider. According to Munoz et. al (2014a) women leaders utilize networking and mentorship to gain access to leadership positions they otherwise would not have been able to obtain. The ability of others to view them in higher leadership positions was highly motivating to women aspiring to become a superintendent. Not only seeking a new position, but also remaining in it, was influenced by mentors. As one assistant superintendent shared,

As an assistant principal, my mentor/principal always said what are you going to do next? He pushed me to do different leadership things and had said to me- you are way smarter than me. Why are you not getting your superintendent's license? Why are you not getting your degree?

As she continued to reflect upon her journey in making the decision to pursue the superintendency she shared, “But he kept pushing me – You need to do the next thing. I don’t know how far or quickly I would have pushed and be in the principal’s seat and central office job. They don’t come open very often.”

Another assistant superintendent shared how mentors inspired her to further her education and seek the superintendency by saying,

At that time, I fell into a lot of experience and available mentors. They would really be the ones who encouraged me to get my superintendent’s license and kind of aspire be a superintendent. They were instrumental in encouraging me to go back to school and made sure they were accessible to me.

Another assistant superintendent shared she was inspired to pursue the superintendency by university professors. However, it wasn’t until a fellow administrator in her district encouraged and worked alongside her did she actually pursue obtaining the credentials necessary to obtain the position. She shared,

I think when I went through the administrative program at (removed name) I knew then talking to professor (removed name) and professor (removed name). We had a good personal relationship. They really inspired me. I knew I was going to take that next step; I just wasn’t sure when. When I became principal and had (removed name) as my assistant he had the same goals. He is like c’mon let’s just do it!

Another assistant superintendent described her mentor relationship with women as being collaborative compared with men as being an obstacle in which to overcome. The difference in a mentor being viewed as someone in which to learn and grow from, versus being inferior to, was evident.

Women Mentors - My former superintendent was 100% collaborative. She felt her role was to train me up. Everything was inclusive. Very unique relationship. She was a mentor of mine. I was allowed to basically do and be at everything I wanted

to. I was taken to national and state level conferences that other people were not. If she was presenting somewhere, I co-presented. Really - just what a true mentoring relationship should have been.

Men Mentors - I had two men that were the other people in my role that served as my mentors. They liked hazing and practical jokes. Different things that you roll with it. As soon as I proved I wasn't a push over and this isn't going to be as fun as they thought, they stopped.

However, not all participants identified a difference in mentor relationships based on gender. One assistant superintendent described her experience with a male mentor as,

Then I went to central office only because my mentor hired me to be secondary director of teaching and learning. I got to work with him again. I still reach out to him with really tough things that I just want his perspective on. He asks great questions. He never tells you what to do. He keeps talking to you until you feel good about what you choose.

All participants expressed a desire to build relationships with other educational leaders in similar positions, related issues, and parallel goals, such as obtaining the superintendency. These similarities extend to other areas, such as gender. As Copeland and Calhoun (2014) found, women superintendents tend to seek out women mentors intentionally due to the unique challenges they feel they face. They feel this is due to women being able to understand how some challenges may not be directly related to the position itself but due to unique issues that women educational leaders may face.

Despite women wanting to establish mentoring relationships with other women, a lack of opportunity and availability to do so is surprising. One assistant superintendent shared,

Recently I have been trying to expand my network of women leaders. All of my previous mentors have been males. There is an absence of female leaders and mentors. The past two years I've started to connect with retired superintendents who are female. They have been really helpful to me.

Another assistant superintendent highlighted the importance of having a mentor who can

relate to the same issues their mentee is facing. These similar issues can be unique to gender but also include additional factors such as unique school characteristics, such as an urban versus suburban school. She shared,

I never found someone I connected with. No one had urban school experience everyone was from (removed names). I am not saying you couldn't lean in on those people but they are completely out of touch with what we are dealing with. I wish there was an urban doctoral program in Indiana to help. Those are the people I need to lean in on. It doesn't feel like there are solid mentors.

Additionally, when sharing about a recent experience with a leadership group intended to build and grow the capacity of female leaders an assistant superintendent said,

There is a leadership group going on right now and I have dropped out of it. It was so negative about the glass ceiling and anti-woman. I am here to be lifted up. I found it very depressing. I want to find out - if this is happening how do I overcome it? Not constantly be talking about how it is always happening. I want more positive not negative.

On the other hand, another assistant superintendent shared a very different experience with an organized group for women leaders in explaining the impact a mentor can have on her career by creating opportunities that assist her on her journey to the superintendency by saying,

This conference that I participated in through the (removed organization), which is focused on women leaders in Indiana. And one of the speakers last year talked about how it's different to have a mentor from a champion. And that was really eye opening to me because a lot of the people in my past have served the same person, have served both of those roles. So they were mentoring me, you know, the instructional part, giving me opportunities at the same time that they were strategically championing me, you know, with others and putting me in a position to ensure I would be successful.

To conclude, participants agree that mentor relationships have been essential in the advancement of their career and continues to be critical while aspiring to serve as a superintendent.

Mentors have provided leadership opportunities to learn and grow from, encouraged pursuing additional education and credentials, and inspired applying and interviewing for higher leadership positions, such as the top school position, superintendent. However, a desire to connect with mentors for specific reasons, such as unique issues related to gender (women v. men educational leaders) and school characteristics (urban v. suburban) was identified.

### **Grooming**

When participants described what influenced their decision to pursue the superintendency, three of the four participants shared a cause-and-effect relationship centered around verbal communication with them by a person holding a leadership position above them such as, “If you \_\_\_\_\_ then you will have the opportunity to \_\_\_\_\_.” Connell et. al (2015) found women who are currently or were formerly serving as superintendents all identified mentors who encouraged, assisted, and supported them in finding, applying, interviewing, and obtaining a position. When discussing this theme, grooming is viewed as a sponsorship, people who help you advance in your career. As one superintendent shared,

The largest influence, (removed name) who was superintendent at the time, had a lot of experience and really saw opportunities for me to grow. He made it very clear to me if I pursued my superintendent’s license, I would have the opportunity to be assistant superintendent in (removed name). He also saw a future beyond that for me.

Working with her current superintendent, she observed first-hand how he not only shared his belief in her becoming the next superintendent of their school district but also communicates this idea with others in the community. This assistant superintendent strongly believes that her superintendent holds power in decision making and can influence her career pathway. This support,

expressing the desire for her to serve as the next superintendent, appears quite meaningful in her belief in being able to obtain this top school leadership position. She shared,

I would say he has quite a bit of an impact on my future career choices. I think he has been a great advocate for me as far as the he does hope that I'm the next superintendent of our district. And I know, he shares that with me and he also shares that publicly. So I feel like he's very, very supportive.

Another assistant superintendent shared how she became aware of and obtained her current role. For her to become a viable candidate for the position, she knew it was necessary to become a qualified candidate and obtain the required credentials. She never assumed, despite being encouraged, that the position was hers. However, her overall impression of her journey to her current position is that she was groomed for it. She shared,

I knew (removed name) was going to retire. I knew I needed the license. I never assumed any position I moved into that it is automatically mine. If I was even going to be considered for that position, I needed the license done before she retired. I knew that was coming so I knew I had to get it done. My relationship with the superintendent was very strong, too. She encouraged me to go back and grow. She always said, "What do you want to do" and supported me with next move. So I guess I probably had a unique experience. She has groomed me to be in this position.

Additionally, this same assistant superintendent shared how her mentor and superintendent is currently preparing and paving the way for her to serve as her replacement when she retires. Connell et. al (2015) found that women were assisted by mentors in acquiring top school leadership positions by going out of their way to recommend and persuade others to hire them. The decision of who the district's next superintendent will be is described by this assistant superintendent as,

It already has been made when (removed name) moved me up here. This has been the plan. Let me mentor you and take it over. Not many superintendents have been in this position as long as she has. She has seen a lot of things through.



Another assistant superintendent described how she was groomed and moved into various leadership positions at the start of her career in educational leadership when she was serving as an assistant principal. She shared,

A month or two in, the principal that hired me said I only have a couple years left. He felt like he was hiring me to be his replacement. There was another assistant principal there but that probably wasn't going to be where he landed. Right away he took me under his wing and brought me into the tough conversations with teachers.

After serving as a building leader, she continued sharing about her movement into higher leadership positions by saying,

And so the superintendent wanted to look at our structure and see if we were being the most efficient. That is when things happen-shuffle people around. He had asked me to move to this position. I didn't interview or anything. They just moved me over.

She continued on this pathway of, "Then I went to central office only because my mentor hired me to be secondary director of teaching and learning."

Therefore, women educational leaders are not applying and interviewing for the position of superintendent, potentially due to their shared belief in being groomed for a position within their own school district. Munoz et al. (2014b) found women do not apply and interview for the position of superintendent as many times as men do. Over half of superintendent certified women have never applied for a position of superintendent compared to less than a quarter of superintendent certified men.

## Leadership is “Male”/Gender Bias

All four participants unanimously agreed that being a women in the field of educational leadership was an overall disadvantage throughout their careers and continues to be so as they aspire to the top school position, superintendent. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) found women educational leaders believe they need to look and act differently, “like a man,” and were unsuccessful when they displayed skills and abilities most often associated with being a woman.

As one assistant superintendent reflected on the conclusion of a meeting, she described how she was treated differently than the men in attendance. She attributed this difference to being one of few women and the possibility of limited opportunities for men leaders interacting with women leaders by saying,

And I didn't notice a difference in gender like during it, but I get up at the end and everyone is shaking hands, the males. But when they get to me they don't shake hands. And I don't think it's about me because they treat me very well. But it's almost as if, like our norms and our habits of how we close those situations, like they don't know what that looks like with a female because there aren't enough females for that to have even been formed yet.

This same feeling of being an outsider, due to the single factor of being a women, with other educational leaders was shared by another assistant superintendent when she said,

As far as leadership roles, I know being a female principal I was one of the only few. I was a high school female principal. I mean...so... being in the room with other high school principals you could sometimes just feel the good old boy network. You know what I mean? So you try to make sure that you stay emotionally regulated and don't get kind of hyper over things. I mean, like, you kind of just try to learn to play the game.

Leadership being identified as “male” also contributes to barriers that women educational leaders experience in the job search process. Participants shared experiences of women superintendents who have previously served in their own districts as well as personal stories of the overall hiring process of superintendents. Additionally, a common feeling of school districts and school boards being inexperienced in working with women leaders was also shared. Sperandio and Devdas (2015) found these gendered barriers, held by both women and men, appear

to be of greater importance to the hiring process than job candidate's education, credentials, and experience. Both men and women perceive leadership in this same way, which explains why less women are encouraged to pursue the superintendency and most often do not.

One assistant superintendent shared her experience of participating in the hiring process of a superintendent. She noticed a clear difference in how men and women were included and the discussion immediately following each interview. Perceived feelings of others versus qualifications/experience were noticeably different for potential job candidates based on the individual factor, gender. She revisited this unique interview experience and shared some of the thoughts of the interview team by saying,

We have to include a female, doesn't really matter who. Let's just make sure we interview a female. That certainly indicated some bias. But then when we had interviewed the female candidate, they were able to talk about some of the things they liked about her, but they would talk about how, like, we can't see her here. They talked a lot more in her debrief about how people would perceive her than they had about the other candidates - it was about the experience they were bringing to the table.

An assistant superintendent shared concerns with how "quality" of candidates for the superintendency was determined and how this may differ depending on the make-up of school board members. When interviewing potential candidates, board members may lack training and experience, which may cause them to be inconsistent in their hiring practices.

When you have a school board made up of community members and it is from their lens as to what makes quality, they have at times attached this job to being too much for a female... or can't be performed by a female... or they've never had the experience with a female, so it is lack of trust.

Connell et. al (2015) identified the community as the least supportive of hiring women as superintendents. Community members, as well as outside contractors and vendors, doubt the

competence and abilities of women to lead and make decisions. Another superintendent described this “lack of trust” for women as “blind trust” for men. She shared,

We now have four out of five-member board that is female, but they are not necessarily very supportive of female leaders. So in our district, I would say that they have had personality conflicts with more of the female leaders and they just kind of have a blind trust and acceptance of some of the male leaders.

Another superintendent elaborated on the difference in how board members privately and publicly recognize leaders in the district and how she observes a difference in men versus women leaders.

And so I watch the board and how they interact with my female directors versus my male directors. I watch the way that they speak about them when they're not there. And for the females, they seem to be very pleased with their work, but don't look for opportunities to praise them publicly. They don't look for opportunities to elevate them or invest in them. Whereas with the male leaders, in my perception, they don't even talk about their work. I don't even know if they're aware of their work, but they will be the first ones to be recognized publicly. They will be the first ones that in the community will be talked about as part as far as like our district excelling.

Another superintendent shared how this difference in how men and women leaders are perceived have not changed over time. A women superintendent, the only one the district had, was described as,

And so when people talk about her time here, I have not heard stories about what she accomplished or didn't accomplish. It wasn't relative to job performance. The things that seem to be propagated over and over again in history and lore is about her personality.

Another assistant superintendent agreed. Her overall feeling was that a women serving in the role of superintendent was not even something being considered by her district. She expressed this feeling by saying,

I don't know if I would want that job if the superintendent quit tomorrow...first of all I don't think they would come to me. I don't think a women superintendent in our district at the current time would be... she would face a lot of struggles just for that.

One other assistant superintendent shared how the feelings of others toward women serving in the top school position, superintendent, translates in who is actually serving in these roles by saying,

If you look across the state, there are predominantly more women in the assistant superintendent role and you don't see that same parallel in numbers and the superintendents. And that's especially true if the assistant superintendent title holds anything to do with curriculum instruction, that's where you will find most females.

Overall, both women and men share the same belief – “leadership is male.” Hiring practices, personal beliefs, and a lack of women serving in top school leadership positions were the primary reasons why participants’ responses indicated that gender bias continues to exist and prevents them from obtaining the superintendency. Participants, as well as school board and community members, feel that “leadership is male.” They agree that over time, not much has changed in how women are perceived and accepted as educational leaders, especially with women serving in the top school leadership position, superintendent. The single fact of a job candidate being a “women” is enough for others to question, doubt, or reject women moving into the position of superintendent.

### **Assertions**

Due to my qualitative research study involving the use of in-depth, phenomenological based interviewing, I was able to focus on the lived experiences, and make meaning of the experiences, of superintendent-certified women educators from their point of view - how they lived, experienced, and created meaning through leadership in the superintendent job search process. I

created assertions based on the five themes that emerged from my study – geography, family or career, mentors, grooming, and leadership is “male”/gender bias. Assertions were derived from the data collected through interviews and provide women educational leaders awareness of other women educational leaders’ experiences while aspiring to move into the position of superintendent.

### **Assertion #1**

**Superintendent-certified women educators must feel they are able to maintain or improve their current work-life balance to aspire to serve in the top school leadership position, superintendent.**

Participants’ responses indicated a desire to maintain or improve their current work-life balance. In determining whether participants felt they were achieving good work-life balance, they considered time spent at and away from work as well as whether they felt they were forced to make a choice between their family and career. Two of the themes that emerged from this study, geography and family or career, support this assertion.

Women educational leaders recognize the time commitment associated with serving in top school leadership positions. However, participants struggle to imagine themselves moving from the position of assistant superintendent to superintendent due to a perceived decrease in work-life balance. Kelsey et. al (2014) believes that women do identify conflict between work and family. The time commitment that comes along with serving as a superintendent causes women to delay seeking their first superintendent position until their children are older and more self-sufficient.

Despite participants aspiring to serve in this top school leadership position, movement into it is viewed as a giant leap in which they need to carefully consider. Sperandio and Devdas (2015) found when striving to achieve work/life balance and weighing this with the demands of the job, women desire to limit their mobility. They prefer to seek superintendent positions within their current school district or one within a reasonable commuting distance to their home. When one

assistant superintendent was asked about her current position and whether it was an ideal fit for her, she stressed the importance of time and location and how this is factored into her decision making. “I feel like I’m not stealing my loyalties, living in one place with my family, but working somewhere else.” When continuing to elaborate on how she would carefully consider a new position she shared,

I would think of geography, because do I move or do I not move this late in my career? I don't know if I want to buy another house...And I don't want to start another mortgage, especially if it's not my forever house. And so I would think about that.

The ability or inability to maintain or improve work-life balance is influencing participants’ decisions to move into the superintendency. It is also a primary factor in deciding whether a position is an ideal fit or not. When removing family, specifically school-aged children, from work-life balance, participants felt freedom in making career decisions. Munoz et. al (2017a) found women leaders viewed their desire to serve in a leadership role as a sacrifice to their family. This idea of family abandonment, which included reasons such as children, a spouse, and potential relocation were not viewed as something they were able to maintain or be successful at while also serving in the position of superintendent. Women leaders struggled with the belief that they were making a choice – family or career. This choice led to women leaders’ disinterest in continuing to pursue this position due to family being a top priority in their lives. Another assistant superintendent shared,

Well, I intentionally held off trying to get my toe into superintendency until my child was out of high school because he was a very involved kid. I felt like as my career expanded, he got shortchanged along the way with my time schedule and whatnot. So I definitely didn't want to do that. But he's in college now and now I'm free to do whatever I want.

Participants' short- and long-term career goals are driven by the desire to maintain or improve their work-life balance. Participants further described work-life balance as their ability to be present in their families' lives. Additionally, a work environment/boss that supports this same belief, good work-life balance, is appealing. Due to all participants expressing satisfaction with their current work-life balance, the expectation to maintain or improve it highly influences future career decisions. As one assistant superintendent shared,

So I would say short term, the biggest factors are my family and just ensuring that I can still be present for them. I feel like I've been very blessed that I can still be a good mom and I have very supportive boss, you know, who helps me to balance work-life balance. So I would not leave my current position unless I could guarantee that same thing.

Throughout listening to participants' responses, I discovered a common support in positively influencing work-life balance – spouses. Three of the four participants' spouses hold a job in the field of education. Additionally, two of the four participants' spouses work within the same school district. Lumby and Azaola (2014) believe that parenting is more closely associated with women than men. They further explain how for women to take on the role of a leader, they must remove themselves from what it means to be a woman in order to fit the idea of a model leader. A supportive spouse eliminates the idea that women must remove themselves from “what it means to be a woman in order to fit the idea of a model leader.” When an assistant superintendent discussed how she would determine whether to accept a new position as superintendent she shared,

A lot of depending factors - where is it at and how far away is it? My husband is a teacher in the district so we are not going to move away. How close in proximity it was to us...I would think very hard.

When another assistant superintendent responded to what would make a position an ideal fit or not she referenced both her and her husband engaging in the same schedules and activities,



which is centered around school. She explained, “My husband’s a coach, so we're just always at school. It's just kind of part of our life and who we are.”

Superintendent-certified women educators seek the ability to maintain or improve their work-life balance. When considering which jobs to apply and interview for, participants value location and time. A position that is close to home with less of a commute is more desirable. This also allows for more availability with family, especially for school aged children. Moving into the top school position of superintendent is viewed as more of a time commitment than other educational leadership roles. When moving into this position, participants felt strongly about not feeling like they need to make a choice – family or career. Supportive spouses are an important part of their journey and advancement through educational leadership. Spouses can positively influence women’s feelings of being able to successfully move into the superintendency and maintain or improve their work-life balance.

## **Assertion #2**

**Superintendent-certified women educators require more than mentoring relationships, they need “champions”, when aspiring to move into superintendency.**

Participants’ responses demonstrated an interest in and dependency on mentoring relationships. All participants shared formal and informal mentoring relationships throughout their careers in educational leadership. Many of these relationships involved being mentored by someone seated in the position they are aspiring to, superintendent. However, a clear distinction between a mentor who answers questions and provides advice, versus someone who goes out of their way to find opportunities for their mentee to advance in their career, was evident. Due to less women applying and interviewing for the top school position, superintendent, a “champion” can assist women in the job search process. Munoz et al. (2014b) found women do not apply and

interview for the position of superintendent as many times as men do. Surprisingly, over half of superintendent certified women have never applied for a position of superintendent compared to less than a quarter of superintendent certified men. Accordingly, the success rate of attaining the position of superintendent is almost 40% greater for men. Two of the themes that emerged from this study, mentors and grooming, support this assertion.

When participants explained why they are serving in their current leadership position, assistant superintendent, three out of four attributed their move to a “champion” versus a mentor. A “champion” was described as someone who significantly contributed to the advancement of their career and attainment of their current position. Connell et. al (2015) found that women feel mentors can influence school boards and others in top school leadership positions to recruit or interview women. Mentors would go out of their way to recommend and persuade others to hire their mentees. By providing school boards with information related to candidates’ competence and skills prior to interviewing, women felt they were assisted by mentors in acquiring these positions. As one assistant superintendent shared, “I definitely recognize the people that intervened on my behalf and helped to get me where I’m at, so there are people looking out for me.” Another assistant superintendent explained how a “champion” impacted her decision making,

I thought I could have stayed there (in current position) for years and the job came up because someone was retiring. My director said, you need to go for that job. And I’m like, oh, I don’t want that job. I just was not interested. He’s like, it’s a cabinet level job. I want you to be on the superintendent’s cabinet. And so I went and talked to the retiring director.

Participants’ stories included long term relationships with “champions” in top school leadership positions. These relationships led mentees to view their mentors as family. Future career decisions are influenced by past actions taken by their mentor as their “champion” and continuing

to place them in more advanced positions, such as superintendent, in the future. As one assistant superintendent explained her relationship with her “champion”,

I mean she's mentored me since I started in the district. That's why I've moved up in different positions because we've had a very close relationship for many many years. She's like a second mom to me. So I'm very appreciative for that. I'm blessed in that way.

Participants’ interactions with “champions” included unique experiences that placed them in situations where they viewed themselves as serving at the same level as their “champion,” engaging in the same opportunities, and working together as a team. This is especially true when women educational leaders serve as “champions” for superintendent-certified women who aspire to move into the superintendency. Katz (2006) found current women superintendents viewed other women leaders as collaborative, not driven by the idea of holding power or control over others and being good listeners. Women leaders who served as the first women superintendents in their district, with no women superintendents to emulate, noted gender discrimination was a shared barrier they felt they needed to overcome. One assistant superintendent described her champion as,

My former superintendent was 100% collaborative. She felt her role was to train me up. Everything was inclusive. A very unique relationship. She was a mentor of mine. I was allowed to basically do and be at everything I wanted to. I was taken to national and state level conferences that other people were not. If she was presenting somewhere, I co-presented. Really - just what a true mentoring relationship should have been.

Superintendent-certified women educators’ leadership experience has been significantly impacted by “champions.” From those who helped participants seek and obtain positions they may have otherwise not have looked-for or seen themselves in, to those who continue to pave the way during their future job searches, they are critical in helping more women move into the top school

leadership position, superintendent. According to the American Association of School Administrators [AASA] decennial studies, the percentage of female superintendents across the nation over the last 10 years - 24.1% (2010) and 26.68% (2020). Women continue to be disproportionally represented in the top school leadership position, superintendent. With little change in women serving as superintendents across our country, “champions” are needed now more than ever.

### **Assertion #3**

**School districts, working collaboratively with school boards, need to establish norms to effectively hire school leaders – with the goal of recognizing mutual objective qualities, which reduce gender bias.**

Participants’ responses demonstrated that they themselves, as well as other key members of school communities, accept and prefer men to serve in educational leadership roles. These beliefs were not found to be based on facts and evidence that support men versus women serving in these roles. Instead, stories, ideas, opinions, and practices that are more in favor of men serving in leadership roles, such as the top school position, superintendent, were shared. All participants provided detailed personal experiences that provided evidence of preference being given to men who serve in educational leadership roles. One of the themes that emerged from this study, leadership is “male”/gender bias, supports this assertion.

Common to all participants was the issue of gender bias. Each participant detailed her own personal stories that included the community, colleagues, and school boards. Connell et. al (2015) identified the community as the least supportive of hiring women as superintendents. Community members, as well as outside contractors and vendors, doubt the competence and abilities of women to lead and make decisions. As one assistant superintendent explained this same belief,

When you have a school board made up of community members and it is from their lens as to what makes quality, they have at times attached this job to being too much for a female... or can't be performed by a female... or they've never had the experience with a female, so it is lack of trust.

Another assistant superintendent shared her experience serving on a team after interviewing the only women candidate for superintendent by saying,

But then when we had interviewed the female candidate, they were able to talk about some of the things they liked about her, but they would talk about how, like, we can't see her here. They talked a lot more in her debrief about how people would perceive her. Then they had about the other candidates. The other candidates, it was about the experience they were bringing to the table. But I felt like when we debriefed about her, we talked a lot more about our perceptions of her, as well as how she'd be perceived by staff and by the community. It was less about the work she had done and less about the skills or the potential work she could do, in my opinion.

Bongiorno et. al (2014) found women leaders, and whether they display tentative or assertive behaviors, impacts how both men and women perceive them as being likeable and influential. Women who fail to display assertive behaviors in leadership positions may be viewed as unlikeable and uninfluential. If women deviate from male stereotypical standards, they may be negatively viewed as ineffective leaders. As one assistant superintendent described herself at a meeting with other male leaders she said, "So you try to make sure that you stay emotionally regulated and don't get kind of hyper over things. I mean, like, you kind of just try to learn to play the game."

Another assistant superintendent found women who display assertive behaviors to be viewed as unlikeable and ineffective. How members of the school community described their only female superintendent was not focused on job performance but instead on her behavior and personality. She stated,

But the stories that are told about the one female superintendent always focus on her strong personality and not as a positive trait. And, you know, her strong leadership seemed to rub a lot of people the wrong way. And the stories that people tell about her describe her as eccentric or difficult. And so when people talk about her time here, I have not heard stories about what she accomplished or didn't accomplish. It wasn't relative to job performance. The things that seem to be propagated over and over again in history and lore is about her personality.

All four participants have traveled through educational career pathways that have led them to the same position – assistant superintendent. This common pathway for superintendent certified women educators is supported by research that does not place women at an advantage when engaging in the job search process for superintendency. Davis and Bowers (2019) found the most common pathway for first time superintendents was becoming superintendent-certified while in the principalship and then being hired out of that same position and into the superintendency (36.94%). When analyzing pathways by gender, women start and stay within the assistant superintendency (23.83%), closely followed by starting and staying with the principalship (22.2%). The most common pathway for men is earning their superintendent-certification during the principalship and being hired out of this position directly into the superintendency (41.32%). As one assistant superintendent shared her experience with a lack of women serving as superintendents and in the role most men are hired directly into the superintendency from (principal),

I would like to see a female leader in that position. I'd like us to see strong female leaders in director positions and in our high school administration and our middle school administration where we do not see female leadership.

When participants described their educational leadership experience prior to obtaining their current position, assistant superintendent, they have held an average of six positions. In the same way, Brunner and Kim (2010) found pathways for women include additional roles that most men

do not obtain, such as director or coordinator. These additional roles, which are most often held by women, appear to provide additional barriers to acquiring the superintendency, especially if men are able to bypass them and enter the superintendency directly from the principalship.

School boards hiring preferences and practices are not in alignment with one another, which contributes to the absence of women in the top school leadership position, superintendent. School boards prefer candidates pursuing the superintendency to have experience with curriculum and instruction. To support this belief, Brunner and Kim (2010) found when approximately 3,000 school board members were asked which leadership role they preferred superintendents to possess, 41.3% chose education leader (curriculum and instruction) and 33.4% chose managerial leader (general management, budget, and finance). Despite these data, and women traditionally holding these preferred roles (curriculum and instruction), more men are serving as superintendents. As one assistant superintendent reflected on which educational leadership roles are more held by women throughout the state of Indiana she shared,

If you look across the state, there are predominantly more women in the assistant superintendent role and you don't see that same parallel in numbers and the superintendents. And that's especially true if the assistant superintendent title holds anything to do with curriculum instruction, that's where you will find most females.

Similarly, Mullangi and Jagsi (2019) believe organizations are not seeking ways in which to further promote women to leadership positions. Issues related to IP within organizations are caused by women lacking female role models or mentors to emulate and leadership pipelines excluding or having bias that affects candidate pools. By being proactive, organizations can be transformed to increase equitable representation of women as leaders. As one assistant superintendent shared overcoming this same belief of unequitable representation of women as leaders by saying,

So I have concerns sometimes that, you know, I'm closing other doors. And the one that I want to open may not open for me, but then in the same way, I somewhat see it as a challenge or an opportunity to change that and to be able to show this district and our community what a strong female leader looks like. And to change that narrative, I certainly don't want us to go another hundred years without female leaders that can be successful. I think that, you know, it's not just about me in that position whether I would get it or not. I would like to see a female leader in that position.

Superintendent-certified women educators deserve to be on the same playing field as men when entering the job search process and aspiring to serve in the top school leadership position, superintendent. School boards, made up of community members, hiring preferences and practices, both personal and professional, do not promote the movement of women into superintendency. In addition to this, our society continues to display deeply rooted beliefs of women not serving in top leadership positions, such as superintendent.

### **Summary**

Through use of in-depth, phenomenological based interviews, I was able to make meaning of all four participants' experiences related to my research topic – women educational leaders' movement into superintendency. From the data collected through this qualitative study, five themes emerged: geography, family or career, mentors, grooming, and leadership is “male”/gender bias. Based on these five themes, I developed the following assertions:

1. Superintendent-certified women educators must feel they are able to maintain or improve their current work-life balance to aspire to serve in the top school leadership position, superintendent.
2. Superintendent-certified women educators require more than mentoring relationships, they need “champions”, when aspiring to move into superintendency.



3. School districts, working collaboratively with school boards, need to establish norms to effectively hire school leaders – with the goal of recognizing mutual objective qualities, which reduce gender bias.

Recommendations for future research and research questions will be discussed in chapter 5.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to learn about the path to advancement: the experiences of women educational leaders' movement into the superintendency. This chapter contains the implications of this study, including the research questions examined, recommendations for future research, and the limitations of the study. The unique design of this study allowed participants to reconstruct and make meaning of their lived experiences with the goal of relating them to the research topic – women educational leaders' movement into superintendency. Using Seidman's (2019) structure and process for interviewing, I focused on and strived for open-ended, in-depth inquiry, which allowed participants to provide details that were related to a specific purpose. This research method allowed me to better understand the lived experiences of participants, in leadership and the job search process. Their experiences and perceptions of the job search process allowed me to explore why women are underrepresented in this top school leadership position.

The analysis of participants' responses caused five themes to emerge – geography, family or career, mentors, grooming, leadership is "male"/gender bias. The five themes supported the development of three assertions. As women educational leaders continue their path to advancement and pursue the superintendency, maintaining, and preferably improving, their work-life balance is a requirement. Where a superintendent's position is located, and how the location of this position may impact perceptions of balancing both family and a career, impacts women educational leaders' decision making. Women educational leaders' movement into superintendency is greatly influenced by other educational leaders who are in positions above them. There is a clear distinction between mentors and champions. Educational leaders who serve as champions to

women pursuing the superintendency do more than answer questions and open doors to opportunities. They play a significant role in the obtainment of higher-level positions, which sometimes they are groomed for or are given. Women educational leaders will continue to encounter barriers on their path to the superintendency. Overall, leadership continues to be viewed as “male” by both women and men. To overcome these barriers, school districts will need to create a hiring process for superintendents that is fair and equitable, with the goal of reducing gender bias.

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How do superintendent-certified women educators perceive or make meaning of the superintendent job search process?
2. How do superintendent-certified women educators describe the role of leadership experience in the superintendent job search process?

### **Discussion of Findings**

Research Question #1 – How do superintendent-certified women educators perceive or make meaning of the superintendent job search process? All four participants interviewed are currently serving as assistant superintendents. In the educational leadership line of succession, a person seated in this role is potentially next in line to serve as a superintendent. Despite being seated in this high-level educational leadership position, with the required credentials and experience necessary to obtain the top school leadership position, superintendent, only one of the four assistant superintendents is actively participating in the superintendent job search process. This assistant superintendent delayed pursuing the superintendency due to the importance she placed on maintaining good work-life balance. She shared, “Well, I intentionally held off trying to get my toe into superintendency until my child was out of high school because he was a very involved kid.” Kelsey et. al (2014) believes that women do identify conflict between work and

family. The time commitment that comes along with serving as a superintendent causes women to delay seeking their first superintendent position until their children are older and more self-sufficient. They perceive advancing in their career, beyond that of an assistant superintendent, as a risk to their current work-life balance. All assistant superintendents described their current work-life balance as being able to pursue both their personal and professional interests in a way that makes them feel like they are not having to make a choice of one over the other. Sperandio and Devdas (2015) found when striving to achieve work/life balance and weighing this with the demands of the job, women desire to limit their mobility. They prefer to seek superintendent positions within their current school district or one within a reasonable commuting distance to their home. With only one superintendent position available in each school district, opportunities to remain in the same geographic location they currently reside or work in is extremely limited. Movement into the superintendency, and the goal of maintaining or improving work-life balance, is challenging for participants and is the leading cause of why they are delaying their involvement in the job search process.

The assistant superintendents interviewed perceive the job search process as something they do not need to be actively participating in to be able to move into the position of superintendent. Munoz et al. (2014b) discovered women do not apply and interview for the position of superintendent as many times as men do. A study conducted on school central office leaders found over half of superintendent-certified women have never applied for a position of superintendent compared to less than a quarter of superintendent certified men. Three of the four assistant superintendents in this study feel they are the next person in line for the superintendency at their current school district. The assistant superintendent who is actively seeking a position shared this same belief until she applied, interviewed, and was not offered the position of

superintendent at her current school district. Participants expressed feeling a strong connection to their community and are not eager to serve as a superintendent outside of it. As one assistant superintendent shared, “I want to be a part of the community I lead. And I don't see myself being able to lead a community that I'm not a part of.”

Assistant superintendents interviewed identified the need for others seated in roles above them to assist in their superintendent job search process. This desired assistance from others was described as someone going out of their way to create opportunities for advancement and movement into higher positions. An assistant superintendent interviewed described this as, “My former superintendent was 100% collaborative. She felt her role was to train me up. Everything was inclusive. Very unique relationship.” Another assistant superintendent said, “So they were mentoring me, you know, the instructional part, giving me opportunities at the same time that they were strategically championing me, you know, with others and putting me in a position to ensure I would be successful.” Connell et. al (2015) also found that women feel mentors can influence school boards and others in top school leadership positions to recruit or interview women. Mentors would go out of their way to recommend and persuade others to hire their mentees. An assistant superintendent shared, “I definitely recognize the people that intervened on my behalf and helped to get me where I'm at, so there are people looking out for me.”

Each assistant superintendent believes that being a woman places them at a disadvantage in the superintendent job search process. One assistant superintendent interviewed was part of a team responsible for hiring the next superintendent of her school district. She shared evidence of women job candidates being viewed differently than men by saying, “We have to include a female, doesn't really matter who. Let's just make sure we interview a female.” Assistant superintendents are concerned with how school boards and community members perceive women in leadership

and their lack of experience in working with women leaders. They feel their perceptions and lack of experiences may impact their ability to move into the top school leadership position, superintendent. Sperandio and Devdas (2015) found these gendered barriers, held by both women and men, appear to be of greater importance to the hiring process than job candidate's education, credentials, and experience.

Research Question #2 - How do superintendent-certified women educators describe the role of leadership experience in the superintendent job search process? All four assistant superintendents described their educational leadership career pathway as being complex, with holding between five and eight positions prior to serving in their current role. Brunner and Kim (2010) found pathways for women include additional roles that most men do not obtain, such as director or coordinator. These additional roles, which are most often held by women, appear to provide additional barriers to acquiring the superintendency. Assistant superintendents interviewed expressed traveling down similar pathways of most superintendent-certified women educators – currently serving/ending in the position of assistant superintendent. Davis and Bowers (2019) found the most common pathway for first time superintendents was becoming superintendent-certified while in the principalship and then being hired out of that same position and into the superintendency (36.94%). When analyzing pathways by gender, women start and stay within the assistant superintendency (23.83%). Assistant superintendents interviewed attribute leadership experience in curriculum and instruction to more women than men. As one assistant superintendent confirmed this belief by saying, “If you look across the state, there are predominantly more women in the assistant superintendent role...And that's especially true if the assistant superintendent title holds anything to do with curriculum instruction, that's where you will find most females.” Women feel their leadership experience typecasts them into this specific

educational leadership role, which makes it more challenging to remove themselves from and advance to the top school leadership position, superintendent.

It is evident that all assistant superintendents interviewed feel they possess leadership experience desired in candidates pursuing the superintendency. Their similar background in curriculum and instruction is commonly preferred by most school districts. Brunner and Kim (2010) found when approximately 3,000 school board members were asked which leadership role they preferred superintendents to possess, the top two choices were - 41.3% education leader (curriculum and instruction) and 33.4% managerial leader (general management, budget, and finance). Despite these data, and women traditionally holding these preferred roles (curriculum and instruction), more men are serving as superintendents. Assistant superintendents interviewed believe their experience is not valued in the same way as men. As one assistant superintendent recalled her experience in a discussion with an interview team about the only female candidate for superintendency, in relation to the other male candidates, “They talked a lot more in her debrief about how people would perceive her then they had about the other candidates. The other candidates, it was about the experience they were bringing to the table.” Another assistant superintendent interviewed shared her knowledge of the only woman superintendent to serve in her school district by saying, “And so when people talk about her time here, I have not heard stories about what she accomplished or didn't accomplish. It wasn't relative to job performance.”

Superintendent-certified women educators do not feel their leadership experience adds to or carries a lot of weight in the superintendent job search process. Connell et. al (2015) identified the community as the least supportive of hiring women as superintendents. Community members, as well as outside contractors and vendors, doubt the competence and abilities of women to lead and make decisions. Assistant superintendents interviewed attribute this to the make-up of the

school board and what they determine as “quality” candidates. As one assistant superintendent shared, “It is from their lens as to what makes quality, they have at times attached this job to being too much for a female...or can’t be performed by a female... or they’ve never had the experience with a female.”

### **Recommendations**

Further research on how school districts are held accountable for tracking current and previous administrators by gender and race/ethnicity is needed. In addition to this, the process on how school districts track promotion rates of administrators should also be researched. School districts need to establish a system of accountability that can be easily accessed by the public. This system will assist in determining whether progress in improving diversity in educational leadership is being made. Integrating this data into a system that is already being utilized to track other school data, such as the Indiana Department of Education INview online data portal, which tracks performance and progress, is preferred. This online system is already collecting data on educator and student population by race/ethnicity. Analyzing the results of hiring and promoting administrators by gender and race/ethnicity, can assist school districts in setting goals to improve diversity and representation for identified groups, such as women. Due to school boards, who are primarily made up of community members, being ever-changing, it is imperative for them to have this information readily available prior to beginning the hiring process for a school district’s superintendent. Both school districts and school boards need to be held accountable for progress in diversity of educational leadership, especially the top school leadership position superintendent.

School boards need to establish best practices for hiring superintendents. Of utmost importance in the creation of these best practices should be the inclusion of bias training, which also includes how to prevent unconscious bias. Many school board members in Indiana belong to



the Indiana School Boards Association [ISBA]. Despite no formal training being required of school board members, ISBA provides ongoing events and opportunities to current and new board members. One event, the New Board Member Academy, is a potential avenue in which to include this necessary training. Ensuring each school board member participates in bias training prior to beginning the hiring process for a new superintendent, will assist in the diversity and representation of job candidates from underrepresented groups, such as women. Due to school board members representing the public, and whose primary job it is to hire and evaluate a school district's superintendent, it is critical they are fair and consistent in implementing established best practices that promote representation from all. Further research on the impact bias training has on school boards hiring outcomes of new superintendents is necessary to determine if improvement in diversity and representation of underrepresented groups are made.

Further research on how universities raise awareness to barriers faced by women in educational leadership, and how they support women in overcoming them throughout their journey to pursuing the superintendency, is needed. Women in educational leadership positions continue to express the idea of being “the only” woman. They often enter new positions without a network of other women. Early intervention in superintendent preparation programs, can assist women in feeling like they can successfully face barriers, which may increase the number of women applying and interviewing for superintendents' positions. Superintendent-certified women educators identify unique challenges, such as work-life balance, and how they contribute to women delaying and seeking the superintendency. The idea of women educational leaders working with women mentors, is not something easily obtained, due to the lack of them, which in turn creates an additional challenge for women. Women's support systems need to be developed so that when they enter environments where they view themselves as “the only” they are not alone. The

responsibility of women educational leaders' building their own support system and network should not be their burden to bear. School board members and educational leaders need to create an inclusive culture, which consists of leading by example and being champions for other leaders in underrepresented groups.

### **Limitations**

The delimitations of my research study were due to the boundaries I established. First, I was intentional in the selection of my participants. Superintendent-certified women educational leaders, who reside in the state of Indiana and who aspire to become superintendents, were sought out. I was successful in identifying my participants through the approach of purposeful small samples. All participants needed to possess knowledge and experience related to being superintendent-certified women seeking the superintendency. All four participants were identified through a list of potential participants, which was created through assistance provided by the IAPSS and WELL. This study was not designed to only include women educational leaders serving as assistant superintendents. However, coincidentally all participants held the same position, assistant superintendent. If I had included participants outside of this group, the results of this study could have potentially changed, and the outcome of this study may have been different.

Second, I narrowed down the research area in which I explored – how women educators perceive or make meaning of the superintendent job search process and describe the role of leadership experience in the superintendent job search process. The perceptions of women who are actively seeking the superintendency, and those who are not but would agree to serve in the position if offered or recruited, are specific to the experiences of this sample group in this study. By narrowing down the area in which I explored, women's experiences during the superintendent

job search process, I further defined the parameters of this study. If the parameters of this study had been altered or expanded, the outcomes of this study may have changed.

Finally, my own potential biases may have impacted the analysis of my research findings. Due to me being a superintendent-certified woman who resides in the state of Indiana and may potentially seek the superintendency in the future, I needed to be open to the possibility of others having experiences that were different than my own. I minimized this limitation by engaging in reflection and discussion with my research committee and colleagues. I strived to make meaning of participants' experiences that was gathered throughout the process of data collection and analysis. If another researcher conducted this study who does not have a similar background and experience as the participants in this study, the outcomes of this study could potentially change.

### **Conclusions**

The literature and results of this study confirm that superintendent-certified women educators are not engaging in the superintendent job search process in the same way or at the same rate as men. Internal and external factors contribute to how women perceive or make meaning of the superintendent job search process. By recognizing how these factors, in combination with women's leadership experience, impact the superintendent job search process, no change in who is moving into the position of superintendent will be made. By focusing on how we can support women in maintaining and improving their work-life balance will lead to more women aspiring to serve in the top school leadership position, superintendent. By more leaders stepping up and being willing to serve as "champions" versus mentors, women will be further supported and provided with additional opportunities for advancement in educational leadership. Lastly, the hiring process of superintendents needs to be altered by the education received by school board members prior to engaging in the superintendent search and selection process. Unless gender bias is reduced by

proactive measures, superintendent-certified women educators will not be provided with the same opportunities men seeking this same position are.

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## **APPENDIX A: INVITATION LETTER**

Purdue IRB# 2021-1086

Study Title: “The Path to Advancement: The Experiences of Women Educational Leaders’ Movement into the Superintendency.”

Principal Investigator: Dr. Marilyn Hirth with Pamela Moore (Key Personnel and Doctoral Candidate)

Dear Prospective Interview Participant,

My name is Pamela Moore and I am a doctoral candidate at Purdue University. My doctoral research study is titled, “The Path to Advancement: The Experiences of Women Educational Leaders’ Movement into the Superintendency.” The reason for this correspondence is to ask for your assistance in conducting this essential research. You have been selected as a potential participant in my study because you meet the following criteria: 1) identify as a woman who resides in the state of Indiana and holds an educator’s license with the content area of District Administrator License: Superintendent; 2) aspire to serve as a superintendent. Based on the selection criteria, this e-mail serves as an invitation for you to participate in this research study.

Your participation will contribute to the current literature about the absence of superintendent-certified women educators leading our public schools. I seek to better understand women educational leaders’ pathways, and internal and external factors that may influence them. Your experiences and perceptions of the superintendent job search process will allow me to explore why women are underrepresented in this top school leadership position.

If you choose to participate in this research study, you will be asked to do two things:

- Participate in two, open-ended, in-depth interviews with me. Both interviews will be conducted virtually, using Google Meet, at a convenient time for you. Each interview will last no longer than 90 minutes and will be recorded. The goal of both interviews is for me to make meaning of your lived experiences in leadership and the superintendent job search process.

- Review a transcription document of our interviews for accuracy.

Your participation in this research study is strictly voluntary, and you may choose not to participate without fear of penalty or any negative consequences. No compensation will be offered for your participation. You will be able to withdraw from participation at any time and all interview data will be deleted, including the informed consent agreement.

An informed consent agreement will be provided prior to the first scheduled interview. There will be no individually identifiable information, remarks, comments or other identification of you as an individual participant.

If you would like to speak with me to further discuss your participation, please feel free to contact me via email at [mooreps@purdue.edu](mailto:mooreps@purdue.edu) or cell phone 219-309-6623 or my committee chair, Dr. Marilyn Hirth [mahirth@purdue.edu](mailto:mahirth@purdue.edu) by August 20, 2021.

If you agree to participate in this ground-breaking research, please reply to this email by August 20, 2021.

Thank you for your consideration,

Pamela S. Moore  
Doctoral Candidate  
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
Purdue University

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **Interview One – Life History and Lived Experience**

Describe your schooling experience from primary through post-secondary education. Please include details about any person or persons who influenced your education and educational choices.

Tell me about your experience in obtaining the position you are currently serving in?

Follow-up: How did you become aware of this position and acquire it?

Tell me as much as possible about your experience working as an administrator.

Follow-up: What is it like? Take me through a day in your life as “insert position.”

Who can you turn to for support in your current position?

Who can you turn to for guidance in your current position?

Tell me about your experience with mentors.

What does it mean to you to be a superintendent?

When in your career did you make the decision to pursue the superintendency?

What/who do you feel influenced your decision to pursue the superintendency?

Why did you obtain a superintendent’s license? Did obtaining this license influence your career goals?

Tell me about your experience in searching for a job as superintendent.

How did you become aware of superintendent jobs to apply to? How did you make the decision of which positions to apply to?

If your current school district offered you the position of superintendent, explain to me how you would make this decision of whether to accept the job.

If another school district offered you the position or recruited you, explain to me how you would make this decision of whether to accept the job.

What are some characteristics you feel you possess that put you at an advantage in obtaining a position as superintendent over other candidates? Disadvantage?

Tell me about one of your superintendent interviews. Reconstruct the details of the interview.

What feedback from school boards and search firms have you received after interviewing?

### **Interview Two-Reflection of Lived Experience**

Reflect on your career pathway in the field of education (ex: teaching, building leader, central office) and explain why you feel you are sitting in your current role.

Explain to me why you feel your current position is or is not an ideal fit for you?

Follow-up- geography, family, flexibility

Describe what you feel the difference is in holding the position of superintendent v. assistant superintendent?

Follow-up-Do you feel the preferred qualities for women v. men different for each of these positions?

How does working for a school board (as a superintendent) v. working for a superintendent (as an assistant superintendent) differ to you?

Describe what the ideal relationship would look like between you (as superintendent) and school board would be?

Follow-up-If you were the superintendent of your current district would it match what you are looking for as an ideal relationship?

Tell me about your working relationship with your superintendent? Does he/she have a role/impact on your future career choices?

Follow-up-who/what has the biggest impact on your future career choices?

Describe what would influence your decision to apply for a new position?

Follow-up (if they answer lateral move v. moving up)

You have obtained the required credentials-Ed.S. or Ph.D. and superintendent's license...explain why you are not pursuing a position as a superintendent?

Explain to me your 2 year, 10 year and end career goals? What factors influence these goals?

# VITA

Pamela S. Moore

## EDUCATION

2022	Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
2021	Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana Ed.S. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
2010	Purdue University, Hammond, Indiana M.S. in Educational Administration
2005	Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana B.A. in Elementary Education

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2017-Present	Discovery Charter School, Porter, Indiana Principal
2014-2017	Discovery Charter School, Porter, Indiana Assistant Principal
2005-2014	Duneland School Corporation, Chesterton, Indiana Elementary Teacher