Career Pathway Barriers, Strategies, and Practices of Female Superintendents in Rural
Georgia: A Narrative Inquiry

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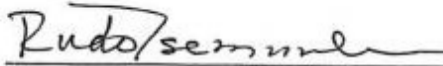of the Dewar College of Education and Human Services

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Erin S. Rehberg

Ed.S., Valdosta State University, 2014
M.Ed., Valdosta State University, 2009
B.S.Ed., The University of Georgia, 2005

This dissertation, "Career Pathway Barriers, Strategies, and Practices of Female Superintendents in Rural Georgia: A Narrative Inquiry" by Erin S. Rehberg, is approved by:

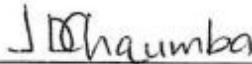|	
Dissertation Committee Chair/Researcher	Rudo E. Tsemunhu, Ph.D. Professor of Leadership, Technology & Workforce Development
Dissertation Committee Co-Chair	Nicole Gunn, Ed.D. Instructor of Adult and Career Education
Committee Member	Josphine Chaumba, Ph.D. Associate Professor & Program Director of Social Work
Committee Member	Donald Leech, Ed.D. Professor of Leadership, Technology & Workforce Development
Associate Provost for Graduate Studies and Research	Becky da Cruz, Ph.D. Associate Provost for Graduate Studies & Research

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Abstract

I investigated six rural Georgia female school superintendents' perceptions of trajectories into the superintendency and their roles and responsibilities as educational leaders. I examined how their life and career experiences shaped their professional roles as practicing female superintendents. This study contributes to the limited academic literature on female superintendents, focusing on the gender obstacles they overcame to find success in a male-dominated career. It also uses the voices of women in rural districts to tell their own stories. I used three conceptual lenses: feminist theory, the gatekeeping theory, and the structural empowerment theory to understand the women's main characteristics of rising to senior leadership positions in a rural school district. I developed four analytical themes from the data: 1) surviving in the male-dominated jungle of educational leadership, 2) being safer at home, 3) the paradox of female leadership, and 4) balancing work-life demands. The findings suggest that female educational leaders adapt and change their behaviors to survive a male-dominated landscape. Although female superintendents are severely underrepresented, they bring to leadership a complete range of the qualities modern leaders need, including self-awareness, resilience, creativity, humility, and authenticity. Male leaders might benefit from these unique characteristics. The research shows the strategies to address the social, political, and economic challenges females face in their day-to-day practices as superintendents. This study's findings are significant for those who mentor female educational leaders, design educational leadership programs and hire school superintendents.

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Acknowledgments

This research project would not have happened without the support I received from many people.

First, I attribute any success to my parents and the love of reading and learning they instilled in me at an early age. Thank you for reading to me, taking me on countless trips to the public library, exposing me to art and good music, making sure I was in church every Sunday, being the PTA President (Mom), and drilling into my head that the worst thing you could ever say about a person is that he or she had potential (Dad). You made this project possible.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the memory of Melanie Chavaux.

Your influence on my life and career is immeasurable. Thank you for being my friend and investing in me. I miss you every day.

Chapter I

Introduction

I have worked in rural Georgia education for 17 years in various capacities, including teaching high school English, working as a school media specialist, and serving in district curriculum and instruction administration. During this time, I have attended many conferences on education. The general everyday attire of many women at these conferences on classroom instruction always amuses me. There is still plenty of cardigans and the newest style of monogrammed bags.

In 2018, I was fortunate enough to attend the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, with my superintendent. AASA is also known as "The School Superintendents' Association." I remember being immediately taken aback by the number of White men in grey suits when I walked in the door to the conference center. I had never seen so many men at an education conference. Before attending this conference, I never considered the vast difference in the percentage of superintendents who are male and those who are female, especially when compared to the rate of teachers who are male and those who are female. I have worked for male and female superintendents during my career but had never considered the barriers female superintendents likely faced in their journeys to and the position. I never thought these female superintendents had specific strategies to break the glass ceiling in education.

When I began the doctoral program at Valdosta State University, I knew I specifically wanted to conduct a study on school district-level leadership. My curiosity in district leadership was piqued when I was in a course with the Georgia School Superintendents Association (GSSA) during the same school year I attended the AASA conference. In this course, the

facilitator discussed how school and district leadership differs, and I became curious about various educational leaders' perceptions. I explored several different dissertation topics until one professor suggested a study on female superintendents in Georgia. This conversation immediately took me right back to the moment in time when I looked around at the AASA conference and noticed the lack of females in attendance. I immediately considered the rich stories to be told on this topic from female superintendents who have sought and successfully earned the position. This revelation lead to questions in my mind such as, "What are the stories of these female superintendents?", "What were the difficulties female superintendents had to deal with as they navigated the journey to the superintendency?" and "What did it take for these female superintendents to earn the position?" Furthermore, I wondered what these female leaders would say about the underrepresentation of females in this position.

I understood a qualitative study would allow me to hear from female superintendents themselves in my quest to understand challenges female educational leaders have faced in their pursuit of the top position in the field. I read other studies on this topic, developed my potential research questions, and determined the best gathering and analyzing data. As I prepared to collect data, I greatly anticipated sitting across the table from these powerful women and listening to their stories, learning about barriers they may have faced. I was determined to discover how they overcame barriers and what they believe may help increase female school superintendents' influence. Additionally, I realized the stories in my study might not reflect what previous research studies have uncovered about female superintendents' experiences, but their stories are essential.

Brunner (2000), a leading researcher on female superintendents, said she "pursued the advice of successful women superintendents with the hope it would help other women who are in

or aspiring to educational leadership" (p. 10). Because 20 years have transpired since Brunner published these words, I knew it was time to hear new voices on the topic of educational leadership for females, especially those who have become superintendents of school districts.

Statement of the Problem

Males dominate the school superintendent position in the female-dominated career field of education (Maranto et al., 2019). In Georgia, 71% of school superintendents are male, and 29% are female (Georgia School Superintendents Association [GSSA], 2020). Researchers asserted the disproportionate number of female superintendents had been a neglected area of research (Björk, 2000; Brunner, 1999; Maranto et al., 2018). According to Brunner (2000), "Research focused on women superintendents was and is as scarce and scattered as the women themselves" (p.76). Notably, there is a lack of understanding of deep issues concerning equitable representation and how to raise awareness among school board members and other critical stakeholders of the need to increase the number of women in educational leadership (Maranto et al., 2018).

Researchers determined several barriers hindering female educational leaders from earning the position of superintendent of schools (Brunner, 2000; Glass, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Maranto et al., 2018). Some barriers include gender biases of school boards and others who make decisions regarding hiring processes. Still, several greater ideological and cultural causes affect women's ability to earn this highest-ranking position in a school district (Maranto et al., 2018). Barriers for women to the superintendency include the poor positioning of women within the organization for promotions, a lack of experience in fiscal management, and an existing male-dominated "buddy system" in school leadership circles (Brunner, 2000; Glass,

2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Maranto et al., 2018). In the literature review, I discuss additional information about potential barriers.

Sharpe et al. (2004) reported that school boards receive fewer applications from women seeking the superintendent's position. If trends continued at the same rate as the number of females in the position, it will take three decades before the percentage of female superintendents is equitable with male superintendents (Kowalski et al., 2011). To be sure, the position of superintendent is demanding and requires knowledge of all of the working parts of the school system (Maranto et al., 2018). Those areas include finance, curriculum, special education, facilities, student services, transportation, and school nutrition. It is unclear what keeps females from either aspiring to or attaining the school superintendent position even though many have experience in all areas of education (Shakeshaft, 1989).

Several barriers prevent women from earning the school superintendent's position and the lack of females in this position. The percentage of females in the superintendent position does not match the rate of females working in education. Glass (2000) noted 72% of educators were female while 14.5% of superintendents were female. Since the AASA study in 2000, the statistics have improved nationwide. Approximately 24% of superintendents are women (Maranto et al., 2018). However, this percentage still does not match females enrolled in public schools or the percentage of employees teaching in public schools (Kowalski et al., 2011).

The superintendency barriers negatively affect females who aspire to this highest-ranking position in the field of education (Glass, 2000). Additionally, most school districts' leaders are not representative of most employees (Glass, 2000). The problem can also influence educational leadership programs, as they may not adequately prepare females who seek to become school superintendents (Glass, 2000). Mentorship relationships can be affected by a lack of

understanding of the problem's nature (Brunner, 2000). This problem also influences local boards of education members who seek to fill the superintendent's position, as they may not fully understand the implications of the lack of females in the role (Glass, 2000). The numerous challenges for females seeking to earn the school superintendent's position affect multiple stakeholders, so additional research on this topic will be valuable. Since other researchers have identified barriers, it is crucial to hear the voices of females who have overcome these barriers and challenges to earn the school superintendent's position.

Purpose

This researcher aimed to identify the professional experiences and strategies used by women who achieve school superintendence positions in rural Georgia regarding their career advancements. The purpose of this qualitative study was to fill gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of female superintendents in rural Georgia through the stories of women who have earned the position of the school superintendent. Notably, I focused on perceived barriers for females in the journey to the superintendent position, along with the strategies and practices allowing them to attain the position.

The researcher limited this study's scope to three core concepts related to female superintendents' experiences in rural Georgia. The first core concept in the study was their life and career experiences, as they pertained to becoming a superintendent. This concept was central to adequately describing the female superintendents and factors in their lives contributing to the desire to pursue the school superintendent's position and the challenges faced in their journeys. Björk (2000) indicated it is important to understand how female superintendents perceive their experiences in inequitable circumstances. There is also a need to understand female

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superintendents' experiences better to analyze women's ways of leading and their use of power (Björk, 2000).

The second core concept was the perceived barriers to the superintendency for female educational leaders. This core concept was central to the study because it allowed the research participants to reflect on and examine barriers and challenges in their career journeys related to those identified in other research studies. Secondary core concepts were the previously identified barriers. These barriers included but were not limited to the positions held by female educational leaders, a lack of credentials, a lack of experience in fiscal management, a lack of interest in the position, familial obligations, the glass ceiling, and adherence to societal norms (Brunner, 2000; Glass, 2000; Maranto et al., 2018).

The third core concept in the study was strategies used by female superintendents to obtain the position. The strategies included the plans made by females as they decided to pursue the school superintendent's position. These strategies consisted of the female superintendents' political positioning, educational credentials earned, other positions held, and different strategies identified by the research participants. Brunner (2000) asserted the importance of focusing on how women have overcome or worked around their inequality experiences.

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the life and career experiences of identified female school superintendents in rural Georgia regarding their career advancement?

RQ2: What do female school superintendents in rural Georgia believe are strategies for increasing female superintendents at school districts in the southern U.S. region?

Significance

There is a lack of understanding of the equitable representation of female superintendents and how to raise awareness among school board members and other critical stakeholders of the need to increase the number of women in educational leadership (Maranto et al., 2018). Brunner (2000) conducted a qualitative study on 12 female superintendents. She indicated research is most influential when focused on the stories of participants' experiences rather than on just what they do.

The real-life stories of female superintendents in this study illuminated the extent to which life and career experiences contributed to females' rise into the superintendency. Furthermore, I elucidate the perceived barriers they overcame, strategies to earn the job, and the practices leading to the superintendent's position. Females who desire the superintendent's role can better understand the journey to the superintendency as a result of this study. This study's findings are also significant for those who mentor female educational leaders who design educational leadership programs and boards of education.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework in a research study outlines the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories related to the topic (Maxwell, 2013). This proposal's conceptual framework focused on my experiential knowledge, existing theory, and existing research related to the research study topic. I applied this conceptual framework to explain what was happening and connect all of the components. Yet, it is important to note conceptual frameworks evolve as studies progress (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

Researcher's Interest

   In a qualitative study, it is essential to recognize that the research study often has personal experiences related to the topic (Maxwell, 2013). These personal connections to the topic can lead to deeper insights. Maxwell (2013) suggested by acknowledging the experiences of female superintendents and other educational leaders; researchers can treat their experiential knowledge as a valuable research study component rather than something to be eliminated.

  My interest in school and school system leadership dynamics drove this study. During the first 16 years of my education career, I worked under five principals and four school superintendents; two of the superintendents were females, and one principal was female. I have witnessed the effects of leadership turnover and even worked in a school system involved in a lawsuit with a previous superintendent. According to the superintendent, her gender may have cost her the job. Colleagues shared stories of reluctance to hire or promote female educational leaders because they doubt their leadership abilities because of their gender. I know people who have been reluctant or doubtful of leaders' effectiveness because of their gender. Working in systems with these dynamics and hearing stories of female leaders' experiences has created an interest in gaining a deeper understanding of aspirational women in what continues to be a male-dominated field.

  I believe my deep interest in these females' experiences is rooted in other people's stories. These stories have contributed to the desire to listen to female educational leaders' stories directly from those who lived them. Furthermore, I am a female educational leader who works in the district office of a school system. At the mid-point of my career, I must decide what path I plan to forge for myself for the remainder of my years working in education. My desire to gain

immediate insight into other female leaders' experiences and listen to their stories played a role in this study's shape and design.

Existing Theory

I applied three theories to explain the interactions between factors in the study. Maxwell (2013) acknowledged that using existing theory can be advantageous and risky in research studies. The use of existing theory is beneficial when it allows the researcher to provide a framework for making sense of a study's concepts or illuminating them (Maxwell, 2013). Existing theory can be risky when it deforms the study or causes the researcher to overlook specific study implications (Maxwell, 2013). In addition to carefully using existing theory in the study, it was essential to ask participants what theories they may use to explain their phenomena. Maxwell asserted for a study to be an accurate qualitative study, one must consider participants' theories. Thus, I asked participants about theories for explaining the disproportionate number of female superintendents throughout rural Georgia or the challenges experienced by female superintendents.

One theory I applied was feminist theory (FT). Reinharz (1992) argued that the feminist perspective includes various perspectives essential for advancing the feminist movement. Some of the fundamental principles of research based on FT included the notion feminism is a perspective, not a research method; feminist research aims to create social change; and feminist research aims to represent human diversity (Reinharz, 1993). According to FT proponents, science is shaped and filtered through human beings and their consciousness and experiences (Taylor, 1998). Central to FT is that women have fewer career advancement opportunities than their male counterparts (Reinharz, 1992). It is evident women have fewer opportunities to advance their careers in education when considering the disparity between male and female

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superintendents. Grogan (1999) determined equity and equality are concerns for the gap in female superintendents as women are earning as many advanced credentials as men.

Feminist theory is directly related to Research Question 1 and better understanding female superintendents' career and life experiences in rural districts. Taylor (1998) wrote:

> If feminist scholarship begins by asking questions informed by women's exclusion in the world and from the standpoint of a personal life that has yet to be taken seriously by others, feminist research aims to expand science and culture to create knowledge that makes a difference in the world. (p. 358)

Traditionally, school systems marginalize women in the career area of superintendent (Glass, 2000). I used their stories to create new knowledge surrounding the experiences of female superintendents.

According to Grogan (1999), women base their world view on men's experiences. Feminist theory helps shape the disparity in female superintendents compared to female educators. It helps explain why this inequality is rooted in a larger societal concept than in education alone. Perceived potential barriers for female superintendents are rooted in FT and deserve examination through the voices of the women who have experienced them.

Another theory shaping this study is the gatekeeping theory (GT). Lewin (1951) and Shoemaker (1991) introduced GT. They based this theory on people, events, and situations related to social change and social control. Lewin began with the idea of changing a population's food habits and explaining mass communication processes and procedures. He concluded not all members of any population have equal importance in determining what they consume. He asserted change in society is best accomplished when enacted by those with the most control. The entrance of food to a family must go through several gates or gatekeepers who control the

supply. While Lewin's study focused on food channels, he also concluded this theory could be more widely applied. Lewin suggested that gatekeepers decide who or what gets in and who stays out. Shoemaker amplified GT by focusing on gates or gatekeepers' influences on professions and organizations.

I used GT to explain the barriers to females' superintendency, create strategies, and enact plans to earn the position. One example of gatekeeping for female superintendents included the recruitment process by boards of education (Glass, 2000). Many school boards work with consultants during superintendent search processes (Glass, 2000). The school board defines the ideal candidate to the gatekeeper consultant. Researchers use the gatekeeping theory to explain strategies and practices developed as female superintendent candidates become aware of the barriers and challenges in their pursuit of the position caused by gates and gatekeepers. They can use the information to form strategies and practices for getting through those gates.

Finally, I used Kanter's (1977) structural empowerment theory (SET) to understand better how an organization's shape can determine leaders' gender composition. Kanter indicated gender differences do not merely exist on their own. Instead, they develop through differences in ambition, efficacy, mobility, work style, and social structure. Kanter argued a better placement of an individual in an organization allows the individual to develop higher aspirations and seek advancement.

Structural empowerment theory is directly related to the barriers and challenges female superintendents face in their career journeys and the strategies and practices used to earn the position of superintendent. According to SET theorists, aspirational females can overcome the organization's challenges created by certain gatekeeping practices (Glass, 2000). Kanter (1977) uses the structural empowerment theory to explain how employees' perceptions of the work

environment can shape one's sense of autonomy. This study connects this theory principle to women's empowerment in their journey to the superintendency and how women have positioned themselves to increase their upward mobility opportunities.

While it may seem as if SET competes with GT, SET explains how positioning within an organization while passing through gates can increase opportunities and ambition for females. As with GT, a better understanding of SET helps explain the existing perceived barriers to organizational ladder climbing and strategies and practices used to overcome the challenges presented by the barriers, such as improved structural placement. Cassidy (2018); Connell et al. (2015); Grogan (1999); Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011); Kawaguchi (2014); Maranto et al. (2019); and Newton (2006) have used all three theories involved in this study in other research studies based on females and the superintendency.

Summary of Methodology

Qualitative research is personal, deals with how people make meaning of the topic under study and is rooted in inquiry (Patton, 2015). As the study's purpose was to examine the personal stories of the lived experiences of females who have overcome institutional and societal barriers to earn the position of the school superintendent, a qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study. Patton (2015) wrote, "Stories organize and shape our experiences and also tell others about our lives, relationships, journeys, decisions, successes, and failures" (p. 128).   Stories were the main source of data in this research project.

Narrative inquiry was the research approach in this study. Narrative inquiries foster a collaborative process between the researcher and participants in which the participants' lived experiences are at the core of the study (Patton, 2015). The most important feature of narrative inquiry is stories as data (Merriam, 2002). In other words, narrative inquiry reveals how people

perceive their human experiences and how they make sense of the world (Patton, 2015). Narrative researchers treat the story as the data. The narrative is the analysis in which the story is interpreted, placed into context, and compared with other stories (Patton, 2015). In this study, six female superintendents' stories were collected, analyzed as narratives, and compared to other female superintendents' stories.

I used purposeful sampling to select six female superintendents from rural school districts in Georgia and used three data collection methods: interviews, documents, and memos. Data analysis included various coding, categorizing, and reflective writing strategies. I took necessary precautions to assure the validity of the findings, including collecting detailed, thick descriptions, triangulation of data; identification of researcher bias and reactivity; and increasing generalizability of the results.

Limitations

The small sample size and the school districts' geographic location in which the superintendents served limited the study's scope and transferability. Transferability is the ability to generalize a conclusion within a case, setting, or a group, to people, events, times, and settings not directly observed, interviewed, or represented in the data collected through other means (Maxwell, 2013). The study sample consisted of six female school superintendents in rural Georgia. I excluded superintendents serving suburban or urban school districts. Furthermore, I excluded those involved in hiring, recruiting, or training school superintendents. There is an assumption female school superintendents involved in this study gave honest, thorough responses based on facts. However, this study may have limitations based on the researcher's biased perceptions and the research participants.

Another possible limitation of the study was the reluctance of participants to speak freely during interviews. Also, participants' perspectives of observations, or their reservations about being observed, limited data collection. Potential limitations include distorted responses, incomplete or inaccurate documents, and researcher bias (Patton, 1999).

Definition of Terms

Feminist theory. The feminist theory includes a variety of perspectives advancing the position of females in society. Feminist researchers aim to create social change and represent human diversity (Reinharz, 1993). Central to FT is women have fewer career advancement opportunities than their male counterparts (Reinharz, 1992).

Gatekeeping theory. Gatekeeping theory is based on the "gate sections" covered by "gatekeepers" who make the decisions regarding who or what gets in as well as who or what stays out (Lewin, 1951). This theory can be applied to explain why certain populations or demographic groups are kept from reaching certain organizations' positions, including school superintendent.

Glass Ceiling. The term glass ceiling describes the barriers and challenges women face when seeking top-level leadership and government positions—the United States. Department of Labor defined the glass ceiling as "artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational biases that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in the organizations into managerial-level positions" (United States Department of Labor, 1991, p. 1)

Rural district. School districts are considered rural if they "serve fewer than 25 students per square mile" (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021). Rural school districts "serve a more dispersed population and do not have the economies of larger-scale school districts" (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2021).

School board. The school board is a body of locally elected officials responsible for setting a school district's policy and managing the school district's budget. The school board hires the superintendent and reports directly to them to carry out its policies and local, state, and federal education laws (Greene, 1992).

Structural empowerment theory. Structural empowerment theory considers the shape of the organization about the gender composition of the leaders. Theorists propose the better the placement of the individual in an organization, the more likely they are to develop higher aspirations and seek advancement (Kanter, 1977).

Superintendent. The superintendent is the local educational agency leader and is responsible for that school district's daily operations. The school superintendent can be considered the school district's top executive, or CEO. Superintendents are considered the chief education advocates for children (AASA, 2021).

Chapter Summary

The number of male superintendents continues to far outweigh the number of female superintendents in school districts across the country despite being a female-dominated profession (Maranto et al., 2019). This study elicited female school superintendents' stories in rural Georgia to understand the dynamics of female experiences. With a qualitative examination, and through the lenses of FT, the GT, and SET, the results of this study described the experiences of female superintendents and the strategies they believed might decrease the disparity in the field.

The researcher organized the study into six chapters. In Chapter I, the researcher provided the introduction to the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose, the research questions, the significance, the conceptual framework including the researcher's interest and

existing theories, a summary of the research methods, the limitations of the study, and a list of definitions of terms used. Chapter II focuses on reviewing prior literature on this topic; Chapter III the study's methodology. Chapter IV contains participant profiles and Chapters V and VI, the results, and conclusions.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Researchers have underscored the problem of the disproportionate number of female superintendents over the past three decades, including the barriers faced by some women who seek to earn the position of school superintendent (Blount, 1998: Brunner, 2000; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Glass, 2000; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989). While this research reflects barriers women have faced on their journeys to the superintendency and, in some cases, ways they have overcome these barriers, there are few studies based on the voices and stories of the women who have lived them. Grogan (2000) asserted the superintendency itself needs further research. He indicated the necessity of drawing on women's experiences and defining the superintendency. There is a need to hear the stories of women who have defied the statistics and earned the superintendent of schools' position to understand better their perspectives, experiences, and beliefs regarding the women in the superintendency. In this study, the researcher sought to fill these gaps in the literature. It is also necessary to understand existing theories and literature related to the disparity of female superintendents in public school systems.

In this study, the researcher examined literature resources available through the VSU Odom Library beginning in Spring 2020. After two meetings with a research librarian, I learned to use the best databases and search engines in GALILEO (Georgia's Virtual Library), including PsychInfo, GIL Express, ProQuest, and Discover. I also acquired several different print resources through this collaboration with the research librarian. I used the following search terms to develop this chapter: ("school superintendent" OR superintendent) AND (woman OR women OR female) AND (barrier OR challenge) AND Georgia. Additionally, I expanded my search by

using (Superintendent OR leadership) AND (women OR female OR woman) AND education AND "narrative" or "narrative inquiry" or "narrative analysis." I also used different iterations of these search terms several times to gather research from various sources. While I made every effort to find the most current research, many sources on the historical context and evolution of the theories in the study were up to 60 years old,

Conceptual Framework

Experiential Knowledge

My career journey from teacher to media specialist to school district coordinator sparked my interest in this study. I am a female educational administrator currently in my fifth year and 17th year as an educator. I have had many experiences working with various male and female leaders during this time. I have spent my entire career in the same school system. During my 12 years working primarily in school buildings, I worked for five different school principals, four of whom were men. During my entire career (all in one school district), I have worked under the leadership of four superintendents. Two were male, and two were female. As I began to consider ideas for a research study, I knew I wanted to focus on leadership, particularly at the district level. My professional experiences and various leadership dynamics in the first half of my career have inspired me to research. Through conversation with one professor, I discovered a study on female school superintendents' experiences would be an exciting and essential study and may impact the remaining portion of my career journey.

I never sought out a role in school administration, but I worked on an education specialist degree in Instructional Technology during my time as a school media specialist. During these years, I also worked closely with the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) in my school system on several projects. When the position of instructional technology coordinator became available in

my district, the CAO assigned me this role and provided me with guidance and mentorship. I worked to complete my leadership certification, and my entire career took a shift. I had never previously thought much about my career beyond becoming a school media specialist. Yet, suddenly, through the encouragement of leaders, mentorship from the female CAO, and growing confidence in my leadership abilities, I realized my career path might take me in a direction I had never previously conceived. After earning my leadership credentials, I decided to explore other avenues of my career while also learning more about educational leadership and pursuing a doctorate in educational leadership.

My career began in a high school English department, teaching courses in literature/composition. After seven years of teaching, I transitioned to a middle school media specialist position. In both of these positions, most of my colleagues were female. However, most of the administrators I worked for during these years, both principals and assistant principals, were male. Upon reflection, I now recognize the male administrators were either principals or the assistant principals in charge of facilities, maintenance, or athletics. During my years working in schools, the administrators in charge of curriculum and instruction were always female assistant principals.

One female superintendent got embroiled in a lawsuit with the district during my time in the district. The school board refused to renew her contract citing various reasons, including potential ethical violations. She sued the school district for refusal to renew her contract because of her gender. The court eventually dismissed the case, but the former female superintendent made claims the board wanted her to hire administrators for certain positions based on their gender. I was a classroom teacher at the time and unaware of the gender and politics at play in this lawsuit. Yet, I can now see how the termination of the superintendent's tenure and the

subsequent case affected specific leadership approaches in the school system. These experiences have influenced my desire to understand leadership dynamics at a deeper level and better understand the influence of gender in educational leadership. The current superintendent is a female in her fourth year in the role.

Existing Theory and Knowledge

I have divided this section into four sections. Before discussing the existing literature, I briefly explain the three theories used to guide this study: feminist theory (FT), gatekeeping theory (GT), and structural empowerment theory (SET). In the first section on existing literature, I present a historical context of the position of superintendent, women in the role of superintendent of schools, and a brief history of research of females in the school superintendency. In the second part of this section, I focus on the career pathways of female superintendents. The third section highlights the many barriers to the superintendency identified in previous research studies. Finally, I review what previous research studies have identified as characteristics of female superintendents and how they lead. All portions of this exist to provide a context for better understanding females' experiences in the school superintendent's position and information previous researchers have uncovered about the experiences of females in this male-dominated position. In the final section of this literature review, I discuss FT, GT, and SET in the existing literature.

Theories

I conceptualized this study through the lens of FT, GT, and SET. Maxwell (2013) wrote the use of existing theory is helpful when it provides a framework for making sense of a study's concepts or illuminating them. All three approaches helped me better understand the critical aspects of this study. These include the history of women in the position of the school

superintendent, traditional career paths for female superintendents, barriers for women to the superintendency, and characteristics of female leaders.

Feminist Theory

The feminist theory includes multiple and varying perspectives, which have been necessary for advancing the feminist movement (Reinharz, 1992). This study consists of women from different backgrounds and experiences, much like FT itself. Bergeron (2015) traced the feminist movement in the US to women's involvement in specific social activities such as the suffrage movement and the civil rights movement. These movements gave women the ability to speak out against gender inequities and injustices (Coontz, 2013). Some of the most basic principles of research based on FT include the notion that feminism itself is just a perspective and not a research method (Reinharz, 1992). Additionally, research on FT indicates social change is at the heart of feminism (Reinharz, 1992). The most central notion of FT is that women have fewer opportunities than men, particularly related to career advancement (Reinharz, 1992).

Feminist theories often differ from one another (Grogan, 2000). What links most feminist issues focuses on "the situation of women and the analysis of male domination" (Flax, 1987, p. 40). Therefore, a better understanding of the superintendency for females is rooted in FT perspective drawn from the experiences of women in the position and how they perceive their worlds (Grogan, 2000). Furthermore, feminist scholars have suggested a more equitable demonstration of resources and opportunities from marginalized leaders influences superintendency (Grogan, 2000). Grogan (2000) stated feminist research should focus on ethics of care and focus on equity to advocate an action that leads to improvement for female educational leaders.

Gatekeeping Theory

Lewin (1951) and Shoemaker (1991) founded GT based on people, events, and situations that influence social change and exert social control. According to Lewin, gatekeeping implies certain people, events, and/or conditions that control the "gates" and who or what may pass and who may be blocked. In any organization, Lewin determined it is clear that forces are at work choosing what can pass. He initially focused on the food industry and deciding which foods reach which populations. Shoemaker expanded Lewin's theory asserting gatekeepers can influence what becomes of a person's reality. Both Lewin's and Shoemaker's work on GT highlighted how "gates" and/or "gatekeepers" can influence women's journeys who aspire to the superintendent of schools.

Structural Empowerment Theory

Through SET, Kanter (1977) proposed a better placement of an individual in an organization allows the individual to develop higher aspirations. Thus, organizational structures shape the gender composition of the workers in various positions. Applying this theory, researchers can identify female issues in the top leadership position, preventing women from rising to the top (Glass, 2000). Still, it stems from the entire social structure of the organization. Additionally, this theory can help explain how employees' perceptions of their work environments can shape their autonomy within the organization (Kanter, 1977). Kanter proposed that the more advantageously an employee is placed within an organization, and the more satisfied in their work, the more likely they aspire to higher positions or assume additional responsibilities.

Historical Context

Blount (1998) discussed the history of women in the superintendency. She stated men dominated the profession of teaching in the early part of the 19th century. Frequently, these men worked in one of the many one-room schoolhouses scattered around the US. However, by the middle of the 19th century, teaching positions began to be filled by female teachers. When this happened, governance officials created school administration positions reserved for men. Men authorized women's promotions, led the schools, and were often the heads of the households. The education system equally balanced the ratio of men and women towards the end of the 19th century. However, in the early part of the 20th century, women held 70% of teaching positions (Blount, 1998).

The first female superintendent in charge of a large school district was Ella Flagg Young, hired to be the superintendent in Chicago in 1909 (Blount, 1998). Blount (1998) highlighted the boldness of Young's assertion when selected for this position when she said women were "destined to rule the schools of every city" (Blount, 1998, p. 1). However, women held only 9% to 11% superintendent positions between 1910-1950. Representation of women in education in total peaked at 86% around 1920.

At the end of World War II, the G.I. Bill of Rights impacted the statistics of females in both teaching and administrative positions in education. The G.I. Bill of Rights provided educational funds for men returning from war educational expenses. Men benefitted from some of those funds to earn administrative credentials to achieve the superintendency and, therefore, competitive salaries. According to Tyack and Cuban (1995), the department of education revoked a previous policy of firing married teachers, as the war caused a shortage of male

teachers. However, education agencies continued to hire men for administrative jobs during and after the war (Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

According to Grogan (2000), scholars have defined the superintendency as male-dominated. Spalding (1954) explained the superintendency as borrowing principles of action from business, government, and the military. He described the superintendent in male terms and as one whose "main responsibility is to impart qualities to a school system and preserve them for it" (p. 53). Wilson (1960) likened the superintendency to a minister– a distinctly male profession. Clabaugh (1966) wrote, "The American school superintendent accepts the fact that his school system is the lengthened shadow of himself" (p. 1). The word "himself" here indicates the adoption of the superintendency as a male profession.

Job responsibilities for superintendents have evolved over the years. The AASA and National School Boards Association published a pamphlet in 1968 in which they defined the nature of the position of superintendent. According to this pamphlet, school superintendents were responsible for planning and evaluation, organization, management of personnel, business, buildings, auxiliary services, provision of information and advice to the community, and coordination of the entire system. This description of the position did not include a focus on instructional leadership. In the 1980s, several researchers focused on the superintendent's role in educational reform (Burnham, 1989; Crowson & Morris, 1987; Cuban, 1988; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Palau, 1989). And in 1982, AASA published another report on the superintendency. This report also included distinctly male terms to describe the superintendent. The only pronoun used was *he and statesman* (Grogan, 2000).

According to Blount (1998), school districts hired fewer female school superintendents in the middle part of the 20th century, decreasing to 3% from 1950 to 1970. Additionally, the first

report from AASA, including statistics on females in superintendents' positions, was released in 1971 and revealed only 1.3% of all superintendents were female (Blount, 1998). A decade after this, the percentage had decreased to 1.2% (Cunningham & Hentges, 1982). There has been a prolonged increase in female superintendents since 1970. However, in 1980, Wilson stated, "The most successful superintendent is male, Anglo-Saxon, middle-aged, Republican, intelligent, and a good student but not 'gifted'" (p. 20). This description clearly describes the superintendency as a male-dominated preference.

In 1993, a survey by Montenegro reported 10.5% of superintendents were women. Additionally, a 1992 survey from AASA indicated 7% of the nation's superintendents were women (Glass, 1992). Around this time, the Census Bureau also identified the superintendency as the most male-dominated executive position in the US (Glass, 1992).

Skrla (2000) indicated society associates the superintendent job with masculinity. This masculine approach has reinforced research, teaching, and publications about the superintendency. Tyack and Hansot (1982) reported an absence of data surrounding gender and the superintendency and described data by sex as being "strangely inaccessible" (p. 13). The proportion of women by ethnicity in the superintendency has been even more challenging to determine (Shakeshaft et al., 2007).

Statistics of women in the position of superintendent have slowly evolved Skrla (2000) reported that by the turn of the 21st century, men were still 40 times more likely than women to advance from teaching to the superintendency, as in 2000, women made up only 13.2% of the superintendency (Glass, 2000). There was a slight increase between 2000-2003, with 18.2% of women holding the superintendent position (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). By 2007, women had still not reached their destiny of ruling the schools in every city declared by Ella Flagg Young, as

only 21.7% of superintendents were women (Kowalski et al., 2011). In 2015, AASA reported 27% of superintendents were female (Finnan et al., 2016). This report also indicated men are four times more likely than women to serve as superintendent of schools, and women and men of color are still grossly underrepresented (Robinson et al., 2017).

Grogan (2000) determined research on the superintendency itself is both multilayered and contradictory. Around the turn of the 21st century, researchers' interest in female superintendents in school districts peaked (Björk, 2000; Brunner, 1999; Brunner, 2000; Gardiner et al., 2000; Glass, 2000; Grogan, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1999; Skrla, 2000). Many studies have been conducted through the lens of female leaders being women first and leaders second (Grogan, 1996). Grogan (2000) reported a growing research interest in female superintendents, the role of school boards in selecting female superintendents, and factors that motivated women to aspire to the superintendency. However, the number of studies on this topic has dramatically declined since 2000, thus denoting a decreased emphasis and interest in female leadership (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). Furthermore, Christman (2003) indicated qualitative researchers' minimization of feminist research and their perceived threat to the status quo challenged basic assumptions about the position of the school superintendent. Furthermore, many educational leadership researchers focused on men, which did not add to the body of knowledge around female leadership (Shakeshaft et al., 2007).

Career Pathways

Brunner and Grogan (2007) indicated women often follow a different path to the superintendency than men. For women, the most popular way to the superintendency follows from teacher to principal then to a position at the system's central office (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). In a study by Brunner and Grogan (2007), 17% of women superintendents reported

following a path from teacher to central office administrator, appointed to the superintendency, and 16% followed a path from teacher to principal to superintendent. However, a more recent study indicates 43% of superintendents spent 11 or more years as teachers, with no statistically significant difference between men and women (Robinson et al., 2017). More female superintendents have experience at the central office level than male superintendents (Robinson et al., 2017).

Most female superintendents spend a portion of their careers as classroom teachers. Wallace (2015) reported 73.01% of female superintendents in six southeastern states served as teachers during their journey to the superintendency, with the highest percentage serving as teachers for 5-10 years. She discovered 57.15% of female superintendents had served as a principal, 52.38% had served as a district-level director, and 49.21% had served as an assistant superintendent (Wallace, 2015).

Men enter superintendent jobs from secondary school administration at a rate of 70% (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Fewer women tend to be secondary school administrators, yet this position has been the most frequent position from which superintendents of schools are selected (Sharpe et al., 2004). Lemasters and Roach (2012) found that women serve as high school principals before becoming superintendents. A common theme in career paths for female educational leaders often includes experience in elementary education (Garn & Brown, 2008). Dana and Bourisaw (2006) indicated school board members prefer to hire superintendents who have previously worked in secondary school administration. Edgehouse (2008) wrote:

> Although more women lead elementary buildings, men dominate high school principal and superintendent positions. Male dominance in the high school principal position may indicate an additional barrier to female superintendency as they are few female high

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school principals. Yet, this position is a reasonable step in the career path of those who

have reached the top (p. 16).

A lack of female high school principals could influence the lack of female superintendents

(Edgehouse, 2008).

The age at which women choose to begin their pursuit of the superintendency can hinder

their progress (Glass, 2000). Many women do not aspire to leadership or administrative positions

early in their careers (Garn & Brown, 2008). Traditionally, women enter educational

administration later in life with more years of classroom experience (Shakeshaft et al.,

2007). Women may choose not to pursue the superintendency because they decide to raise their

children first. By the time they enter leadership positions, they may like the time necessary to

earn the experience needed to become superintendent (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Robinson et al.

(2017) determined the average age women first became a superintendent was 47, with an average

of 6.9 years serving as superintendent. Conversely, men entered the superintendency at the

average age of 43 and served an average of 10 years.

Women who may not plan to become superintendents may end up pursuing the position

of superintendent due to the encouragement or suggestions of others (Gupton & Slick, 1996).

Yet, early studies on female administrators indicated women had little support, encouragement,

or counseling from either family, colleagues, or educational institutions/organizations to pursue

careers as school administrators or superintendents (Baughman, 1977; Schmuck, 1976;

Shakeshaft, 1985). Garn and Brown (2008) wrote the combination of successes combined with

suggestions from others leads to women beginning to consider a path to the

superintendency. Additionally, this means women who have not planned to become

superintendents may not be in positions typically leading to the superintendent's work (Sharpe et

al., 2004). Allred et al. (2017) conducted a study with female school superintendents in rural districts in Texas. The researchers interviewed seven female superintendents to determine their aspirations, motivations, needs, and constraints. In this study, five out of seven superintendents revealed they decided to pursue the superintendent position only after a mentor, supervisor, or professor suggested it.

Females often express their aspirational desires through preparation by obtaining superintendent credentials and advanced degrees (Allred et al., 2017). Additionally, female superintendents are more likely to be appointed in the districts they already serve than hired in a different district (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). Even though the number of female superintendents is still not at an equitable percentage, the number of females earning doctoral degrees outweighs the number of men (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). More than half (60.5%) of all women superintendents have a doctorate (Robinson et al., 2017). This statistic is much higher than the number of male superintendents holding a doctoral degree, at 49.7% (Robinson et al., 2017).

Barriers for Female Superintendents

Shakeshaft et al. (2007) determined women do not serve in educational leadership positions in a proportion that closely represents their presence in the field of education or even in proportion to their training and certifications in school administration. Lemasters and Roach (2012) found that the general and student populations are half female, 72% of the nation's professional educators are female, but 75.6% of the superintendents are men. Wallace (2015) indicated that female superintendents only increases at 0.7% annually. Researchers suggest that it will take 80 years for females to balance the representation of women in public schools' senior leadership. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) determined that fewer women superintendents result from men's stereotypical expectations and beliefs.

At the turn of the 21st century, AASA published a report to identify barriers to the position of the superintendent for females (Glass, 2000). According to his research, Glass reported one barrier: females are often poorly positioned or in positions not often leading to the superintendency. For example, male superintendents are very likely to have experience in athletic coaching (Maranto et al., 2019). Researchers have discovered approximately 80% of school superintendents had coached athletic teams at some point in their careers (Rousmaniere, 2013). These athletic coaching positions often allow men to forge connections and have leadership experiences to move into school leadership roles. These school leadership roles can open up doors for district leadership positions (Maranto et al., 2018).

The working conditions and perceived sex discrimination for women in the superintendent of schools may make the position less desirable (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). This concept can also apply to the school principal's work, often a precursor for the superintendent position. Wynn (2003) determined teachers with leadership skills prefer to stay in the classroom rather than seek principal positions because of their negative perception of the job. Additionally, Scherr (1995) asserted women might not find the position of superintendent appealing because of their experiences working with male superintendents whose leadership style may not be compatible with theirs. Skrla et al. (2000) determined men sometimes use intimidation and silence to discourage women's voices. Sometimes these tactics have included name-calling, rumor circulation, and lies. Some men have also directly stated that they do not want to work for women (Logan & Scollay, 1999). Lange (1995) studied educational department chairs in which 78% of women indicated sexual harassment at work. This negative perception of the position of superintendent can serve as an internal barrier to the superintendency for women.

A lack of role models, sponsors, and mentors for women seeking to become superintendents is an additional barrier to the superintendency for women (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Shakeshaft et al. (2007) argued role models exhibit behaviors for others to emulate. Sponsors help others by providing advice and networking opportunities. Mentors take sponsorship deeper by helping mold mentees through coaching, advancement, and support. Gardiner et al. (2000) found the best mentors for female educational leaders were female and of the same ethnicity as themselves. Because most superintendents are still White men, they provide the highest possible role models, mentors, and/or sponsors for women. Shakeshaft (1999) found school leaders seldom address sexual tensions between male mentors and female mentees, resulting in less productive and potentially damaging mentorship relationships. Grogan and Brunner (2005) determined central office administrators receive less mentoring than superintendents. These findings suggest the leap from central office administration to the superintendency is difficult for women because of the lack of mentorships. Dunn and Moody (1995) conducted a qualitative study of 228 U.S. colleges in which they concluded gender continued to be an issue when matching participants for mentorship relationships.

Further, women may not have experience in fiscal management or additional credentials needed to earn the position. Sharpe et al. (2004) determined that females have historically done more work in curriculum and instruction than human resources or finance. Brunner (2000) discovered male colleagues who are more prone to discuss finance and politics than student learning and curriculum and instruction often silenced women superintendents. The lack of experience for females in these areas may make them less attractive to school boards (Glass, 2000). Most school boards and other community members may still think of male leaders as

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more suited for school superintendent's job because of their fiscal stewardship (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Brunner and Grogan (2007) found board member perceptions indicated their belief females were not effective financial managers. Another barrier is females often earn degrees in educational leadership but do not earn superintendent credentials (Glass, 2000). Yet, women seeking the superintendent position may be more suited for the job because of their experience in curriculum and instruction, especially since the No Child Left Behind era brought about an increased focus on student achievement (Lemasters & Roach, 2012).

Women may experience an internal barrier to the superintendency based on poor self-image or a lack of confidence (Brown & Irby, 1995; Gupton, 1998; Hewitt, 1989; Lutz, 1990; Scherr, 1995; Walker, 1995). Women who aspire to become educational administrators are more likely to report lowered confidence levels or aspirations than women who have become educational administrators (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). A lack of leadership identity and confidence can increase isolation in female educational leaders (Christman, 2003). Scherr (1995) determined women feel they have a stricter job developing a leadership identity than their male counterparts. This lack of leadership identity has led to a feeling in women that they must present themselves better, have a better education, and have more experience in the classroom before seeking school superintendent positions (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Earning the position of superintendent usually comes after earning advanced degrees and certifications. According to Shakeshaft (1985), women referred to a lack of finances as a reason for being unable to achieve these advanced qualifications. Suppose women are single mothers or sacrifice their families' needs to enroll in educational programs. In that case, they are less likely to have the capability to pay for enrollment in advanced degree programs (Shakeshaft,

1985). Few studies have examined the hardship of women's financial commitment in earning the qualifications to become superintendent.

Females may not be interested in the superintendent position due to personal reasons, including familial obligations and adherence to societal norms (Glass, 2000). Researchers found female principals express less desire for the superintendency than male principals (Maranto et al., 2019). Moreover, women often put their career aspirations after their family responsibilities (Barrios, 2004). Shakeshaft et al. (2007) wrote, "pursuing career goals can be very difficult in comparison with the norm established by their male counterparts" (p. 114). Indeed, the factor of family responsibility has continued to serve as a barrier to women seeking upward mobility in educational administration (Shakeshaft, 1985, 1999). Grogan (2000) wrote, "A superintendent is not encouraged to put his or her own family needs first. For this reason, among others, women are still largely absent from the position" (p. 125). Women have indicated they are less interested in superintendent positions because of limited time for family and career obligations and a higher commitment to family than career aspirations (Connell et al., 2015). Male superintendents are more likely to be in a relationship, usually marriage than women superintendents (Robinson et al., 2017). Female superintendents are also three to four times more likely to be childless than male superintendents (Robinson et al., 2017).

Spousal dynamics may also serve as a barrier to the superintendency for women. Females often put their spouse's careers ahead of their own (Gupton & Slick, 1996). A mid-decade study of the superintendency did not support the belief that women are limited by family circumstances more than men (Robinson et al., 2017). Still, this study did not examine the feelings of educational leaders other than superintendents or aspirational superintendents, just

acting superintendents (Robinson et al., 2017). Additionally, most studies that examine family responsibilities related to careers only do so for women (Shakeshaft et al., 2007).

Being unable or reluctant to relocate can also be a barrier to the superintendency for women (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). Frequently, employers expect women to follow spouses as they move to new positions, but the case is not the same for men (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). To preserve the family structure, women may have to pass on promotions, limiting their ability to climb the leadership ladder (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Shakeshaft et al. (2007) defined this as "geographic immobility" for women. Reinforcing this notion is that women are more likely than men to be hired as superintendents from the school district where they work, with 98% of women superintendents having worked in two or fewer districts (Robinson et al., 2017). The lack of mobility for female superintendents also indicates school boards may be more willing to hire unknown males than unknown females or that women must prove themselves to people they know before being hired for leadership positions (Robinson et al., 2017).

Another underlying barrier identified in the AASA report is the reluctance of school board members to hire female superintendents (Glass, 2000). School administrators and school boards recognize covert sex discrimination as a barrier for women to the superintendency (Miller et al., 2006). And often, narrow gender norms shape public education leadership (Maranto et al., 2018). In their study of 114 school boards in 19 states, Marietta and Stout (1994) found male-majority school boards hired female superintendents less frequently than female-majority school boards. Furthermore, female superintendents are more likely to be employed when districts use professional search firms instead of local search committees (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Yet, even though the government has enacted gender equity laws to increase, many K-12 school systems still have a glass ceiling for female leaders (Maranto et al., 2018).

A "buddy system" or "Good Ole' Boy" system exists in the educational leadership structure. The "Good Ole' Boy" system means men prefer and promote their male colleagues to leadership positions such as superintendent of schools (Polka et al., 2008). Women were not part of the traditional community events of the superintendent of schools, including golf tournaments and hunting and fishing trips (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). Since studies conducted in the mid-1980s, researchers have continually reported women to believe negative stereotypes of women by school board members serve as a barrier to the superintendency for women (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Brunner and Grogan (2007) reported 74% of female superintendents felt the presence of this "Good Ole' Boy System." Additionally, many women believe gender bias creates a significant challenge to their path to the superintendency (Garn & Brown, 2008; Wallace, 2015). The 2015 Mid-Decade Survey of Superintendents reflected that females are more likely than males to find the "Old Boy" network challenging in the school superintendent position (Robinson et al., 2017).

The political nature of the superintendency can also serve as a barrier to women who aspire to enter this position (Grogan, 2000). She indicated a superintendent not only deals with high levels of politics but also with everyday issues. Being involved in politics is rooted in "the challenge of forming relationships with members of the highly pluralistic society in which we now live" (Grogan, 2000, p. 119). The political issues that arise for a superintendent include the school district's fiscal and human resources demands. Cuban (1988) found female managerial roles eclipses their superintendent's instructional roles. Therefore, he argued a superintendent must use political skills to achieve educational goals.

An additional barrier to the superintendency is a lack of gender-specific preparation in the curriculum of educational leadership programs (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). There is a lack of

attention to equity issues in academic preparation for superintendents and an underrepresentation of women in curricular materials, case studies, and qualitative research (Shakeshaft, 1999). And there is a continued failure to address the gender knowledge and skill base needed for the superintendency for females (AASA, 2021). Moreover, many women consider their superintendent preparation programs not inclusive of women's voices (Skrla et al., 2000).

Brown and Irby (1996) conducted a study to determine the needs of female leaders in educational administration programs, particularly those who serve women. They suggested five recommendations for female leaders: 1) programs should include information on how to alter negative perceptions of female leaders, 2) how to select mentors and role models, 3) how to understand language differences between men and women, how to handle conflict, 4) how to enhance decision-making skills while cultivating an intuitive nature, and 5) how to manage legal issues. Additionally, they determined educational administration programs that include women should discuss stress and time management techniques, reflect on experiences, project new goals, and practice fiscal management of various budgets.

Females may also enter education for purposes other than earning an administrative position such as superintendent. Notably, many women may desire to stay in the role of the teacher, as teaching is why they entered the profession (Glass, 2000). A final factor affecting a lack of female superintendents is women enter administrative positions later in their careers than males (Glass, 2000). Barrios (2004) determined one of the significant barriers for females hoping to become superintendents included limited time for career mobility. Dana and Bourisaw (2006) indicated that the age difference puts many women at a disadvantage before interviewing for superintendent positions.

Connell et al. (2015) connected the late entry of females into educational leadership positions to a lack of career planning for women. According to Shakeshaft et al. (2007), men plan their careers better than women. Furthermore, he cautioned men's career paths might not be as helpful to women who choose or are reluctant to advance into senior leadership jobs.

Characteristics of Female Leaders

Gilligan (1982) wrote women's leading way is different from men's. Deep insights into characteristics of female school leadership are necessary for the development of education policies and leadership preparation programs that support effective schools (Kruger, 2008). Some women believe the silence on gender conversations in educational leadership programs equates to a lack of support for female educational leaders (Shakeshaft et al., 2007).

Additionally, researchers should closely examine the perpetuation of male dominance in school superintendent positions by reviewing masculine normalizations that have persisted in education through discourse, actions, and research on women in educational leadership (Skrla, 2003). Stephens (2009) stated a more robust knowledge of female leadership behaviors and characteristics is necessary for leadership preparation programs to improve their programs to help new and aspiring female superintendents. Furthermore, Young (2003) determined the necessity of gendered solutions to preparing female superintendents for the position.

Many employers perceive women as instructional solid leaders and men as more authoritative or directive (Kowalski et al., 2011). This idea may be rooted in the fact that, compared to men, women spend more time in the classroom before earning leadership roles, including superintendent (Newton, 2006). Women are more likely to have been master teachers, district coordinators, and assistant superintendents, all positions focusing on curriculum

(Robinson et al., 2017). However, other studies have revealed that there is not much difference between the way women and men lead or their leadership strategies (Cassidy, 2018).

In the 2015 Mid-Decade Study conducted by AASA, men and women superintendents revealed different beliefs for being hired and different beliefs for what the board expects (Robinson et al., 2017). Women participants believed school systems hired women for their administrative experiences and curriculum and instruction expertise, while men thought employers hired them for their administrative experiences and personal characteristics (Robinson et al., 2017). This disparity indicates women believe boards of education value curriculum and instruction knowledge more than men. However, females and males agreed on their jobs' top three board expectations: effective communicator, problem-solver, and fiscal oversight.

This 2015 Mid-Decade Study also examined how males and females experience challenges in the superintendency. There were very few differences by gender in this survey (Robinson et al., 2017). One of the differences revealed is that males find state and local funding more challenging than females. Additionally, males are more likely than females to be challenged by federal regulations. Time requirements were more of a challenge for female superintendents than male superintendents. However, there were no differences by gender on this survey on challenges for superintendents on job stress, unrealistic performance expectations, unethical employee behavior, and self-fulfillment (Robinson et al., 2017).

Women tend to be more focused on children and child development (Björk, 2000). Employers consider women superintendents successful if they are considered capable, well respected, well-liked, and effective (Brunner, 1998). They also tend to focus on communication and being perceptive towards the needs of others (Björk, 2000). While school board members and search committees assume strong disciplinary and noninstructional abilities

for males, Newton (2006) reported women are likely to be more closely scrutinized for capabilities such as fiscal management, maintenance, and construction.

School authorities often perceive women as better collaborative decision-makers and better at decentralization, making them more desirable by some school boards in the school superintendent position (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Women have also adapted to a more collaborative leadership style as a learned behavior (Hoyt, 2007). Some women believe direct behaviors may not be received well by men and choose to behave in more passive behaviors (Hoyt, 2007). Therefore, several researchers have determined women's democratic and participative leadership style is notable in how women and men lead (Hoyt, 2007; Lemasters & Roach, 2012).

Female leaders also approach power differently than men (Hoyt, 2007). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) wrote, "Women have modeled ways to use power and make change through understanding, a process that requires listening, not just talking" (p. 91). Brunner (1994) also found women avoid using the term power and are more likely to describe themselves as good listeners, patient, and productive. This approach to power and the term power allows leaders to perceive women as more collaborative in their approach to leadership (Lemasters & Roach, 2012).

Wallace (2015) determined the top three incentives for becoming a superintendent for female superintendents in six southeastern states included making a difference, leading learning, and team building. The top factors influencing decisions to become superintendents included a commitment to education, an opportunity to impact student achievement, and serving the community. The least important factors influencing the decision to become a superintendent

included compensation, the prestige of the position, and the desire to leave building-level administration.

Brunner (1998, 2000) conducted several studies on the leadership strategies of female superintendents. In her 1998 study, Brunner identified 12 women superintendents and noted gender-specific strategies they used in their careers. These include: (a) balancing gender expectations along with expectations of the position, (b) keeping a simple plan focused on children and instructional improvement, (c) remaining "feminine" in a male-dominated position, (d) reconceptualizing what it means to "act like a man," (e) removing barriers, (f) maintaining a "can-do" attitude and balancing a work-life balance, and (g) sharing power and credit. According to Robinson et al. (2017), the lack of female representation in the superintendent of schools is a problem with fairness and equity, and female leaders bring improvements in leadership and learning.

Allred et al. (2017) identified seven motivations for female superintendents: 1) a drive for excellence; 2) desire to make a difference in their schools and the lives of others; 3) acknowledgments of district improvements; 4) an obligation to positively represent female leaders; 5) a personal obligation to serve others in their communities; 6) a passion for education that encompasses a love of children, and 7) a desire to accept challenges.

Kruger (2008) found females serving as superintendents in rural or poverty-stricken communities tend to be less motivated by salary, holidays, or title and more motivated by intrinsic rewards such as rewarding personal relationships and positive instructional leadership. It is worth noting women serve in rural districts in higher proportions than in other school districts, which is likely a reflection of the motivations of female school superintendents (Sharpe et al., 2004). Most female superintendents serve in urban and rural districts and are more likely to lead

rural schools (Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Robinson et al., 2017). Females are also twice as likely to serve as superintendents in rural districts as males (Kowalski et al., 2011). Therefore, leadership preparation programs should focus on females serving in rural school districts (Allred et al., 2017).

Many women in leadership positions believe they must maintain an awareness of their style because often, it is unacceptable for a woman to have a direct style or be perceived as assertive (Brunner, 2000). Many employers perceive women as working emotionally (Brown & Irby, 2005). This perceived emotional-driven behavior has led some to believe women cannot be rational decision-makers (Brunner, 2000). Shakeshaft (1999) also wrote a myth exists that women are too emotional, cannot see things rationally, and are therefore poor decision-makers. Some employers believe women are unfit for administrative jobs due to their suspected inability to be disciplinarians, an inability to work with and lead men, and an inability to command respect (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Female superintendents often refer to themselves as having a softer style or behaving in a more "lady-like" manner (Brunner, 2000). Female leaders believe they should act like women instead of behaving like men (Brunner, 2000). This belief has led to women who want to be superintendents feeling the need to speak the language of male leaders while also remaining feminine (Brunner, 1994).

School boards have sometimes perceived women as having "malleable" personalities (Skrla, 2000). This perception indicates school boards may think they can easily control and direct female superintendents. If a female superintendent turns out to not be malleable, it can create a problem for the woman and the school board (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Further, if the woman perceived to be malleable turns out to be assertive, others can perceive them negatively (Skrla, 2000).

Wallace (2015) determined female superintendents believe the strategies for attracting female superintendents include establishing mentorship programs, ensuring equal pay for females, establishing support systems, changing board perceptions of females, and making the job more manageable. Mentorship programs, especially for female superintendents, can help provide them with the support needed for the position (Melendez de Santa Ana, 2008; Wallace, 2015). The presence of the "good-ole boy system" has impeded the ability of female mentors for female leaders in the superintendency network (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). Additionally, Barrios (2004) indicated limited access to mentors within the educational community. However, mentors play a crucial role in developing the skills of a superintendent (Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009), with 94% of women who completed the 2015 AASA Mid-Decade Survey of Superintendents indicating receiving mentoring and 72% of women reporting they have served as a mentor (Robinson et al., 2017).

Shakeshaft et al. (2007) indicated five recurring components of female educational leadership. These traits focus on social justice, spirituality, relationships, an instructional guide, and striving for balance. Many women have indicated they are instructional and task-oriented leaders (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Research has also revealed women are more relational and interpersonal, while men are more direct and write more and longer memos than women (Counts, 1987; Nogay, 1995; Perry, 1992). Garfinkel (1988) asserted loyalty from staff members for women is defined by competency, while men defined loyalty as staff members who agree with them publicly.

Grogan and Brunner (2005) determined several recommendations for leadership practice for females. One suggestion was for women in leadership to communicate the rewarding nature of their work to other women. Grogan also asserted that leadership's joy could inspire other

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women to seek leadership positions. Additionally, women in leadership should work with other women to successfully balance professional and personal responsibilities (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Grogan also suggested women in leadership should also seek to mentor other women, and young female educators should be encouraged and directed toward leadership positions. Finally, professional organizations should promote and focus on gender research efforts (Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Theories as Connected to the Concepts and Literature

Feminist theory, GT, and SET are evident throughout the literature on female school superintendents. Components of FT are evident throughout the history of female superintendents and research on this topic. The feminist notion of enacting social change is evident in Ella Flagg Young's statement of women destined to rule the schools. Additionally, researchers focused on the specific experiences of women in the role of the superintendent is part of the feminist idea of the importance of the varied experiences of women and of being allowed to share their stories. Feminist theory suggests female superintendents have had a more difficult journey to their career paths to the superintendency than their male counterparts. This difficult journey includes the many barriers revealed in the literature and a lack of understanding of women's leadership.

As indicated in GT, females face gatekeepers during a career path to the superintendency many men may not face (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). These gatekeepers may include school board members, either male or female, who can only picture the superintendent as the former football coach. It can also include gatekeepers who limit superintendent offerings to leaders who have had secondary leadership experience or who doubt the abilities of females to handle such a challenging position. There are also community gatekeepers who may feel opposed to a female in a position of power, making the highest public official salary in the community (Lemasters &

Roach, 2012). Overall, GT explains the existence of internal and external barriers to females in the superintendency.

Structural empowerment theory reveals intentionality in a female educational leader's career journey if she aims to become a superintendent. The literature suggests leaders are more likely to earn the position of superintendent if they have secondary school administration experience. Therefore, if female leaders seek to become superintendents, they must be aware of the hiring patterns of school boards based on the previous positions leaders have held and position themselves accordingly. They should be mindful of superintendents' credentials and degree requirements and how they affect hiring decisions. How women lead is also influenced by SET. If women feel satisfied with their job performance and role, they will perform higher and seek more job responsibilities.

Summary

The review of the literature outlined the history of females in the superintendency, the traditional career pathways for female superintendents, barriers female superintendents have faced, and leadership characteristics of female superintendents (Blount, 1998: Brunner, 2000; Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Glass, 2000; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Gupton & Slick, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1989). Many studies have revealed the disparity of females in the superintendent of schools. In 2015, the AASA reported only 27% of superintendents were female (Finnan et al., 2016).

Current literature on the gender imbalance among school superintendents suggests unconscious bias by those making hiring decisions, lack of a strong candidate pipeline, and a scarcity of female role models and networking opportunities as reasons for gender imbalance (Glass, 2000). There is a need for a more robust representation of women at the top to allow

more women to join the ranks. More female superintendents may help influence hiring decisions for leadership positions, ensuring a robust pipeline of future superintendent candidates.

The researcher entered this study assuming at the core of the pervasive gender imbalance in the superintendency is the idea US society systematically oppresses women and that men have been historically dominant. Thus, this researcher examined women's stories to understand the power relationships and inequalities between women and men. This research may lead to solutions to address the inequality women face in top leadership jobs in education.

Chapter III

Methodology

Although females dominate careers in education, males dominate the position of superintendent, which is the highest position of power and salary in a school district. Researchers have indicated the disproportionate number of female superintendents as a neglected area of research (Björk, 2000; Brunner, 1999; Maranto et al., 2018). A lack of understanding of issues exists concerning equitable representation in the position of the school superintendent, coupled with a lack of knowledge of how to increase awareness of female representation in educational leadership (Maranto et al., 2018). The purpose of this research study was to identify the professional experiences and strategies used by women who achieve the school superintendency in rural Georgia regarding their career advancements. The researcher aimed to fill gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of female superintendents in rural Georgia through the stories of women who earned the position of superintendent.

I provided an overview of the research methodology, the overall research design, and a rationale for the study. In this chapter, I describe the research setting and my researcher role. Furthermore, I outline my data collection procedures, including participant selection and the interview protocol to guide interviews. Next, I provide a detailed description of my data analysis processes. I also explain my steps to ensure the credibility of the study. Finally, I present my efforts to comply with the Valdosta State University (VSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines and the complete protection of human subjects.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1. What are the life and career experiences of identified female school superintendents in rural Georgia regarding their career advancement?

Research Question 2: What do female school superintendents in rural Georgia believe are strategies for increasing female superintendents at school districts in the southern U.S. region?

Researcher Design and Rationale

I limited the scope of this study to the experiences of female superintendents in rural Georgia related to three core concepts. The first concept was two-fold: first, I examined participants' life and career experiences before becoming superintendents. Second, I explored participants' daily roles and responsibilities as they executed their job as school superintendents and the challenges faced in their journeys.

The second core concept was the exploration of participants' perceived barriers to becoming superintendents. This core concept was central to understanding possible reasons why women remain underrepresented in senior school leadership positions. Furthermore, this allowed participants to reflect on the issues at stake regarding equalizing job opportunities with men in education. And the third core concept was the examination of participants' professional strategies to execute their responsibilities and compete with peer male school superintendents. The researcher believed participants' lived life and professional experiences can potentially pave the way to the highest leadership K-12 administrative position for more women and eventually balance male and female participation in the superintendency sphere.

I used a qualitative research design to give participants a voice to share their stories. Qualitative research is ideal because it is personal, allows people to make meaning of their

experiences, and is rooted in the assumption that there is no single reality but encompasses multiple realities for any phenomenon (Speziale et al., 2003). Moreover, Polit and Beck (2008) asserted every individual perceives, interprets, and experiences a situation of interest from one's perspective, as individuals have different experiences of reality. As the purpose of the study was to make meaning of the personal stories of the lived experiences of females who have overcome institutional and societal barriers to earn the position of the school superintendent, a qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study. As Patton (2015) stated: "Stories organize and shape our experiences and also tell others about our lives, relationships, journeys, decisions, successes, and failures" (p. 128). The stories of the women in my study will provide the main source of data to illuminate female superintendents' experiences.

Specifically, I applied the narrative inquiry design for this research. Narrative inquiry is gathering research information through storytelling (Patton, 2015). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted, "Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives" (p. 2). In other words, people's lives consist of stories. Thus, my narrative study explored the ways female school superintendents experience the world. In this study, the stories of six female superintendents were collected, analyzed as narratives, and compared to the stories of other female superintendents.

The researcher considered other qualitative research designs before settling on narrative inquiry for this study. Upon examining different research designs such as basic interpretive and case studies, I selected the narrative inquiry approach as the best for this research study. Because the collaborative nature of narrative inquiry supports an interview process that collects multiple, detailed stories, this research approach best served the purpose and goals of this study in which the intent was to explore the experiences of female superintendents from the stories of those who

have lived them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this narrative inquiry, the stories of the female superintendents were the primary source of data.

Setting

In Georgia, 79% of the teacher workforce and 69% of the leader workforce are female (Tio, 2017). Additionally, 51% of public school students are male, and 49% are female ("Quick Facts About Georgia Public Education 2018-2019"). However, 71% of school superintendents are male, and 29% are female (Georgia School Superintendents Association [GSSA], 2020). Of the entire population of 181 school superintendents listed on the Georgia School Superintendents Association website, 45 are female superintendents serving in rural school districts, equaling 24% of the total population of school superintendents in the state at the time of the study (Georgia School Superintendents Association [GSSA], 2020). Therefore, there were 45 potential participants for the research study. These potential participants were located geographically throughout all regions in the state of Georgia (Georgia School Superintendents Association [GSSA], 2020). I researched female superintendents other than my district.

Role of Researcher

My role as the researcher in this study was to examine the thoughts and feelings of study participants. This examination involved asking participants to share thoughts and ideas that may be very personal. Sometimes these experiences may be fresh in participants' minds. I was aware that reliving past experiences could be difficult. I safeguarded participants and their data as I conducted this study. I clearly articulated the IRB safeguards in the ethics section of this chapter. My role in this study was as an observer-as-participant. I was the primary data collection and analysis instrument that collected, coded, and analyzed data from interviews and participant journals to uncover emerging concepts and patterns. Thus, there was potential for bias, which

could influence the study's outcome, making this a challenging balancing act of being objective and nonjudgmental in my thoughts, observations, and actions. That potential bias could be my experience as an educator, as I have been working in the field in various capacities, including teacher, media specialist, and district administrator for a total of 17 years. Because I have experiences related to the topic and a deep understanding of the subject, based on my work experience, I was mindful of my subjectivity and minimized bias in my research. I explain this concept more fully in the validity section of this chapter.

I interviewed school superintendents with whom I have never previously interacted. The lack of overlap between real-life experiences and the process of this research study helped minimize any power differential between the participants and me. I also gave participants a choice to opt-out of the interview process at any point for any reason.

Participant Selection

The researcher purposefully selected participants for this study. This selection helped me remove the potential influence of external variables and ensure the generalizability of research results. My goal was to select participants who could best inform the research questions and enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study. I developed a list of criteria necessary to identify appropriate participants. I based the following selection criteria on the study's research questions, theoretical perspectives, and existing literature. Participants identified as female and were currently superintendents in rural school districts in Georgia.

I used snowball sampling techniques in addition to purposeful sampling. Participants led to more potential participants who met the research criteria. I recruited many participants until I reached data saturation. I expected to reach that level with a research pool of about six to eight participants. Patton (2015) described the snowball method as an effective and efficient method in

which the researcher asks questions of well-situated people for input regarding valuable participants for a research study. I asked my Georgia Curriculum and Instruction Supervisors (GACIS) board and leadership at the GSSA to help me identify potential participants. Because of personal familiarity with several female superintendents in rural districts, information about research participants whose experiences supported the goals of the research study was collected. These superintendents then suggested others for the study.

I communicated with participants via email and telephone. First, I sent a letter explaining the purpose of the study and an invitation to participate in the research (see Appendix A). I followed up emails with telephone calls to ensure I did not lose contact with participants. I also used the help of colleagues to recruit participants. The sample reflected the general population impacted by the study as the selected participants fit the characteristics of being female superintendents from rural school districts in Georgia.

Qualitative research relies on copious amounts of research data. The study involved six research participants. The small sample size was consistent with qualitative research, seeking to gather reliable, in-depth research data to answer the research questions. I stopped recruiting more participants when the data collected reached a level of data saturation, as reflected by repeated themes from the participants. I began to reach data saturation with my fourth participant but continued with six participants to confirm I had enough in-depth data.

Data Collection

The selection of instruments for educational research studies is crucial to their success (Ary et al., 2019). Researchers must examine what other researchers have used in similar research studies to determine whether to use pre-existing instruments or develop their own data collection instruments. I created three data collection instruments for this research.

Qualitative studies are grounded in interviews to understand the participants' lived experiences (Seidman, 2013). Seidman (2013) described a three-part interview series for qualitative studies. I adapted the three-part interview process to a two-part interview process. All interviews in this study lasted approximately 90 minutes and followed the semi-structured format using an interview guide (see Appendix B). The interviews took place in the setting where each participant felt most comfortable. The female superintendents willing to participate in this research study were asked one month before the interview for a convenient date and time. I provided participants with ample notice and time to select their interview time and space to be comfortable in the interview process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I recorded and transcribed all interviews. The recordings were captured on an electronic recording device and stored electronically. The researcher informed participants the interviews were being tape-recorded and asked them if they felt comfortable being recorded during the interview process (see Appendix C). I backed up all data onto a separate device. Participants validated the transcribed interviews through a process called member checking. I thoroughly describe member checking in a later section in this chapter.

First, I adapted Seidman's (2013) three-series interview model to create open-ended interview guides for a two-part interview with each participant. Open-ended interview questions allowed respondents to share their stories freely. Seidman noted, "an open-ended question, unlike a leading question, establishes the territory under investigation while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she wants" (p. 87). I asked participants to describe their experiences using well-formulated questions that were participant-oriented, not leading, nor worded confusingly (Kallio et al., 2016).

The first research question in this study closely aligned with the first interview focus. The first research question was, "What are the life and career experiences of identified female school superintendents in rural Georgia regarding their career advancement?" In this first interview, participants shared as much about themselves related to the topic (Seidman, 2013). Interviews occurred in the location in which the participant felt most comfortable. Five out of the six first interviews took place in the superintendents' office, one via videoconferencing software. Participants described their career journeys in the interviews and why they chose the field(s) in which they worked. However, the primary focus of the interviews involved the experiences of female superintendents in their career journeys.

The second interview focused on the second research question. The research question was, "What do female school superintendents in rural Georgia believe are strategies for increasing female superintendents at school districts in the southern U.S. region?" Seidman (2013) wrote, "the purpose of the second interview is to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants' present lived experience in the topic area of the study" (p. 21). The questions included aspects of the overall research focus, including the barriers, strategies, and practices of female superintendents. In this interview, I asked participants to discuss perceived barriers to the superintendency, how they experienced these barriers, and the strategies and practices employed to earn the position.

In the second interview, I also asked the participants to reflect on their experiences' meaning as they related to the perceived barriers, strategies, and practices for becoming a superintendent (Seidman, 2013). During the second interview, participants narrated how they saw their life and work experiences influencing the other factors in the study.

I spaced the interviews a week apart from each other. This approach allowed the participants to think about the previous interviews and reflect on the responses to the interview questions (Seidman, 2013). Furthermore, I created an observation sheet to capture behaviors and record information during participants' interactions. Creswell (2018) encouraged researchers to use field notes to capture and record activities at the research site. The observation sheet included places to indicate the demeanor and appearance of participants. It also had space to capture information about the environment of the interview setting. I created the observation sheets as tables with set topics, including participant behavior, appearance, demeanor, and setting information. Additionally, I included information about the date and time of the observation.

Finally, I maintained a research journal to record my reflections during the research. A research journal is an integral part of any research (Creswell, 2018). I used the journal to organize and analyze the progress of this research. My research journal content included information necessary to indicate the direction of the study and the progress made each day toward the result. I also recorded the project's process to help stay on target.

I organized my research journal by the two research questions in the study. The first research question was: What are the life and career experiences of identified female school superintendents in rural Georgia regarding their career advancement? In the section focused on this research question, I made notes after each interview related to participants' interview responses about their career experiences and the various impacts.

The next section of the research journal focused on the second research question. The research question was, "What do female school superintendents in rural Georgia believe are strategies for increasing female superintendents at school districts in the southern U.S. region?" In this section of the research journal, I included information from participants' interviews

related to strategies female superintendents recognized as helping overcome the gender disparity in school superintendent positions. I wrote clearly with many rich details and included the date and time of the notes. In addition to making notes in the journal based on the research questions, I summarized my accomplishments as I progressed through analyzing the data. This section will include notes on what was going well and what I needed to improve. This journal helped ensure successful progress.

Before beginning my interviews, I conducted one pilot interview. Pilot testing is an integral part of developing research instruments (Kallio et al., 2016). Kallio et al. (2016) described the purpose of the pilot phase as confirming "the coverage and relevance of the content of the formulated preliminary guide and to identify the possible need to reformulate questions and to test implementation of it" (p. 15). In the pilot phase, I interviewed a participant similar to those in the study. The pilot interviewee was not one of the actual participants. I revised interview questions and processes based on feedback from her. Expert guidance was employed by asking external experts to review the interview protocol.

I also developed an interview protocol to collect responses. As I took notes, I categorized responses as either descriptive or reflective. This approach assisted with the initial coding phase. I recorded responses using an audio recorder.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is complex and ongoing (Merriam, 2002). I systematically searched and arranged the interview transcripts, observation notes, and journal entries in this process. Data analysis involves coding, making sense of vast amounts of data by reducing the volume of raw information, identifying significant patterns, drawing meaning from data, and building a logical chain of evidence. As described in the data collection process, this

narrative inquiry involved a set of two interviews. I coded data to subdivide the vast amount of raw information and assigned them into categories. Thus, I used codes as labels for allocating identified themes or topics from the data compiled in the study.

Maxwell (2013) asserted that researchers should listen to recorded interviews several times before completing the transcriptions. I listened to the interviews and reflected on the data before coding. I also took notes as I listened to interviews before coding to denote potential themes.

I analyzed the data to identify codes, categories, and themes to understand the research questions' answers better. Coding is used in qualitative research studies to make sense of the data and arrange the data into categories, leading to themes (Patton, 2002). Coding allowed the researcher to reorganize the data based on similarities and differences (Maxwell, 2013). I underlined, annotated, and connected the physical interview transcripts in this part of the data analysis process. This process is known as open coding (Merriam, 2002). I broke down the codes into headings or concepts and subheadings or categories (Merriam, 2002).

After these initial steps, I focused on category development through axial coding. Category development through axial coding involved identifying themes and patterns in the interview responses based on the initial coding process (Saldaña, 2016). As I developed the categories, sections of the interview transcripts and questionnaire responses were copied and pasted into a new document, including charts with the headings created in the open coding process. Maxwell (2013) described this stage of qualitative data analysis as looking for similarities and differences to define categories applicable to group and comparable data. Saldaña (2016) wrote charting allows the research analyst to scan and then conduct patterns from the codes.

The final data analysis step involved connecting the categories created in steps one and two. This step goes beyond looking for similarities and differences between participant responses, observation notes, and other documents. In this step, I made connections among the similarities and differences to elicit four unique themes in the data. Analysis of the data continued until I could not elicit any new categories or themes.

The narrative inquiry aims to give meaning to the participants' experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this study, the objective was to collect and analyze the stories of the six female superintendents from rural Georgia and weave these stories in one narrative report coherently capturing their experiences in their career journeys. I transformed the analysis of the stories of these female superintendents into a report that captures their unique insights and contributes to the existing body of literature on this topic. In addition to the interviews, I used participants' curriculum vitae (CVs) to examine their career experiences.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is about establishing credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable research. According to Patton (2002), researchers should research with "intellectual rigor, professional integrity, and methodological competence" (p.570). The researcher made every effort to ensure strong validity and reliability throughout the study. Creswell (2018) defined qualitative validity as determining whether the findings are accurate from three parties: the researcher, the participants, and the readers of the study.

Credibility

According to Patton (1999), credibility establishes confidence in the truth of a research study's findings. I collected rich data, used triangulation, and validated data with participants through member checking to demonstrate the credibility of the research study's findings.

Rich Data

Creswell (2018) defined rich data as detailed descriptions of the setting and many perspectives about the themes in the study. I provided detailed contextual reports to enhance the credibility of this study. My data included interview transcripts, observation, and descriptions of my potential biases in the data analysis.

Triangulation

Triangulation is a process through which the researcher uses "different data sources by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes" (Creswell, 2018, p. 200). My study focused on the participants' responses, but I also analyzed the CVs of participants in the data analysis. Additionally, I used an observation sheet to note participants' behavior and the interview setting. Triangulation allowed me to identify themes across data sources, mainly the stories of the six different female superintendents, to determine if discrepancies existed.

Member Checking

The participants reviewed their transcribed interview responses to ensure correctness. Maxwell (2013) defined this process as member checking. Member checking is the best way to correct any misinterpretations or misunderstandings or reveal any biases the researcher may have unknowingly included (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher allowed the participants to read, clarify, and edit the transcriptions and analysis. I further enhanced the credibility of by study by enabling participants to verify their transcripts.

Transferability

Transferability demonstrates a research study's findings' applicability to other contexts. To that end, I used thick descriptions to illustrate the research study's results can apply to different

contexts, circumstances, and situations (Merriam, 2002). To determine if a transfer is possible between this study and other cases, I provided detailed descriptions of the setting, varied participants, and a thorough explanation of the analyzed data.

Confirmability

I enhanced the degree of neutrality in this study by basing data analysis on participants' responses and not any potential bias or personal motivations. I achieved this by making sure my bias did not skew the interpretation of my participants to fit a particular narrative. Furthermore, I provided an audit trail, highlighting every data analysis step to rationale my decisions. An audit trail helped me establish that the research study's results accurately portrayed participants' responses.

Ethical Procedures

Subject effects are an internal validity threat that might affect this study. Subject effects result when participants develop certain attitudes in response to the research situation (Ary et al., 2019). Participants may have thought there was a certain way to best respond to the interview questions for this study. The researcher told participants there were no right/wrong answers to minimize this threat. Instead, I assured participants that the study's focus was to understand better each participant's lived experiences as they related to being a female superintendent and their career journeys to the position of the school superintendent. I told participants their responses would be anonymous, and I would use pseudonyms in reporting the results. This high level of confidentiality helped participants feel free to speak their authentic stories related to barriers, plans, and strategies to pursue the superintendency.

After receiving IRB approval (see Appendix D), I obtained consent from participants to participate in this study. The consent process involved explaining the study, allowing potential

participants to ask questions about the study, and giving potential participants adequate time for decisions about participation in the study. I provided an informed consent form to participants to reveal the study's purpose, methods, and possible risks (Denezin & Lincoln, 2011). During the interview process, I read a verbal consent statement to all participants that gave full disclosure of the research purposes, practices, and protocols to protect against an intrusion of privacy (Denezin & Lincoln, 2011).

I used secure methods to collect and manage the data. Also, I established the anonymity of the research site and participants by giving alias names for the participants and the school districts they have been or are a part of. Finally, I will destroy all research data upon completion of the dissertation.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify the professional experiences and strategies used by women who achieve the position of school superintendent in rural Georgia regarding their career advancements. Additionally, the purpose of this study was to fill gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of female superintendents in rural Georgia through the stories of women who have earned the position. I used three primary data collection methods: interviews, observations, and memoing. However, I generated most of the data through a two-part interview with six female superintendents in rural Georgia school districts. This study was a narrative inquiry, with participants' stories serving as the primary data source. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a three-level coding process. I will present participant profiles in the next chapter and research results in the final two chapters.

Chapter IV

Narratives of Female School Superintendents

A lack of understanding of issues exists concerning equitable representation in the school superintendent position, coupled with a lack of knowledge of increasing awareness of female representation in educational leadership (Maranto et al., 2018). The purpose of this research study was to identify the professional experiences and strategies of women who achieved the school superintendency in rural Georgia regarding their career advancement. I used qualitative narrative inquiry methods to understand better the lived experiences of female superintendents in rural Georgia districts. I administered both in-person and teleconference interviews based on participant choice. Five out of six participants met in person for the first interviews. Follow-up interviews took place via teleconferencing software. A flexible interview structure allowed for open-ended questions with clarifying and follow-up questions. After the interviews, I asked participants to verify transcripts and clarify any misunderstandings. Finally, I kept a journal throughout the research project and completed observation sheets after interacting with each participant. Study findings address the following research questions:

Research Question 1. What are the life and career experiences of identified female school superintendents in rural Georgia regarding their career advancement?

Research Question 2: What do female school superintendents in rural Georgia believe are strategies for increasing female superintendents at school districts in the southern U.S. region?

The researcher purposefully selected six participants for this study. The female superintendents in this study participated in two interviews that followed a modified version of Seidman's (2013) three-step interview model. In the first 90-minute interview, I asked participants to paint a detailed picture of their life and career journey related to their career

advancement to the school superintendent position. The following section showcases six female

superintendents' career and life experiences at school districts in the southern U.S. region

through profile narratives. The second interview focused on female superintendents' barriers and

strategies, including their beliefs on what may increase the number of female superintendents. I

included data from the second interview in the participant profiles and the results and

conclusions in chapters V and VI (Seidman, 2013). The snowball sampling technique helped me

find participants who met the research criteria. Some participants suggested colleagues who

would also be ideal candidates for this study.

After the interviews, participants emailed me their curriculum vitae to verify with my

data to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the data. I used pseudonyms to protect

participants and the school districts. Table 1 includes basic demographic data for the six research

participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age	Years in Education	Years in Superintendent Position
Betty	Female	Black	52	30	2
Abigail	Female	White	47	23	3
Inez	Female	White	66	45	12
Rebekah	Female	White	50	27	3
Dorothea	Female	White	51	29	9
Juliet	Female	White	49	28	9

The participant profiles included in this chapter provide information about the interview setting and details about each superintendent's family, education, and career experiences.

Profiles of Participants

Betty

I met Betty for the first time at the district office building in Bailey County, where she served as the superintendent of schools. The district office was across a small holding pond from Bailey County High School. A pleasant receptionist greeted me upon entering the office building. Betty came out from the back seconds later and greeted me while graciously thanking her co-worker. Her office felt like that of an executive, with nice furniture, a floor-to-ceiling window with a view of the pond, an organized desk, and framed copies of her four diplomas: undergraduate, master's, educational specialist, and doctoral. She wore a colorful, professional blazer adorned with bright flowers and tailored black slacks. She wore her hair neatly in a short style. When we first started talking, Betty sat behind her desk but then came around to sit next to me in the guest chairs in front of her desk, noting that this would make the interview seem less formal and more conversational.

At the interview, Betty was in her 31st year in education and her 2nd year as superintendent. She had spent her entire career in one district, and it was the same school district where she attended school as an elementary, middle, and high school student. A single mother raised her as the second oldest out of seven children. Betty's mother only attended school through the eighth grade, and Betty and her siblings grew up in the public housing projects. Her grandfather and great aunt also lived with them. She described growing up in poverty with a mother who wanted better for her children than she had for herself. Betty said there was an expectation that each afternoon the children would sit around the kitchen table and do their

homework while their mother cooked dinner. About her mother, Betty "... knew her struggles and how things could be very different, and she thought of education as the great equalizer." Her mother's emphasis on education shaped Betty's entire life trajectory.

Her mother's viewpoint of education likely contributed to the success of her children. Betty noted four of her seven siblings have, at a minimum, a master's degree. One of her brothers is the sheriff in the same county where she serves as superintendent. Betty asserted by today's standards; many people might think her mother (who worked in a school cafeteria) was not a parent who was involved in her children's education as she rarely went to her children's schools. Still, there was a strong expectation in the household for educational excellence. Two of Betty's brothers were deceased, but she said the remaining siblings still get together with her mother two Sundays per month for dinner.

Betty had vivid memories of her early school days. She remembered all of the names of her teachers in elementary school. Not only did she remember their names (and she called them all specifically), but she also remembered "their voices, and the yardstick that they carried, the things that we read and the playground." She described her fifth-grade math teacher as one of the best teachers she had ever had. This teacher was strict and structured, and "there was not a child in that class who was doubtful about how she felt about them and how determined she was for each one of us to learn." Her teacher's beliefs and practices surrounding classroom teaching shaped Betty's worldview.

Another meaningful elementary school experience occurred when Betty transferred from a rural elementary school to an elementary school located in the city limits at the end of her third-grade year. Betty felt very much like an outsider, and although she did fine academically, the school counselor noticed she was having a difficult time fitting in. The counselor talked her

mother into putting her into the school pageant. Betty had never felt like a "girly-girl," but this experience did much to build her confidence. She argued the experience of being made to speak to strangers and stand in front of a group helped shape her later elementary school years and her future. Betty also noted her relationship with this elementary school counselor lasted through high school. The counselor and her husband bought her first luggage set for her when she left for college.

Betty said her love of teaching and education is rooted in her positive elementary school experience and helping her siblings with their homework each evening. She was responsible for helping her younger siblings with their schoolwork, and her mother depended on her for this task. Betty's teachers also noticed her knack for helping others as an elementary school student and would pair her up with classmates who needed assistance in class. This behavior helped her understand education as "a calling of sorts." Her relationship with her elementary school counselor helped her frame a portrait of the educator she wanted to be --- one who "kids knew they could count on and rely on. Someone who appreciated them and saw the potential in them." This relationship impacted Betty forever.

While Betty commented on many positive school experiences, one negative school experience also stood out in her mind. When she transferred from the rural elementary school to the school in town, her mother may have just dropped her off because she did not remember her being there. Someone took her to the classroom, and when the door opened, the teacher said, "Oh God, not another student." Then when they went to lunch that day, they were serving a food she hated --- stewed tomatoes and rice --- and it made her gag, but the teacher made her eat them. She "hated her for the rest of the year." She ended up with this same teacher again in the sixth grade. This experience with this teacher helped her understand the power of the "things you say

and do in the presence of students and the lasting effect it can have on them." When Betty became a teacher, she worked hard to make all students feel loved and welcomed.

Betty did not recall any restrictions from participating in any activity during her school years because of her gender. While she was never athletically inclined or involved with any sports program, she was academically oriented and in several clubs. Betty was a member of the Beta Club, an honor society for students, and the student council. She was also an assistant editor for the yearbook and the senior advisory board. She recalled sitting in her favorite class, math, which she described as her "strong suit" and thinking of easier ways to explain what they were learning than the methods used by the teachers. Those teachers also solicited her help in assisting other students. Her teachers recognized a leadership strength in her that she did not see in herself.

After high school graduation, Betty chose to attend a large public university. She had never visited the college town, stepped foot on the university's campus, or ever really been away from home much when she left for college. She asserted she had always been an independent person, but felt like a fish out of water when she started college. She said, "I didn't do any clubs or a sorority. I was really there to get an education." She graduated from college in 4 years while working jobs in food service at the university, at a Shoney's restaurant, at a Kroger grocery store, and a telemarketing company. Betty's mother "had five younger children and could not afford to send me money, so I absolutely had to work. Took out my own loans and everything." Although she may not have had as much time for fun as her peers in college, she traced her strong work ethic back to these years of earning a paycheck in college.

Initially, Betty majored in computer science in college. After her second calculus class, she realized this was not for her. At this point, she realized her love of helping her siblings and peers with math. She changed her major to middle grades education. In her words, "It took me

right back to what I loved in the first place." Betty blossomed as a student in late elementary school and early middle school, so she wanted to help children around this age. Her primary area of concentration was math education, and her minor was language arts education. After college, she returned to her hometown and taught fifth-grade summer school for Bailey County.

Betty was offered a job at the elementary school and middle school in her hometown district at the same time. She was interested in both positions but said the superintendent ultimately placed her at the middle school because it was challenging to find middle-grade certified people. Betty taught math and language arts for 13 years at that middle school. She got the opportunity to become the instructional coordinator at the same school. She worked in that position for two years. After those two years, Betty became the assistant principal for instruction at the high school. She initially "hated the idea" of going to the high school after so many years of working in the same school but loved being able to continue to work with the same students she had known as middle school students. After two years as the assistant principal for instruction at the high school, Betty was named principal of one of the elementary schools in her district. She served in that role for one year. Betty then moved to the district office to be the secondary curriculum coordinator and held this job for nine years. At that time, she assumed she would retire in that position and do so simultaneously as the man who was superintendent at the time. She even mentioned that climbing the ladder in her career was never something she considered.

While working in various positions in the school district, Betty also earned three advanced degrees. She earned a Master's, educational specialist, and doctoral degrees in educational leadership. When she first decided to pursue an advanced degree, she thought leadership was a good area of concentration as she had been teaching for seven years at that

point. She had already received an offer to serve as team leader and take several leadership roles in her school. She thought, "Maybe somewhere down the road, I may need this." She had finished her master's degree in leadership several years before accepting her first leadership position outside the classroom. She completed her educational specialist degree after she started at the district office. She decided to pursue her doctorate after that but noted when she began the doctoral program. She was not even considering the pursuit of the superintendency. Betty commented, "Every 7 or 8 years, I got bored. I felt like I needed to go back to school." Conversely, neither of the previous two superintendents in her school district held a doctoral degree.

Betty decided to apply for the position of superintendent when her predecessor announced his retirement at the end of Betty's 29th year in education. When she considered the many positions she had held in her district and her variety of experience, she believed it was only natural to apply to be superintendent. Betty said, "I started thinking, 'Ok, you've been at all the levels, you've done multiple jobs, you've been here, you know of the ins and outs of the district, and you've worked side by side with the superintendent...why not?' Really why not?" One of the first people she told about applying for the superintendent position was her brother, the sheriff. His response was, "What is there to think about?" She knew the choice she had to make.

When Bailey County School District officially posted the superintendent position, it was only open to internal applicants. Betty was one of five applicants in the system and the only female applicant. Two of the other applicants were other district office staff members, and the other two were school principals. She knew there had only been one superintendent of color before her and one female superintendent, but there had never been a female superintendent of color in the district.

While she did not recall a strong opposition to her selection as superintendent, one particular bit of "chatter" Betty heard was the rumor she did not understand or value athletics because she was female. Some of the coaches told her, "They're thinking you are gonna come in and change things." Because she was aware of the importance of athletics in her district, particularly football, she prepared to discuss athletics in her interview for the position. While the district officials did not particularly ask about athletics in her interview, she referred to athletics in her job interview responses. When asked if she thought the men who applied for the position had to think about answers concerning athletics actively, she said, "I do not, I do not. I really don't." Betty stated her belief that athletics was only one of many areas in which men have an advantage in the superintendent position.

Betty stated that the number of years she worked as a classroom teacher and her experience in curriculum and instruction gave her the preparation needed to be qualified for the superintendency. She commented, "I think that having taught as my background keeps me in the loop with instruction and the focus on student achievement." When thinking about how prepared she felt with other aspects of being superintendent, including fiscal management, school nutrition, and operations, she said she has had to learn a lot on the job and through a network of other superintendents. She also trusted and relied on her central office staff to ensure competency in those areas.

While she noted many struggles and difficulties with being a superintendent, Betty was passionate in her response about her description of her best day as an educator. She said,

I look forward to the day where a larger percentage of students are truly

graduating from high school with a clear sense of what it is that they want to do

post-secondary and then going on to do that … It will be a good day when

everybody is on the same page about what it is we want for the education of our

students and what we want for the community."

Indeed, her vision for the future was very clear.

Betty described herself as "ambitious." While she has never had children of her own, she has helped raise several nieces and nephews. At the interview, Betty was divorced, citing her ambition as something that caused a division between herself and her ex-husband. She said, "My entire life has been school and work … I stay at work until the job is done." Betty presented as a passionate, visionary leader who has overcome many obstacles to become a successful leader in her community.

Abigail

I had my first interview with Abigail at the district office for Greenway County Schools, where she served as superintendent at the time of the interview. Greenway County is a small, rural district and the district office was in a tiny, outdated cinder block building. The school secretary buzzed me into the building. I mentioned my appointment with the superintendent, and the receptionist told me she was out of the office but would return very soon. The superintendent entered the building within two minutes, apologizing for being a few minutes late. She was delayed at the football stadium, ensuring everything was ready for that night's first game of the season. However, she looked casual, with her shoulder-length blonde hair resting just above the collar of an untucked black polo shirt bearing the district's logo and her black pants and sandals. We initially sat in her office before quickly moving to the conference room adjacent to her office because she said it might be more comfortable for an interview. In the brief time, we were in her office, I noticed she had framed diplomas, family photos portrayed, and a neat desk. The office

had a large window and cinder block walls. The conference room only contained a table and chairs. It was not formal, and the room included bulletin boards void of any items.

Abigail was in her 29th year in education and her 3rd year as superintendent. Before that, she worked in several different school districts and a private educational company. She grew up in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, described as a "blue-collar" home. Her mother worked as a secretary for a state government agency, and her father was an assembly line worker for a major motor company. She described her family as "traditional" with married parents and one younger brother. She described her parents as "very good" and "supportive of education."

Distinct memories of early educational memories stood out to Abigail. She recalled the name of her kindergarten teacher and said, "She had red hair. I will never forget it." She remembered her kindergarten teacher had said to her, "Abigail, you know how to read," and she started pulling her to the side and reading one-on-one with her every day. She also spoke highly of her favorite teacher in third and fourth grades. Abigail said, "She was a very, very, very strict teacher, but she was very soft-spoken, and she really cared about her kids." She would send work back to her and tell her she knew she could do better. She later understood this teacher only wanted the best version of her, and Abigail said she would never forget how that made her feel. Abigail indicated she had an overall, very positive K-12 school experience and was very fortunate to have "good teachers who saw good things in students and worked with them."

While most of her school memories stood out as positive, Abigail recalled one negative school experience in her middle school years. She said a male teacher, who did not have a background in education, tried hard to be a friend to the students using what he considered to be humor. She recalled he brought students up in front of the class and said embarrassing statements about the students that he found funny but were, instead, humiliating to the middle school-aged

students. She noted this experience as being "impactful," She has always remembered never to embarrass students intentionally.

Abigail did not recall discrimination because of her gender during her school years. Still, she did remember feeling frustrated in math classes by the male students seeming to catch onto concepts more quickly. She said it always bothered her she could not do high-level math at the same level as some of her male peers. Abigail participated in athletics as a student, both as a cheerleader and a member of the school's softball team. She was also involved in the student council, was on the debate team, and was in the school play for just one year because she liked and respected the drama teacher, who was also her English teacher. She recalled the English teacher as a school leader and traced some of that back to the individual attention she received from her kindergarten and third/fourth-grade teachers. She recalled those teachers doing setting the "groundwork for confidence." She believed her peers in school would describe her as "fun, bossy, and maybe stubborn."

Abigail had aspirations to become both a teacher and a lawyer as a child. She even thought she might like to become an educational lawyer for a while, so she decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in special education. After high school graduation, Abigail attended a medium-sized public university. She described her college experience as "enjoyable," saying she was an active member on campus, even working as a student ambassador for the university, giving tours to potential students. After graduating from college, she still considered the possibility of going to law school. She took the LSAT, applied to law school, and applied to three counties for teaching positions. She was accepted to two private law schools and one out of state and was on a waitlist to a public in-state school.

Because of her financial circumstances, she decided it was in her best interest to accept a teaching position. She was interviewed and hired by the special education director in the county and had a conversation in her interview about the role of the special education director since she was interested in educational law. Abigail noted this conversation helped shape her career trajectory.

She began teaching inclusion special education, and after three years, she transitioned to a self-contained special education classroom where she worked for two years. She then became a learning specialist who helped with accommodations for special education students. Later, Abigail advanced to the position of special education coordinator in her district and worked in this position for four years. Then, she accepted a position at the state Department of Education for four years as a program manager for school improvement related to special education. Abigail knew if she ever wanted to advance her career in education, she needed experience beyond the special education arena. Thus, she accepted a job as an assistant principal and worked in this role for two years before being promoted to special education director for the county. After five years of working as a special education director, Abigail's mother received a terminal medical diagnosis. She wanted to have more time to be with her mother than her then position allowed and decided to take a job with a private educational company to have more flexibility and the opportunity to work from home.

After Abigail's mother passed away, she returned to a school system as an assistant superintendent after two years of working for the educational company. She noted while traveling to various school districts and meeting with superintendents while working for the private company. She believed she could do the job they were doing. She recalled telling her husband, "I think I could be a superintendent," and his response was, "I told you that when we

first got married." She said accepting the assistant superintendent position was a conscious career move because she knew the next step was to become a superintendent.

Abigail earned a master's degree in special education before starting the special education coordinator position. While in that position, she also earned an educational specialist's degree in educational leadership. After she completed the specialist degree, she believed it would be "crazy" not to apply some of those credit hours towards a doctoral program, so she decided to pursue a doctoral degree in leadership as well.

After Abigail completed her doctoral degree, she enrolled in GSSA's Superintendent Professional Development Program (SPDP) while working as an assistant superintendent. After completing the SPDP program, she sought superintendent positions. Abigail decided to look for jobs in "smaller rural systems because that was more similar to the assistant superintendent position." She also commented, "I had not supervised operations necessarily or business, even though those had informally been a part of my role as special education director." Abigail felt boxed in professionally as she looked for superintendent positions, as most of her experience was in the special education arena.

Abigail decided to apply for the position of superintendent where she currently works because of its rural size and relative proximity to where she was living. She knew her family would have to relocate, but they supported her decision to apply for the position. The school board in Greenway County initially interviewed seven candidates and then narrowed it down to three. After narrowing the field, they conducted another round of interviews and named two finalists; the other finalist was male. Eventually, Abigail was named the sole finalist and got the superintendent's job. She recalled when, after her appointment, someone said to her, "We are so

excited. We have never had a female superintendent before." She was surprised by this revelation.

The school board that hired Abigail was composed of five females and now comprises three females and two males. She felt fortunate to have an amicable relationship with the school board and held weekly conversations. She took the time to get to know them as people and find ways to connect with them outside of school business. She described her school board as "strong and supportive."

Abigail believed her time as a classroom teacher and school administrator helped shape how she served as a leader. She said,

> My experiences were good. The teaching was fantastic, so the classroom was fantastic. Working with my kids and the peers that I had, especially the ones I did my co-teaching with were, things that shaped me a lot and it's based on leadership. I remember, particularly at the middle school, we had a very family- oriented, kind, spirited principal… she did a lot of shared governance… she really built a good community in her school.

Abigail stated she carried this family-oriented view of leadership into other positions she held.

In discussing the positives of being an educator, Abigail drew on specific stories about student successes from her days as a classroom teacher in the special education setting. When asked what she found challenging about working in education, she stated, "The things that have frustrated me the most often are regulations and laws. Some of the regulations just are not grounded in common sense … you want to think about how to serve kids and how do you serve all kids consistently when there are laws that sometimes don't enforce that."

Abigail was also quick to indicate many rewarding aspects of education. She said,

> The most rewarding is when we come together as a group to identify areas
>
> that we can always do better for with helping children. Being able to see
>
> globally across the district, and seeing how it connects preschool to
>
> 12th grade to our graduates … then you can see the whole journey, the
>
> work we've done. It's rewarding to see the community's success because
>
> of the school system.

Abigail found her superintendent position challenging and rewarding and used her vision to guide her daily work.

Inez

I met superintendent Inez for the first time at the district office building in Mosely County. The district office sat in a small concrete building on the main street in a tiny rural town. A receptionist greeted me upon arrival, and the superintendent's administrative assistant came out to walk me to the superintendent's office a few minutes later. Before being called back, I noticed an amiable banter among the women working in the office. The administrative assistant offered me a bottle of water or Diet Coke as we entered the superintendent's office. The superintendent's office was decorated with many awards and photographs and contained several shelves of professional books. I noticed one of the frames on her wall had an article about Inez from a national newspaper. An embroidered sign was proclaiming Inez as "Georgia Teacher of the Year." Stacks of papers covered her desk, and she said, "Please excuse this mess, but it's just how I work!" Inez wore a bright blue top contrasting nicely with her white hair. She was very friendly, and it was quickly evident her many years in education have brought her a sense of confidence and a willingness not to mince words or shy away from sharing opinions.

At the interview, Inez was in her 45th year in education and 11th year as superintendent. She had spent most of her career in the same district; she attended elementary, middle, and high school there as well. Inez grew up with a father in the military. While she was born in Texas and spent some of her childhood growing up on various military bases, her family returned to Mosely County later in elementary school. Moseley County is where her parents grew up, and her grandparents lived. She described her parents raising her to be very independent. She "was raised in Southern Baptist Church and [her] father was very militaristic in his upbringing, very loving but very demanding that we [were] independent…" Inez was the middle child of five children with an older brother and sister and a younger brother and sister. While her father served in the military, her mother stayed home to raise the children. Once her father retired and moved back to Mosely County, Inez's mother took a job as the city clerk and held the position for approximately 20 years.

Inez believed many of her viewpoints were a reflection of her upbringing. She was born in 1955, 1 year after Brown v. Board of Education. This Supreme Court case was supposed to end segregation in schools, although mandatory integration did not happen in Mosely County until 1971 when Inez was a sophomore in high school. Inez said, "to be a part of that whole transition and part of history I saw what was going on and my father always encouraged me to know what was going on in the world around me…" She "saw some of the injustices" and described being "outspoken" about current events. She was particularly upset about her Black peers enduring micro and macroaggressions from White classmates. She also recalled the private school in town opened while she was in high school, and she referred to the school as the "Segregation Academy" throughout our interview.

One of the most influential moments in Inez's life and career happened on a field trip she took in high school. She said her "hippie psychology teacher" took her and her classmates to a state mental hospital she described as an "insane asylum." In her words, "No one should have ever approved that trip, and the hospital shouldn't have wanted us there." She described walking through and seeing people in cages, naked, and hearing how doctors sterilized the patients upon hospital admission. Inez saw a catatonic woman pacing in one of the cells repeating, "round and round, and round I go," She also noticed a child in the cell with the women. She said, "back then, they called it a Mongoloid, but it was a child with Down's syndrome." Inez recalled sitting close to the teacher on the bus on the way home to ask her teacher more about what she had witnessed. She continued to pester her teacher with questions even weeks after they returned. Inez shared her teacher's revelation to her shortly after that trip. "[He said], 'They're starting a special education class at the elementary school, and instead of coming back to my class, you will go over and help with the special education.'" Special education was just getting started in the school system. When Inez had the chance to work with the new class, it ignited a fire in her, not only for special education but also for advocating for all children.

At the midpoint of her senior year of high school, Inez approached her guidance counselor and asked if she had enough credit units to graduate, and when she found out she did, she said, "Well, I'm not coming back." She went home and told her mother she was dropping out of high school and going to college nearby to see if they would let her in. They accepted her, and she made plans to start college without knowing how she would pay for it. Someone in the financial aid department at the college told her there was a national defense student loan for special education teachers that would cover all of her costs. She recounted her parents "scraped together some money" to buy her a car and never helped her again financially.

Inez perused a book of jobs in the financial aid office at the college and found a posting for a transportation orderly at a hospital. When she went to the interview, the female interviewer told her they were looking for a male for the position. She said to the woman, "I have worked on a farm and bailed hay… I can carry a suitcase." In response, the interviewer asked a man to join them in the interview room, and after they asked her a few questions, they offered her the job. Inez worked as a transportation orderly for the hospital throughout college until she completed her student teaching. She also married her childhood sweetheart right after she started college, and they had been married ever since. Additionally, she had her two children while she was in college.

After completing college, Inez accepted her first job teaching special education in myriad types of disabilities. In her words, this was a "marvelous, marvelous" time. At the time, superintendents were elected instead of appointed, and she helped promote the high school principal, who had been an important mentor to her. When he was not elected, she sought to leave the school system. She worked for the Georgia Network for Educational and Therapeutic Support (GNETS) program housed one county over. At the time, many people called GNETS "psycho ed" because it served students from seven or eight school systems who suffered from severe mental and social disadvantages. She worked as the GNETS director for six years until the school district opened a new high school in Mosely County after a "bitter consolidation" of the two high schools in the county. She found herself wondering who the high school principal would be. She was inspired to apply for the position. She proffered it was vital to have someone who understood the cultures of all parts of the county as principal to advocate for all aspects of the community at the newly formed school. She got the job and was the first principal at the consolidated high school and the district's first female high school principal.

By the time Inez became high school principal, she had already earned master's and specialist degrees in special education. When she became principal, she took a few courses to complete her leadership certification, and then, after several years of being principal, she enrolled in a doctoral program. She completed her doctorate in leadership, stating she had no intentions of becoming superintendent. She said, "I liked the kids, I liked the teachers, I liked school, I liked proms, and I liked pep rallies." But when the sitting superintendent retired, Inez started worrying about answering to a new person. In her words, "I didn't want somebody else telling me what to do. I do not like to be told what to do." Inez decided to apply for the job and became the superintendent.

After Inez decided to apply, the school board conducted a statewide search using GSBA (Georgia School Board Association). There were "20-something" applicants, and they narrowed the search down to three: Inez and two men. A board of four men and one woman selected her unanimously. After being the first female high school principal, Inez became the first female superintendent hired in the Mosely County School System. She recalled questions from the "good ole boy" network when she became high school principal of whether a woman could handle the job. She said, "At the cafe where men drink coffee, they would say, 'A woman can't handle the great big boys up there at that school and blah, blah, blah…" However, she recalled men who knew her personally would stand up for her. She did not remember hearing anyone question whether or not she could handle the superintendent's job after building a solid reputation as a leader in her time in the principalship. Inez said she has never been afraid to stand up for herself, even once famously telling a man in a planning and zoning meeting who referred to her as a girl that while she did not have male anatomy, she did indeed have a brain.

Inez strongly believed her experience as a high school principal extensively prepared her for the superintendent's job. In her words, "high school principal is the best paving ground for the superintendency." As far as formal professional learning for the superintendency, Inez had taken the SPDP with the GSSA while she was a high school principal. She completed the SPDP course before applying for the superintendency at the urging of a female colleague in another district.

Inez became superintendent at the age of 55. She indicated she would not have wanted to become superintendent at a younger age because "It's like a president; you need limited terms. After 30 years, you can retire, and there's a lot of freedom in that." She also argued being a superintendent requires making good use of "political collateral." She offered she had a good relationship with a stable school board. Still, she said the relationship was like a marriage that must be developed and maintained no matter how many anniversaries you have had.

Inez had much to say about the positives of working as an educational leader. At the heart of her response was her desire to give every child a solid education, no matter their background, disabilities, or residence. She was thankful for the "opportunity to have a major impact on students and educators and all the staff." Inez noted a superintendent needs to set the school district's morale and "let students know they are valued, and families know they're valued." Inez never mentioned the desire to retire or pass the torch in Mosely County School System to anyone else.

Rebekah

I met Rebekah for the first time at Lynn County Schools, where she served as superintendent for the interview. I had to wait a few minutes for the interview to start and enjoyed a friendly conversation with the receptionist while I waited. Lynn County's Board of

Education lies along a highway in a nicely furnished and decorated former bank building. The school district acquired the building when the bank closed. When the previous guest left Rebekah's office, she came out to greet me with a friendly handshake. Rebekah was a middle-aged woman with long brown hair with blonde highlights. I found her office nicely decorated with executive-style furniture and many windows with plantation-style blinds. She dressed professionally in black trousers and a red blouse. Her desk contained some piles of paper, but it was not cluttered. At the beginning of our interview, she sat in one of two comfortable wingback chairs next to her desk for our interview. I sat in the other chair so the interview could be more conversational.

Rebekah grew up in the same county where she still lived, only a few miles away from Lynn County, where she served as superintendent at the time of the interview. She was the third of four daughters of a teacher mother and farmer father. Her parents highly valued education, and she was fortunate enough to "be able to do school very well." She was a very motivated student throughout school and spent her time outside of school, working on her family farm. She said her father made a "really good living" and she participated in all of the school activities and described her childhood as "normal." She was "very close" to her parents up until their deaths. Her mother died when she was 30 years old, and her father passed away a couple of years before the interview. Both parents died of cancer. She described herself as fortunate for having grown up in a "big close-knit family."

Schoolwork was always easy for Rebekah. She said, "I could read very early." Kindergarten did not exist at the time, and she remembered being able to read before she started school in first grade. She described starting school as an "adjustment" since she was already academically ahead of the other students. However, she thrived in school, was always "very

organized," and loved having her mother as a teacher at her school and even for one subject in the fourth grade. Her mother and another fourth-grade teacher had the most positive impact on her life and her desire to become a teacher. Rebekah was a well-rounded student who was named Miss Homecoming in high school. She received many accolades throughout school, and although her high school was a small rural school, she remembered the feeling of pride she often felt because of doing well in school and making her parents proud. She was also an athlete and participated in basketball, softball, and tennis.

Rebekah knew from a very young age she wanted to be a teacher. She did not remember voicing it, but she knew teaching was a career path she could follow because she "thought so much" of her mother. Her mother encouraged her to become either a "teacher, nurse, [or] secretary," which were all "very respectable positions for a lady." After graduating from high school, Rebekah commuted to the local community college. She earned an associate's degree and then transferred to a nearby university to complete her bachelor's degree in early childhood education. She started her career teaching kindergarten in the county where she grew up and still resides. Around the time she started her first job, Rebekah married her high school sweetheart after completing college. After a few years of working, earning two advanced degrees, and being married, Rebekah's life took a turn when she and her husband divorced, and she was left heartbroken.

She sadly recalled her mother asking her to think of something she had always wanted to do, and she quickly told her mother she wanted to be a flight attendant. She quit her job, moved to New York, and became a flight attendant. She had already completed her master's and specialist degrees in education. She had just started her doctorate, so she wrote her dissertation and completed her doctorate while working as a flight attendant for a major airline company.

Rebekah worked there for two years and then moved back home to Georgia. She continued to train people in the airline industry when she resumed her teaching career. After that, she was offered a position as an assistant principal, and her leadership journey "snowballed" after accepting the job.

Rebekah worked as an assistant principal in a nearby county for four years before taking a job as a principal at a school she knew was set to close in 1 year. The principalship was in the county where Rebekah served as superintendent at the time of the interview. After the school closed, Rebekah transferred to the district's central office and became Director of Federal Programs. She served for ten years, working closely with the two previous superintendents. Rebekah was surprised when the superintendent announced he would retire soon before her. After he announced his retirement plans, a school board member called Rebekah right away and said, "The board needs you in this position." They did not go through the interview process, naming Rebekah the next superintendent of Lynn County Schools. She accepted the position and stayed on the job for 3.5 years. There had only been one female superintendent in the district before Rebekah's appointment. Although that superintendent did not have a successful tenure, the board was still willing to hire Rebekah when the position opened up.

Rebekah credited the previous two superintendents with helping her obtain and become successful in the role of superintendent. The immediately previous superintendent asked her to attend executive sessions and board meetings, and she said he "always kept me in the loop with the school board." Rebekah also felt very comfortable as a fiscal leader when she was named superintendent due to her decade as the Director of Federal Programs. She believed these circumstances well-positioned her for the position. Through her years of leadership, Rebekah realized that one could not worry about pleasing everyone. She said, "You just have to know that

you're doing what's best and people aren't always going to like it and that can be hard." Rebekah described herself as having a "servant's heart and a positive attitude." She felt "very fortunate" in her career journey and has liked every job she has ever had. She added, "There have been bad days," but the job has never been bad.

Rebekah started her leadership journey early but had her children older than average. She even recalled being pregnant at a meeting to get information about retirement. When she was named superintendent in the district, Rebekah was slightly worried about balancing being the mother of two young children and one stepchild with the demanding requirements of the position. She said the board never acted concerned about handling the job's demands while also being a mother. Her husband, who worked on the family farm, had a very flexible schedule and could spend time in the afternoons taking the children to their various after-school activities. She said, "He is part of the whole thing in wanting the district to be successful and wanting the children to be successful, and he plays the biggest part of being able to balance it all." Her husband was aware of the pressures of his wife being a superintendent, but he had always been extremely supportive of her being in this role.

After Rebekah's nephew committed suicide at 14, she made her students' mental health a priority as superintendent. She said, "I think the mental health crisis that our nation faces with our babies is just gut-wrenching. We are a small system, and we have had several suicides." Rebekah noted she never wants her nephew's death to be in vain. She said, "I think things are not as they were for us when we were children… but I'm trying to work on the mental health for our youngsters, it's really what keeps me going." Rebekah's goal was to identify students struggling with mental health needs and increase the services provided to these students in Lynn County. She also instituted a "no homework policy" in the school district. Rebekah said, "That's probably

what I am most proud of, is our awareness of mental health issues." Thus, mental health became her platform for change.

While she was never an athletic coach before her tenure as superintendent, Rebekah noted the vast amount of time devoted to athletics in her role as the school district leader. She said, "People told me that would be a big issue, and I never knew." She relayed she relied heavily on the guidance of her athletic director. Coach Smith handled "nine out of 10 problems" related to athletics in the school system, and Rebekah expressed her gratitude for his help. She said, "You know, hiring a football coach or the basketball coach or the firing of one, you know it consumes so much of your time. You're always thinking, 'I'm not really focusing on what's important.'" Rebekah was willing to relinquish some control to the athletic director and noted the value his coaching experience contributed to his leadership ability.

While Rebekah never intended to be a superintendent, she attributed her success to her ability to be "confident and transparent." Moreover, being a superintendent is not about the suit, prestige, or title, she asserted, but rather about what is doing "what's right for kids, each individual kid." For Rebekah, successful superintendents focused on what matters in the position. She said, "When times are really bad or when it's really hard for you, it doesn't help to think, 'Well aren't I powerful?' or 'Aren't I prestigious?'" Yet, powerful relationships with the district's stakeholders and the previous two superintendents propelled Rebekah to the top of her career.

Dorothea

Dorothea was the superintendent of Pope County Schools at the interview. I met her for the first time at her district office building adjacent to the district's bus garage. On the way to our first meeting, I got slightly lost and had to stop to ask a sheriff's deputy where to find the district

office, and he kindly offered to lead me there. We drove past a football stadium and agriculture complex full of equipment and livestock trailers adorned with the Future Farmers of America logo as I followed behind him. Dorothea worked in a very rural district based on the setting. As I entered the office, the young receptionist called the superintendent to let her know I was there and then walked me down a long hallway past several other offices to Dorothea's office. Some of the office doors were open, and others were closed. Dorothea's office looked like a conference room/office at the very back of the hall. Dorothea could turn around from her desk and join me at a long conference room table for our interview. I noticed she kept the office door open throughout our conversation. The office contained executive-style furniture, a bookshelf of professional books, and several framed family photos. Dorothea was a tall, thin middle-aged woman with blond shoulder-length hair who wore a smart white blazer and black trousers with dainty jewelry. Dorothea was very kind and approachable.

Dorothea was in her 30th year in education and her 9th year as superintendent. While she had worked in four different school districts (all in the same region in Georgia), she spent most of her career working for Pope County Schools. Dorothea grew up in the suburbs of Atlanta but moved to the Pope County area just after college and has been there ever since. She grew up with one younger brother and parents who were married until Dorothea was in high school. During her fourth grade school year, her family briefly lived in Pennsylvania but decided they were Southerners and moved back to Georgia after only approximately 18 months. During her time in Pennsylvania, there was a teacher's strike, and her parents decided to enroll her in a private school. She described it as an "interesting experience" from which she learned some lessons about education.

Dorothea's parents worked outside of the home. Her father was a civil engineer, and her mother was a secretary for a chemical company. Her younger brother eventually followed in her father's footsteps into the engineering field and earned a degree in electrical engineering. Dorothea's father was a "very influential" man who believed she could accomplish anything she put her mind to. He discouraged her from choosing a career in education because she was "too smart to be a teacher." Dorothea expressed she felt "maternal" towards her younger brother, especially as her parents went through their divorce.

Dorothea had vivid memories of her early school days. She quickly recalled the name of her favorite first-grade teacher, stating the teacher was "amazing," and provided many hands-on learning experiences. Dorothea remembered an activity with play money used to "buy" goods around the classroom. She could still quickly name all of her teachers from her elementary school days, including the year spent in a private school in Pennsylvania. She also fondly remembered an "impactful" middle school teacher who "took the time to stop her in the hall one day and said, 'You've just grown up so much, and I'm so proud of you.'" This brief hallway conversation profoundly impacted Dorothea as she matured into a young woman.

Dorothea's never really felt successful in science, but this same encouraging teacher took time to help her with her science fair project, which built her "sense of confidence." This teacher helped Dorothea understand the impact teachers can have on students' self-esteem. She said, "It's always nice if a teacher taps into an area you don't necessarily feel like your good at. She flipped my script on whether or not I could do science…" Dorothea traced her confidence back to this experience with her middle school science teacher.

While most of her school experiences were very positive, interactions with a difficult freshman algebra teacher negatively impacted her. She described this teacher as being "really

hard" and "mean." Dorothea said, "There are just some of those teachers that you wonder if they really like kids, and she didn't seem like she did." Her experience with this teacher influenced the type of teacher Dorothea eventually became. She said, "There's a difference between being a rigorous teacher and just being a difficult teacher in terms of feeling like you're getting back at kids." When Dorothea started teaching school, she "was passionate about helping kids make sense of learning."

Dorothea was very active in community service projects during her years in school. "Every year from the time I was in sixth grade through high school, I worked with Special Olympics." She was also very involved with the Methodist Youth Fellowship at her church and the Interact Club at school. Additionally, Dorothea was a cheerleader and the president of her senior class. When asked how her peers would have described her in school, she said, "I wasn't popular, I wasn't the athlete, I was a high B kind of kid, but I was very active, and I think a leader of the average kids." She had accepted this role of a nurturing and quiet leader throughout her career.

After graduating from high school, Dorothea spent one semester at a large public university. She "had a younger brother at home, and worried about him all the time with [her] parents' turmoil, so [she] decided to go back home and enroll in a school closer and take care of him." During this time, she also worked at country clubs in the area, waiting tables. Dorothea noted she was not a person who knew she wanted to be an educator her entire life. Her father discouraged her from pursuing a career in education. Dorothea's undergraduate degree was in Public and Urban Affairs, and her first job was in event coordination at a popular resort. She also met her husband during this time and was married at 22. However, she knew she did not want to

work nights and weekends for the rest of her life, so she went against her father's wishes and returned to school to earn her teaching certification.

Dorothea's first teaching position was in eighth-grade language arts in a school system bordering where she currently serves as superintendent. She "loved working in a middle school because you get to be on a team." She also desired to make learning meaningful for students. As a teacher, Dorothea was aware her students "need[ed] to understand why we're doing this." She always taught reading strategies using the Georgia Driver's Manual. Because the students were approaching the driving age, she knew it would be a relevant activity to keep them engaged while learning. She said, "We had a high poverty rate, and we had some rough kids, but if you pour into them and give it everything you have, kids will know when you care about them." She added, "You can get kids to walk through a wall for you if they know you care about their outcomes." She "had a great teaching experience, and great mentors; I mean great people around me." Dorothea said she never regretted choosing a career in education and relayed many positive memories from her years as a classroom teacher.

Dorothea decided to pursue a leadership position at the insistence of the school principal, where she was a teacher. The principal had been her mentor teacher during her student teaching experience. She remembered, "She just kept saying, 'You're a natural you need to do this!'" The principal hired a substitute teacher for Dorothea when the assistant principal was out so Dorothea could fill in and "see if she liked" working in the role. Her journey into educational leadership responded to "nudging from other people." The principal who encouraged her to take an interest in leadership also provided Dorothea encouragement, support, and guidance. She earned her leadership certification and took her first job as an assistant principal. About this mentor, Dorothea said,

She was assertive, and she would just flat out tell it how it was… I had to step back

sometimes because I wasn't accustomed to that, but her confidence, and it was earned

confidence, in the work and doing the right thing, was clear and I really respected that.

She also noted despite this mentor's straightforward, no-nonsense approach to leadership, she

was also very caring.

After working as a middle school language arts teacher for seven years, she became an

assistant principal at the same school where she was a teacher. She served as the assistant

principal for two years and became principal. She was principal for five years and then

transferred to the district office, an assistant superintendent in a curriculum and instruction

position. After working in this capacity for several years, she moved to a neighboring school

system where a reduced workforce in her current district significantly increased her workload.

She briefly worked at the district office in the other system and then transferred into a principal

position in an elementary school. After this brief term as principal, Dorothea moved back to the

system she worked at as the curriculum and instruction leader during the interview. She was in

the position for one year when the role of superintendent suddenly opened in Pope County.

Dorothea stated superintendents in Pope County have historically been in the role for

many years. A man was in this job for 14 years in recent history, followed by another man for

seven years. Following these long-serving superintendents, the district hired a man from a large,

urban district for the position. Dorothea described him as "very smart, very well-read, but... not a

kind person." She said he was "disruptive" to the district's operations and had a very "hardcore"

mentality. He only lasted in the district for one year. The school board approached Dorothea

about serving as interim superintendent. She said she felt like an "insurance policy" for the

district because she was well-known by the school board. She served as interim for four to five

months. The school board conducted an official search for a superintendent (Dorothea cannot recall if they even interviewed any applicants). Still, they eventually asked her to serve in the position. At the interview, she was in her 9th year as superintendent and planned to retire from the superintendent position after that school year.

As the first female superintendent in Pope County Schools, Dorothea "never aspired to be a superintendent." However, she committed to doing everything necessary for the district, so she agreed to take the position. She did not pursue the county's superintendency and "wouldn't pursue it anywhere else." The district was in a "financial crisis" and there was a "sense of instability" from the previous superintendent, so she was a "known quantity" to do hard work and bring the district back to a place of safety. Dorothea did not recall any resistance to being named to the position because she had already been part of the community and felt they trusted her. She said the interim position she agreed to take lasted nine years longer than expected.

Dorothea had been married for nearly 30 years at the interview and was a mother to seventeen-year-old twins who were seniors in high school. She became superintendent when her children were in third grade. She tried for "about ten years to have kids" and claimed she needed a distraction from her infertility, so she kept going back to school for advanced degrees. She found out she was pregnant with twins when she was in her third year as principal. When Dorothea agreed to take the superintendent position, she told the school board she would have to step back if she felt her career was hindering her ability to be a mother. She asserted being a superintendent is a "family sacrifice and family decision," but added her husband had always been "very supportive" of her in her demanding job.

For Dorothea, the most rewarding part of her job was students' successes. She said, "It doesn't mean I want them all to come out of here and go to Yale or Harvard...just taking them

further than where they thought they could go from where they started." She noted many students in Pope County Schools had historically accepted a generational "second-class citizenry" and wanted them to have every opportunity to succeed. Dorothea did not want students in Pope County Schools to think anyone could "blow out their candles" based on their origin. She also added if she could give her younger self any advice, it would be, "Never stop learning, never stop being an advocate for learning, and prepare yourself for hard times."

Juliet

Juliet was the superintendent of Thompson City Schools at the interview. Due to travel restraints, I rescheduled the interview meetings twice. However, I had the opportunity to drive by the district office where she worked when I conducted one of the other participant's interviews. The district office was in a wing of the old high school located just next to a newer, modern high school building. Thompson City Schools was a tiny rural district home to approximately 1760 students district-wide. Juliet appeared to be about 50 years old. She had shoulder-length brown hair and was dressed in a long-sleeved top and vest. Juliet's office appeared to contain cinder block walls and extra seating for guests. In our conversations, she was very personable, often referring to me by my first name as if we were old friends.

At the interview, Juliet was in her 28th year in education and 9th year as superintendent for Thompson City Schools. Juliet attended elementary, middle, and high school in Thompson City Schools and was voted best all-around from Thompson High School as a high school senior. She was the youngest of three girls in her family, and her mother was the secretary at Thompson Elementary School. She said this experience served as an internship for her superintendent's job, even though she did not realize it at the time. She was "exposed to so much growing up in the school. [Observing] how teachers interacted with teachers, how teachers interacted with students,

and how the principal interacted with the superintendent and didn't realize it." She also helped around the elementary school as much as possible after school and during the summers. Juliet said, "If the custodians needed help, mama sent me. If books needed stamps or orders were coming in over the summer, I was checking in orders. So it taught me an awful lot." Her father was a quality control manager for a manufacturing company in a nearby town, and she described her childhood as "*A Leave It To Beaver* sort of childhood." Her parents were in their eighties, still lived close by, and Juliet still maintained close relationships with her sisters, who were both retired from careers in public service. One sister was an educator, and the other one worked for the Department of Family Children's Services in a neighboring county.

Juliet had fond memories of elementary school. She "absolutely loved kindergarten." She even recalled asking her kindergarten teacher if she could stay in from recess to help her set up snacks and the remaining activities for each school day. Juliet knew early on she would one day pursue a career in education. She vividly remembered sitting at her desk in third grade thinking about how she could teach the teacher's concept in a way that the students would understand. She "remember[ed] thinking I know why the kids are not getting this and so, I know what she needs to do. So… when I am a teacher… I would handle this differently." This pattern continued in high school, and teachers partnered her up with other students to explain math concepts. "In college, that was kind of my livelihood. I would come back here, and the parents would pay me to tutor their kids in high school math." She "knew from a young age this is what I was gonna do, and I loved being at school, and school was just someplace that I felt very comfortable." Juliet acknowledged her love of school was rooted in her mother being a school secretary. The school was her "home away from home."

Juliet quickly mentioned her high school home economics teacher when asked about her favorite teacher. She said, "She was the first person to really push me." This teacher helped her hone her leadership skills. "She me all over to do public speaking competitions and we would go to Future Homemakers of America state meetings in Atlanta, and she just constantly, every weekend had me doing something while in high school." An excellent high school experience inspired her to become a high school teacher. She said, "Academically, socially, I just loved that age." While Juliet had fond memories of growing up as the school secretary's daughter and knowing everyone throughout the community, she noted that sometimes this notoriety had adverse effects. For example, she said when she was on Homecoming Court, made all As on her report card, made the cheerleading squad, or was elected Beta Club president, people would sometimes say, "You know the only reason you get that stuff is because your mom works here." These comments never deterred Juliet, and she enjoyed much success throughout her school years due to her effort and hard work. Juliet did not recall being unable to do anything she wanted in school because of her gender. She said her father often involved her in garden work and manual labor. She "didn't even realize that every girl in America didn't go out and help daddy fertilize the garden." Juliet added, "I never felt limited because I was a girl."

While Juliet knew she wanted to pursue a career in education after high school graduation, she was not precisely sure what particular area she wanted to go into. She narrowed her two choices down to mathematics and high school economics. At the time, she thought she would be a teacher forever and thought being a mathematics teacher might get monotonous and boring. Hence, she decided to become a home economics teacher. She said, "Home economics was life skills, so I could vary activities according to what's going on in the world, so that's what I decided I wanted to do." She completed her first two years of college by commuting to a local

community college and then finished her last two years at a major state university. After graduating, she began applying for jobs and narrowed the job down to two high school positions. Both positions meant a 45-minute commute, so Juliet decided to pick the school system closest to a college where she could immediately start work on a master's degree. She enrolled in the master's program and completed courses in the evenings during her first two years of teaching. She also got married during this time. After completing her master's degree in middle-grade education, Juliet found a job teaching middle school home economics at a school system closer to home. At this time, she also found an educational specialist program and began working on a degree in administration. She only taught middle school in the nearby school district for one year and then accepted a position teaching high school home economics back in her home district of Thompson City Schools. After three years of teaching, Juliet accepted the position of assistant principal at Thompson City High School

While working as an assistant principal, Juliet started working on her doctoral degree and became pregnant with her first child. After working in this position for a few years, the superintendent approached Juliet to see if she would be interested in becoming the assistant superintendent for the system. At the time, two part-time assistant superintendents were retiring, and the superintendent wanted to have one full-time person in the position instead of two part-time employees. She told the superintendent, "You know I've got a three-year-old and a newborn baby," but he asked her to try the position and told her he had confidence in her. While in this position, Juliet "did all federal programs, all system, and school improvement, professional learning, curriculum and instruction, assessment, you name it…" Juliet worked as the assistant superintendent in Thompson City Schools for seven years and completed her doctorate during this time.

Juliet discovered the superintendent she was working for was a finalist for a superintendent position in Alabama through a happenstance situation. She did not even know he was planning to leave. She said, "Our financial situation in the district was horrible. He told me, 'I don't know if our school system will be here in five years, I just don't see how we can recover from this.'" At the time of the discovery, the superintendent was looking for jobs in other districts; Thompson City Schools was nearly three thousand dollars "in the hole." She said, "I just kept thinking, 'I don't have the option of going to Alabama. This is my school system.'" When he left the district, Juliet was named the interim superintendent. She was unsure if she wanted to stay as assistant superintendent, knowing the financial situation, or apply to be superintendent. Her family encouraged her to apply for the job. She kept thinking she would have to work for somebody who knew nothing about the school system, and she knew that would not be a pleasant situation. She thought, "I know what needs to be done and I know the cuts that can be made, and the school system will still be ok." Juliet believed in her purpose.

Juliet decided to apply for the superintendent position and went through three rounds of interviews. She said it was awkward to sit through rounds of interviews because she had known many of the board members for her entire life and the search committee made them treat her as if she was a stranger. As one of the two finalists, a school board member told her, the deciding factor for her selection was her awareness of the district's financial situation. She also agreed to a lower salary than the previous superintendent and agreed not to hire an assistant superintendent. The school board told Juliet, "Your kids are here, you're from here, and we know once you're here, you're gonna give it 150%." Juliet was also the first female superintendent in Thompson City Schools.

After serving as superintendent for nine years, Juliet said she had no regrets about taking on the role. However, she added, "This job has probably shortened my life span overall." She added, "Did it make my life harder than it needed to be? No doubt. But do I regret doing it? I do not. I have no regrets." At the interview, Juliet was in her 28th year in education, with nine in the superintendent role. Juliet counted the principal she worked for when she was an assistant principal and the superintendent she worked for when she was assistant superintendent as her two biggest mentors in her career. The principal instilled in Juliet "the importance of our school system and that you're always an advocate for our school system, and you're always an advocate for public schools." The laid-back superintendent reminded her of the importance of having fun at work. She "knew once he was gone [she] would forget about the fun, [and] would need to surround [herself] with people to bring the fun since I am such a workaholic." Her parents greatly influenced her work ethic and dedication to her job. "They taught me to be a leader, and an ethical person and how to lead with integrity, and all of those things were just instilled in me when I was growing up." She expressed gratitude for having grown up with such supportive parents.

Juliet recalled many wonderful aspects about serving as superintendent in Thompson City Schools. She recalled a specific example of examining reading data and noting the growth in elementary students from the beginning of the school year through November. She said,

> Being able to be a part of those decisions where you sit down with principals and classroom teachers, and you say ok, these are the kids in our little community, and we're gonna do everything we can to make sure that when they graduate, they are prepared to be successful people.

Juliet found her purpose found in helping her students and teachers find moments of success.

Juliet was proud of the financial situation in the school district, especially considering the financial shape the district was in when she began the role. The district had "gone from being nearly three hundred thousand dollars in the hole to having a seven-million-dollar fund balance." She also noted one of the most challenging aspects of being the superintendent in Thompson City Schools was losing friendships because of decisions she had to make for the sake of the school system. Despite these challenges, Juliet acknowledged the successes in Thompson City Schools while also continually focusing on improvement.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided narratives to share information about the six research participants as revealed in the two-part interview series. These narratives overview participants' childhood, family, education, career, and career advancement experiences and contextualize the interview setting.

Narrative inquiry fosters a collaborative process between the researcher and participants in which the participants' lived experiences are at the core of the study. Merriam (2002) indicated the most important feature of narrative inquiry is stories as data. Rich, meaningful interview responses from participants and my observations contributed to a collective overview of six female superintendents' life and career experiences in rural Georgia.

Chapter V

Discussion of Themes

This study examined professional experiences and strategies used by female school superintendents in rural Georgia to advance in their careers. Four main themes emerged from the stories of six women who had served a combined 38 years in the school superintendency. The four themes: surviving the male-dominated leadership jungle, safer at home, the paradox of female leadership, and balancing work-life demands add to our understanding of the experiences of female superintendents who make up only 29% of all the school superintendents in Georgia (Georgia School Superintendents Association [GSSA], 2020). This disproportionate representation of women in the top position in the female-dominated career field of education (Maranto et al., 2019) calls for an understanding of deep issues concerning equitable representation and how to raise awareness among school board members and other critical stakeholders of the need to increase the number of women in educational leadership (Maranto et al., 2018). This chapter provides a synopsis of the data processes and interpretations that informed the themes gleaned from this study ending with a detailed description of each theme with supporting literature and participant quotes.

Data sources in this study included interview transcripts, research journal memos, observation notes, and documents from the research participants. During the data analysis process, I systematically searched and arranged the interview data during the complex and ongoing analysis (Merriam, 2002). I coded data to subdivide the vast amount of raw information and data and assigned them into categories. I then used these codes to identify themes from the data compiled in the study.

Maxwell (2013) indicated that researchers should listen to recorded interviews several times before completing the transcriptions. Listening to the interviews allowed reflection before I

began coding the data. I also took notes as I listened to the interviews in my research journal. This reflection allowed me to denote what I thought may become potential themes during the data analysis process.

Qualitative researchers use coding to make sense of the data and arrange the data into categories, which then become themes (Patton, 2002). Coding also allowed me to reorganize the raw data based on the similarities and differences in the research participants' responses (Maxwell, 2013). During this initial coding phase, I underlined, annotated, and connected the physical interview transcripts, known as open coding.

Each of the twelve interview transcripts was approximately fifteen single-spaced pages of rich data. I carefully read each transcript line by line and wrote codes based on the content at the end of each line. Initially, I marked each interview response as Descriptive or Reflective based on the participants' responses. I also read and coded my research journal and the observation sheets. Initially, I determined my codes per the concepts of the study: life and career experiences, barriers, and strategies for overcoming barriers. I initially had a long list of codes. I then condensed these codes and divided them into sub-categories. I remained flexible throughout the coding of all transcripts. Table 2 shows data analysis procedures.

Table 2

Examples of Initial Codes Used and the Themes Noted

	Theme: Surviving in the Male-Dominated Leadership Jungle
GE	Gender - the participant is aware of how their gender has influenced her career
CE	Career Experiences – the participant understands how her career journey led her to the superintendency
DK	District Knowledge – the participant understands how she fits a need in her particular district
LT	Leadership Traits – the participant describes her leadership style
VE	Value Education – the participant recognizes the importance of education in her life
WE	Work Ethic – the participant describes participants' work ethics
SCF	Self-confidence – the participant describes her self-confidence or the self-confidence of other female leaders
	Theme: Safer at Home
STP	Small-Town Politics – the participant discusses how she handles small-town politics
DP	Difficult People – participant, discusses how she handles difficult people in her community
HT	Hometown/Place bound – participant discusses how she serves her hometown and how she would not move for her career
	Theme: The Paradox of Female Leadership
EO	Encouragement from Others – the participant has grown or pursued positions because of the encouragement of others
MfO	Mentorship from Others – others have mentored participant
MO	Mentoring Others – participant has mentored others
OW	Loneliness – the participant describes her relationship with other women
	Theme: Balancing Work-Life Demands
WLB	Work-Life Balance – the participant discussed balancing the demands of the job
MH	Motherhood – the women discuss the impacts of motherhood
DS	Double-Standard – the women discuss the double set of standards they have experienced

After coding the transcripts, I noticed that repetitive codes emerged and grouped them thematically. I confirmed themes by noting relevant participant quotes. As I began to compare the notes for each code, the themes emerged. I extracted four significant themes from the research data. All participants rose through the ranks or broke the glass ceiling to earn the position of superintendent by surviving in the male-dominated jungle of educational leadership,

leading where they feel safer at home, navigating the paradoxes of female leadership, and balancing work-life demands. Table 3 includes these four major themes along with a supporting quote from each participant,

Table 3

Themes with Supporting Commentary

Theme	Participant	Supporting Commentary
Surviving in the Male-Dominated Leadership Jungle	Betty	With a female I just always um it's some of that plus um we need her to be smart, we need to you know we need her to um you know be more of a people person out in the community and doing this and doing that so I think there are different expectations beyond just having worked and shown themselves worthy.
	Abigail	You have to be able to make sure that you're portraying that publicly so that others have confidence in you especially as a female um you want to be strong enough that people know that you can take care of business.
	Inez	Pick up our own ideas and thoughts and examine them occasionally, do you still believe this, why do you believe it and be willing to say you know what I made a mistake.
	Rebekah	I'm not gonna just sit here and smile at you at the end of the day.
	Dorothea	I'm not apologetic about being a female who leads with high expectations, but I lead from the heart.
	Juliet	I would say the most difficult thing for me was deciding gosh, do I want to be away from my children that much because I really didn't know the time that would be involved in doing and how drastically it may change my schedule.
Safer at Home	Betty	I've always felt like there were people back here like me who needed people like I had when I was coming through and um so that was one of the reasons. The other quite

		frankly was just that I had like I had been away from home long enough.
	Abigail	And so it was the right decision, it may not have been exactly in the moment what I wanted to do but I knew it was where I was going because it was what my background and experiences were…
	Inez	I am place bound but I'm place bound by choice, and I feel like whatever I'm gonna serve, I'm gonna serve my home.
	Rebekah	I would not have applied and moved across the state to become superintendent.
	Dorothea	I'm not a career seeker, it's just been I've been fortunate to have a good career, but it's been where I've been not where I've gone to.
	Juliet	I don't know that I would want to do this job anywhere else and I don't honestly know that I would be as effective because here I know everything about this school system, from the inside out and it would take a while before you could actually start making changes in another system because there would be so much to learn in a new system.
Paradox of Female Leadership	Betty	It was never about me trying to climb the ladder.
	Abigail	I love to see students learn, I love to see students take control of their life and make decisions and then I love to see them graduate and follow through with that.
	Inez	…so I started realizing you sit places by yourself
	Rebekah	I hope that I transmit um a servant's heart and positive attitude
	Dorothea	The next person needs to come in and have very high expectations for performance
	Juliet	I would say the positive thing looking back is the impacts that you are able to make on the children.
Balancing Work-Life Demands	Betty	I felt like I needed children.
	Abigail	There's a whole little corner area with their stuff in it and they are very accustomed to

	spending late nights in my office until we are ready.
Inez	If our children would have been younger, I don't think you could do it.
Rebekah	I had my children late in life and so I was, that was the only thing that worried me, like how am I gonna balance it.
Dorothea	Being a superintendent is a family sacrifice.
Juliet	I would just come to work like at four thirty in the morning and then I would work, my husband would call me when they would wake up like at nine and then I would work from four thirty to nine every Saturday and that was my like catch up time.

Description of Themes

My experiential knowledge, the purpose of this study, and participants' interview responses generated the themes in this study. Thorough data analysis revealed the themes of surviving in the male-dominated leadership jungle, safer at home, the paradox of female leadership, and different expectations for women. I present the four themes as analytical isolates, even though in all instances, the same concept is reflected more than once in the four themes simultaneously. Table 4 provides an overview of the similarities and differences between the research participants.

Table 4

Research Participant General Information

Participant	Position Before Superintendent	Previous Superintendent	Marital Status	Children
Betty	Curriculum Director	Male	Divorced	None
Abigail	Assistant Superintendent	Male	Married	2
Inez	High School Principal	Male	Married	2
Rebekah	Federal Programs Director	Male	Married	2
Dorothea	Assistant Superintendent	Male	Married	2
Juliet	Assistant Superintendent	Male	Married	2

This table reveals some of the similarities and differences among the research participants. While all followed male superintendents in their districts, they ascended to the position from different roles, including curriculum director, assistant superintendent, high school principal, and federal programs director. Most of the participants are married with two children. The following sections will explain the themes uncovered in the research data collected from these participants.

Surviving in the Male-Dominated Leadership Jungle

Learning to survive the male-dominated upper echelons in education is the first theme expressed by the female school superintendents in this study. This theme is analogous to the jungle, where male-based leadership appears to be the norm among mammals (Smith et al., 2020). Furthermore, in their study of female leadership in a male-dominated terrain, Smith et al.

(2020) defined male-based leadership as male mammals having the most influence over the behavior of others as observed in the behaviors of animals such as killer whales, African lions, hyenas, bonobos, lemurs, and elephants to humans. They determined only 10% of mammalian species show evidence of strong cases of female-based leadership. In these cases, female leadership among mammals is evident in female-dominated societies (Smith et al., 2020). However, male leaders dominate the female-majority workforce in education (Maranto et al., 2019). Although male leadership prevails, some women have broken the glass ceiling and assumed senior leadership roles like the superintendent. This theme uses the jungle metaphor to explore the women's perceptions of their trajectories into the superintendency. These women shared their construal of successful navigation of the unexplored metaphorical jungle of educational leadership and survived to tell the story.

While full of beautiful sights and rich vegetation, a jungle is also full of dangerous animals and unchartered terrain. Leadership for women in education is comparable to a jungle. There are many rich rewards to being the leader of a school system and many difficulties women encounter in an ecosystem still very much dominated by men. While the view of students graduating and becoming productive citizens is a remarkable sight, much like a waterfall in a jungle, men, like the lion, are still the kings of the jungle (Maranto et al., 2019). As animals have adapted over centuries to survive in the wilderness, the women in the research study have also adapted to survive in an unfamiliar educational leadership landscape.

Participants in this study identify as females, but they are also very aware of how their gender has shaped their identities and careers. The difference in leadership expectations for men and women has caused these women to use camouflage to blend in at times. At other times, women have had to adopt new characteristics to survive. In this theme, I will explain several

ways women have adopted new behaviors to adapt for survival. It is essential to share contextual, demographic data for the participants to explain how these women have blazed a new trail in the jungle of educational leadership. Four of the six participants are the first female superintendent in their school districts. While not the first female superintendent, Betty is the first Black female superintendent in her school district. All six superintendents have entered the position following a male superintendent.

Although none of the participants expressed the frustration of being unable to excel because of their gender when they were students, they have all recognized the gender disparity in the role of superintendent. In other words, gender never seemed like something that would put them at a disadvantage or force them to adopt new behaviors until they entered the workforce. Lemasters and Roach (2012) indicated that the general and student populations are half-female, 72% of the nation's professional educators are female, but 75.6% of the superintendents are male. Participants felt like underdogs or perhaps even isolated when meeting with other superintendents. Juliet described the gender disparity as "obvious". Abigail quickly answered, "Every day," when asked if she realizes she is in the minority as a female superintendent. She often felt "uncomfortable" to be the only woman in a meeting full of men but noted that it is always harder for a woman to be in a CEO-type role than it is for a man. Dorothea said that while the gender disparity is evident, she has always felt respected as any man in the room. She believes the culture of the superintendency being a male-dominated profession is shifting.

Along with similar sentiments, Juliet never felt like an "other" as a young female superintendent, even though she knew she was one of the only women in the room. Juliet has never felt overt discrimination as a female superintendent, but her husband, an attorney, would

disagree. She said this is because she agreed to take a lower salary than her predecessor, who was a man.

Adaptive behavior in these women is evident in the knowledge they have had to portray to survive. Betty noted that being the only female candidate for superintendent in her interview process made her feel extra pressure to present herself as well-versed on topics commonly thought of as male-centered such as athletics. Betty said,

> I'm not um an athlete, and I don't have a background as an athlete like that sense but I also understand that it takes all of that um for students to have the best experience and so that I wasn't against that I felt like I had to … really sell myself that I understood the importance of athletics.

She added, "I went ahead and addressed those things upfront". Betty has also noticed that men are more skilled in certain male-ascribed roles where women willingly allow them to take the leadership roles. Betty found this to be the case in discussions about operations and maintenance. For example, a school board member questioned Betty why the Director of Operations was quoted more than her in a newspaper article about COVID protocols. She also noticed that staff members automatically route questions about facilities and maintenance to the men in the room.

> It's almost like I'm not in the room like their eyes are on him like they are talking to both of us, but I understand you are the superintendent, but you know, they are looking at him almost like you know, but I know he understands this kind of thing.

Inez was frustrated with her community's lack of confidence in female leadership. This perception suggests that her community subscribes to a patriarchal tradition in which the male elder has absolute authority over the family group; by extension, a few male superintendents exert total power over the leadership team (Bullough, 2013; Glass, 2000). For example, Inez

recalled conversations in the community about whether or not she could handle the big boys at the high school when hired as principal. She said, "Stories would come back of men, some of the men were saying a woman can't handle the great big boys up there at that school and blah, blah, blah." Throughout the data, it is evident that women have survived the male-dominated leadership jungle by proving themselves worthy or capable to those who might believe otherwise.

Some communities still hold on to traditional patriarchal male stereotypes more tightly than others. This tradition is prevalent in a traditional southern context. Hahn (1984) determined that southern patriarchy, or male-dominated society, was described as "Southern honor." This southern honor was "a world of white men facing one another as household sovereigns, and defending that sovereignty in a community of peers" (p. 147). While not all participants dealt with practices such as this one, Rebekah pointed out that some districts and school boards may harbor more long-time held standards for women. In other words, some jungles are more dangerous than others are. Abigail noted that school boards in more "traditional" or rural areas might be reluctant to hire female superintendents because of the culture in their community. The leadership gap in the rural south is also evident in politics, where women are significantly underrepresented compared to the entire population (Crowder-Meyer & Cooperman, 2018).

Moreover, the gender disparity in politics is more evident in Republican-dominated regions than Democratic. The Republican party tends to be less progressive and values traditional family and power structures (Montanaro, 2021). It makes sense that if rural areas are less likely to elect female leaders to political office, then school boards are also less likely to name a female as the leader of the public school system in the community. Jogulu and Wood (2008) determined that female leaders' effectiveness strongly reflects local cultural beliefs. If the

community favors patriarchal beliefs, people are less likely to perceive women leading a public school system. In many rural areas, the public school system is likely the major employer in the county. Therefore, the southern conservative jungle of educational leadership tends to be a haven of dangerous traditional patriarchal elements than in more progressive regions where communities are more modernized and gender-neutral.

Mavin (2008) found that women's presence in roles traditionally held by men is conditional on their willingness to take on new behaviors perceived as masculine. In addition to female superintendents adjusting to their professional environments to survive, they sometimes had to adapt their behaviors to match the different standards set for women in leadership. Brunner (2000) found a range of stereotypes that reflect how men and women are stereotypically supposed to act. Masculinity and femininity are not necessarily fixed but can constantly change based on the culture and meanings ascribed to them (Mavin, 2008). It is more acceptable for men to appear self-sufficient and figure things out independently in modern culture. A man can also act tough without being called a "bitch". The Southern patriarchal society perceives men as less likely to show emotion than women. Female leaders working in traditionally conservative areas strived to comply with some of these stereotypes to gain acceptance into the so-called "boys' club."

Rebekah sometimes had to "act like a mad man" to mimic the male stereotype behaviors to convey to her stakeholders that she is not "just gonna sit here and smile at you at the end of the day." Although she has never had to alter her voice, Inez noted that men ignore women with "girly girl" voices even if their ideas are the best. Skrla et al. (2000) determined men sometimes use intimidation and silence to discourage women's voices.

Abigail mimicked male bravado of self-sufficiency used by men to show they can figure things out independently without the help of others at professional meetings. She hoped taking this same approach would make the men take her ideas more seriously. She said:

I would approach those committee meetings a little bit more formal um I would be prepared before I go in on when I walk in that rather than going and saying hello and catching up I'm going to establish where my seat is and my presence and introduce myself to the speaker or the person you know who's leading the committee um and then maybe go and say hello but um the mannerisms are a little be different.

This notion of self-sufficiency often forced her to work very hard so she could be "overly prepared" for meetings, but she found it necessary to "support her system" by not letting her gender "interfere."

Some animals in the jungle use defenses like playing dead to survive. Other animals, conversely, use startling sounds. Inez found a way to exude aggression and control to get respect and have the final say about staying as a female superintendent for eleven years. However, she found that this behavior was unnecessary as she could get by being herself. She contradicted herself when it came to dealing with "shorter men." She admitted that she has often used her height to "intimidate" people. She also famously told a man at a planning and zoning meeting in her community, "I don't have a penis, but I do have a brain." When discussing the "Good Ole Boy" Network, Abigail was quick to say it "absolutely" exists. Furthermore, Betty said, "It's a boys' world." While acquired knowledge and adaptive behaviors may help women survive in the jungle of educational leadership, the gender disparity does affect the habitat.

One survival skill that the participants mentioned was self-confidence. Along the same vein, Abigail asserted that women must change to appear more self-confident as a key to their

success. Participants' self-confidence was evident by trusting their abilities and judgment. Women who aspire to become educational administrators are more likely to report lowered confidence levels or aspirations than women who have become educational administrators (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). The participants in this study were confident in who they are and their work. Betty checked all of the boxes needed for the superintendent position in her district. While working for a private educational company, Abigail realized that she had as much knowledge for what it would take to be a superintendent as the other superintendents she was working with.

Inez knew her self-confidence was a central factor in her decision to apply for the superintendent position. Her confidence in her leadership capabilities compelled her to apply for the position of superintendent when it came open in her district. She did not want anyone else telling her what to do. She told the school board she was interviewing them more than they were interviewing her during her interview process. She said, "Most of the time, they look for who's tough enough to handle it." If she were not self-confident, she would have never applied for the job. She said, "I knew that I could stand the battle." Dorothea also used a battlefield-type description when she said, "You have to have a lot of fortitude to deal with the criticism in the position."

Although some women lack self-confidence, Rebekah perceived herself as confident. It would be interesting to find out how others ranked her self-confidence. Although her community stacks the deck against women in general, Rebekah broke through the glass ceiling because she chose to assert herself, ignoring the trappings of femininity, and learned the rules of the male-dominated superintendency. She even attributed her self-confidence to helping her become successful. She said she was never interested in climbing the ladder to the position of superintendent, but the more responsibility she received as a leader, the more she thought, "If

they can do this, I know I can do this." She added, "I have always tried to be honest and sincere and hardworking, and a lot of it just fell into place." Juliet said the female superintendents that she knows do not lack self-confidence. She said, if anything, men have to talk about how great they are because they lack self-confidence. Inez believes some women might be reluctant to pursue the superintendent position because they fear rejection more than men. She said, "You can be yourself. You can be a woman." This idea reveals her confidence in achieving her goals despite having the deck stacked against her.

Kay and Shipman (2014) have written books on confidence for girls and women. These books assert that underqualified and underprepared men do not think twice about leaning in as leaders. Women who are overqualified and overprepared may still hold back as leaders. Although the community stakes the deck against women as a larger group, individual women have been able to break through the glass ceiling by adapting to certain behaviors and making certain choices. The women in this study used self-confidence to help them adapt and survive as leaders. They have also consistently demonstrated a strong work ethic. They are committed to giving their best in any position beyond the forty-hour workweek. All of the participants in this study knew their strong work ethic helped them earn the position of superintendent. Many traced their strong ethics back to their school days and the leadership capacity built through various clubs, sports, and activities. The participants worked through college. Betty asserted, "I absolutely had to work." Inez's father, a retired military man, inspired her to do everything to the best of her ability. She said,

> Those things were very a part of what his mantra was for all of us and so we were taught
>
> to work and that whatever you do, you do to the best of your ability and it doesn't have to
>
> be a title or anything like that. If you dig a ditch, you dig the best ditch that you can dig.

For Rebekah, the superintendency is a calling that requires her "24/7." Her phone never quits ringing. She advised those seeking the position of superintendent never to accept the position for the "money, suit, or prestige." Dorothea said her husband told her she should take the superintendent position because she was a "workaholic." She said, "It didn't matter what my job was I was gonna work and get it as close to right as I could." Dorothea talked about going on a recent vacation with her family to the Grand Canyon and carrying her laptop and phone around everywhere she went. She was not the only participant to mention the dedication to working around the clock.

Some female education leaders may have regrets at the end of their careers about the time and energy spent toward survival in the male-dominated jungle of educational leadership. Now that she is towards the end of her career, Juliet wishes she could have learned to have a little more fun instead of just working all of the time. However, she felt the school board selected her for the superintendent position because she worked hard. She told the school board,

> I can promise you that if you ever find that I'm giving less than a hundred and fifty percent to this school system I want you to get rid of me and I want you to hire a new leader because that's how much this school system means to me.

Juliet has never hired an assistant superintendent because she knows no one will work as hard as she does. It could also be possible she feels safer alone than working closely with others she might deem as threats to her standards of excellence. Beneath the surface, her reluctance to have an assistant superintendent could also reveal a lack of confidence in leading or teaching others. She believes women are more willing than men to put in the number of hours necessary to get the job done. She said,

I think there's a difference in work ethic. I think we're; we know what we're getting into when we assume the job but that doesn't scare us, it doesn't bother us because we just have that internal work ethic, but I think a male is taking the job for just completely different reasons and that may be completely unfair, that's just been my limited experience.

Juliet believes her willingness to work hard helped her earn the position of superintendent and is what has sustained her in the role.

While the jungle of educational leadership is still a male-dominated landscape, female educational leaders have learned how to adapt and survive. Sometimes this means women have to adopt a new knowledge base or take on new behaviors. It also means women have to exude self-confidence and adhere to a strong work ethic.

Safer at Home

Most of the participants in this research study live and work in an area not far from where they grew up. Successful navigation of the male-dominated arena of school superintendency by females requires a supportive environment where one can flourish, a notion encapsulated in the second theme, "Safer at Home." Women in this research reported experiencing situations of hostilities different from those experienced by men. They suffered the worst gender discrimination. This discrimination results from a patriarchal culture based on unequal power relations between men and women (Miller et al., 2006). The omnipresent discrimination against women contributes to their fears of being unfairly treated and prohibits them from seeking senior leadership jobs outside their communities. This discrimination explains their decisions to find employment in their environments with established relationships and earned respect.

Familiar, safe, and comfortable public spaces offer women countless possibilities for senior leadership jobs. The six participants in this study leaned into familiar and friendly communities where they were born and raised to become superintendents. According to Viswanath and Mehrotra (2007), women avoid strange spaces because they feel unsafe and vulnerable to domination by their male counterparts.

Furthermore, research reveals that most female mammals are philopatric. This idea means they remain in their home areas throughout their lives (Smith et al., 2020). Female mammals are part of a stable social unit that operates with a strong understanding of their habitats. Researchers indicate philopatry is more advantageous to females than males (Greenwood, 1980). This philopatric behavior is evident in the participants in this research study. All six participants live and work in Georgia, where they all grew up. Five of the six participants (all except Abigail) still live and work within a one county radius of where they were born. Three of the six participants (Betty, Inez, and Juliet) live and work in the same school districts where they attended school as children. Only one of the participants (Abigail) has ever moved to accept a leadership position. The other five participants in this study proudly live and work in their natural habitats, and all indicated they would never be interested in moving for a job. These female leaders feel safer at home rather than venturing into unknown ecosystems. They also feel an obligation to serve the communities where they live and have a history. They have not found these familiar landscapes to be without dangers but have used their knowledge of their communities to build their capacity as leaders.

Inez spent a small part of her childhood in another state but stated her family returned to Georgia after her father's military career ended. Mosely County, where she lives and works, is

her natural habitat. Inez discussed being "place-bound" and how serving her community has been a conscious decision. She said,

> I am place bound but I'm place bound by choice, and I feel like whatever I'm gonna serve, I'm gonna serve my home and Mosely County is a very impoverished, rural, one of the poorest if you look at the different ways, they identify poverty and impoverished districts.

Furthermore, Inez does not know many female superintendents who would even be willing to move for their careers. She said, "I only know a handful of professional female superintendents in Georgia that um just know they'll relocate and go you know to this system for three years, that system for four years, that I call professional traveling superintendents."

Dorothea is not a ladder climber and never wanted to be a superintendent anywhere else. She said, "I was not pursuing it [the position of superintendent] at all, and I wouldn't pursue it anywhere else, to be honest with you. I mean, my pursuit was for this community and the people that I had worked with." Her leadership influences her to do the best for her environment based on her experience. She said, "I wanted to do it was because I had spent many years in the district." For her, it was about making the best decisions to help her particular ecosystem. She added, "I don't want the title, I want, I wanted to be able to do the work like I wanted to be able to help where I could and to serve where I could, but I wouldn't go somewhere else to do that work."

Rebekah also subscribed to philopatric behavior because she has a firm connection to her environment. While she lives in a county that borders the one where she serves as superintendent, she grew up "rooted in knowing everyone" in her hometown. When she became superintendent, she made sure the board accepted her, although her current home is in a different

county. She told the school board she would be willing to buy property in the county, but she would permanently reside on her family's farm because of her strong connection with her siblings. The board accepted this situation, but she was also deeply familiar with the school system where she is superintendent because of the many years working in the district before her promotion. This connection to the school district is what she believes led to her offer of the superintendent job. She said, "I would not have applied and moved across the state to become superintendent." Living and working in the communities where she is familiar feels safer for Rebekah, but she also says it is better for her children. Moreover, Rebekah's children are rooted in the community where she serves as superintendent.

Betty was quick to return home after college because she thought four years of being away at college was long enough. Her only option was to return home and give back to the community that had given her so much. Betty believes there is value in working in a place with a history. She has never wanted to leave and work in another area. She said,

I've always felt like there were people back here like me who needed people like I had when I was coming through and um so that was one of the reasons. The [reason I moved home] other quite frankly was just that I had felt like I had been away from home long enough.

Juliet echoed a similar philopatric sentiment. She said, "This school district has been home for me." She was partly drawn to this school district because her mother also worked there. A "sense of loyalty" inspired her to work in her home district. Juliet received job offers to work elsewhere for more money, but she moved back home to familiar faces and traditions. She took a lower salary than her predecessor because of her understanding of the district's financial situation. She said, "This is like *my* school system." Juliet made the financial sacrifice knowing

that her school board would not have hired a female for the superintendent position if she were an unknown female. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that once a female has "earned her stripes" in a certain community, it is easier to adapt and survive there. Betty shared similar sentiments that it had been her experience that younger female superintendents work in their hometowns. Betty understands that district officials chose these women to be superintendents because they were well-known by their communities. She said, "If the community knows you, they respect you."

A strong desire to protect her habitat played an important role in Juliet's choice to accept the position of superintendent. She feared if she did not apply for the job, she would have to "end up working for somebody who knows nothing about this school system, and it's literally going to drive me crazy." Being a part of the interview process in her hometown also meant interviewing with people she had known her entire life. While this interview was slightly awkward for her and the school board, she ultimately felt she got the position because of her long history with it. She believes everyone calls her by her first name because this is the home where most people know her. These examples of how immersed she is in her district reveal her strong connection to her environment. This connection has aided in her survival in the role of superintendent for nine years.

As mentioned previously, five of the six superintendents have adopted philopatric behavior and chosen to remain very near the place they grew up. Abigail, the one superintendent in this study who moved for her position, reluctantly agreed to take this job. She argued that women are less likely to move for a position. When Abigail started working in a new community, she realized she had to acclimate to the norms and expectations. She had to adjust her way of dressing and the kind of purses she carried. She quickly realized she did not work in a

"suit" district. In other words, she had to adapt to her environment to survive as an outsider. For female leaders, staying close to home means knowing how to be acceptable in a community.

Just because the women follow the philopatric pattern and work near their homes, they still face traps and snares in their work because of their communities. Female superintendents face challenges navigating small-town politics in small, rural school districts. Each of the five superintendents who live and work near their hometowns described particular difficulties they face. Betty noted that everyone's ears heavily influence her school board in a small town. She said, "It's not just those five board members sitting there it's all the people in their ears. It's the people they go to church with and all of that so um I definitely think it's a political position."

Local politics of the different areas of her rural community influenced Inez's career as superintendent. She disliked that the school still practiced racially discriminatory student elections of white and black students in 1995 at the high school. When she became principal, she went about changing the policy. While she anticipated having some pushback, she was not worried about the consequences because it was right. She said, "You have to look for opportunities to change things in education because it is hard to make changes in many communities." She lamented the many struggles with the private school she refers to as the "segregation academy" in her town. Betty believes everyone gets so much "political collateral" and should use it wisely. She commented, "Let's say this piece of paper (she tears the piece of paper), ok I just used it, at some point it's all gone be gone and especially on those controversial things, so you better use that political collateral." While the small-town politics have caused difficulty for Inez, her comfort and familiarity with the community have helped her navigate any potential sandtraps during her term as superintendent.

For Rebekah, understanding industry difficulties in her community has influenced her career. She struggled to provide the best mental health resources for the students in her rural community. The "Good Ole Boy" network refers to the phenomenon where men promote each other through connections rather than hard work. Rebekah dealt with the "Good Ole Boy" network, which also extended to the "Good Ole Girl" phenomenon. However, her recognition of these difficulties and how to navigate them have sustained her as an educational leader.

Dorothea took the job in her hometown to correct the injustices in her community. Her primary mission as the interim superintendent was to promote healthy local internal and external politics. She said, "I'd watched so many people be broken."

> It's politically internally because everybody has a little bit of an angle, you've got the band parents, you've got the football parents, you've got the, you have all of those different groups but then you also have the angles from economic development and you have the angles from the Ag [agriculture] world, you know in Georgia Ag is big and I'm a big supporter so it's not a criticism it's just all of those are political players.

Dorothea struggled when the school board forced her to close a community school named after a state senator. Despite the state senator's beloved reputation, the school's enrollment had dwindled to a point where it was no longer feasible to keep it open. She said,

> I mean if your heart did everything then you'd be bankrupt but at the same time you can't be heartless and there were times whew, those first five years that I felt heartless. It took years off my life, I can promise you that.

Dorothea has learned to remember the core mission of public education as she navigates all of the politics in a small community. She said,

In this role our core mission is to serve kids and so um and communities and families, but it starts with the kid so um, it's pretty easy to navigate politics if you just go back to your core mission every time.

Ryder (1994) reported on the lack of willingness of female educational leaders to relocate for their jobs. She surveyed 1,300 female educators with educational leadership certification but not administrative positions, and 78 percent of the respondents said they would not or could not relocate for career purposes. Grogan and Brunner (2005) determined 50 percent of the participants in their study said the lack of ability to relocate was a prominent barrier for females to the superintendency. These results mirror the perceptions of the female superintendents in the current research. Female educational leaders appear to be philopatric beings who feel a deep connection to their communities and seek to find ways to survive as leaders in their backyards and communities.

The Paradox of Female Leadership

In the current research, women find themselves in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they have to be harsh to fellow females who do not have the insider view of their daily struggles to prove to their male counterparts how good they are. On the other hand, these women cannot suppress their soft skills of nurturing and mentoring others. Thus in this theme, the paradox of female leadership, it is therefore essential to explore how these women function as superintendents when on the one hand, they are struggling to find the courage and be like the male leaders. On the other hand, they are caring and nurturing education leaders. Therefore, despite their struggles to survive in patriarchal leadership terrain and traditional southern conservative environments, women find themselves in awkward leadership positions, creating an anomaly that is the subject of this theme.

In an article in *The Harvard Business Review*, researchers indicated women experience leadership paradoxes exclusively (Zheng et al., 2018). The researchers suggest female leaders will be required to navigate the tensions for female leaders as long as societal expectations for men and women differ. In the article, female leaders face four specific paradoxes. The paradoxes include being demanding yet caring, behaving authoritative yet participative, advocating for themselves yet serving others, and maintaining distance yet being approachable. I found all four of these paradoxes in this research study.

All of the participants found themselves, on the one hand, demanding the best of others and, on the other hand, caring for their subordinates. They maintained high expectations for those in their school districts, yet they also nurtured and cared for their followers. These women demonstrated high expectations through high standards enforced in their school districts. Betty said, "We want to have high expectations for our students." The demand for high standards also extended to the teachers and the school staff. However, she also participated in the professional learning she asked her teachers to join in. She said, "If they are in training, usually I'm in training with them."

Inez mentioned pushback received when she tried to institute new grading policies at the high school as the principal. However, she stood her ground because she knew it was the best decision for student learning and growth. While holding these new and high standards, she also sat alongside the teachers as they learned how to teach under the new set of expectations.

Dorothea specifically faced this paradox of having high expectations while also being nurturing. Her leadership style is "collaborative with high expectations." She thinks she has been nurturing throughout her time as superintendent, and it has earned her a certain reputation as a leader. Still, her caring side may have superseded her demanding side. She believes she

empowers and trusts others as a leader. She even described herself as being "gentle" and "nurturing" the district into a place of success. However, she also recognizes that someone with a different leadership style might serve as a better leader in the district when she retires at the end of the school term. She said,

> The next person needs to come in and have very high expectations for performance, which if I were coming in now, that's what I would do. I just don't, maybe I'm wrong, but I don't feel like I can do that right now because I've been, I've been the caretaker and the gentle leader.

Juliet realizes some people might negatively describe her, but she hopes they will understand why she had to take certain actions. Her remarks show that she wants to be seen as highly effective while still being liked or noticed for her softer side. She said,

> I think our teachers would probably say, we love her, but we know that she can um, you know I don't wanna use the word 'bitch'. But, when she needs to be, you know, she can be that person, so, it depends on what role they've had to deal with me. Honestly, you know majority of them would say um, I hope they would say that they um have enjoyed working with me as the superintendent.

The participants demonstrated their caring side in the way they mentor others. They see the importance of leading other women to prominence in educational leadership. This approach is true even when some female leaders say they have not had many female mentors or have seen the detrimental effects of harshly treating other women. Betty noted female leaders need to "bring other females along." She says it is important to see potential in others and push them towards professional learning experiences. Abigail also said women should support other women. She said, "I do believe that we've got to support other females, and I don't necessarily

know that we are um as intentional on that as we need to be." Inez has mentored other women through the Georgia School Superintendents Association. Rebekah also mentors others because her mentor told her mentorship is a gift to be passed on. In this same vein, Dorothea says her mentor always asked her, "Who are you mentoring, and who is mentoring you?" This question has remained prevalent in her mind when bringing other leaders along.

Promoting other female leaders is part of the women's caring side. Dorothea said there is only one male principal in her district. The rest are females she hired. For her, it is important to encourage and mentor other women and give them leadership opportunities. Even though these women set the bar high when it comes to their expectations of others, they are also willing to extend a hand to help pull others up.

Paradoxically the participants in this study had to balance authoritative and participative leadership. They see their authority or authoritative nature coming from their confidence in leading their districts. They are confident in themselves and their ability to lead and make wise decisions about their organization's final authority. Inez said, "If I wasn't confident I could do the job, I would not have applied." However, they also describe themselves as collaborative leaders who seek the input of others and guidance from mentors. Many of the women work to be team players who seek the knowledge and wisdom of others without appearing authoritative despite being confident in their abilities to lead their districts.

School authorities often perceive women as better collaborative decision-makers and better at decentralization, making them more desirable by some school boards in the school superintendent position (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Betty, who identified as "collaborative," said, "I don't try to exert my authority. …. I don't just um assign or direct or dictate um that I'm just a people person and ugh we all work together…" Rebekah echoed this concept by saying

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she is not territorial, and her philosophy is "better together." She also said, "I hope that I transmit um a servant's heart and positive attitude." While she thinks some may call her a "bitch", Juliet noted that she would describe herself as "transparent" and a "team player."   Abigail and Inez also subscribed to the notion of supportive leadership. Brunner (1994) determined women avoid using the term power and are more likely to describe themselves as good listeners, patient, and productive. None of the women used their position of authority to exert power over others or diminish the growth of future leaders.

Furthermore, the research participants advocated for themselves while also serving others. The women in this study realized that focusing too much on themselves or others would be detrimental to their careers. Only one of the participants specifically mentioned taking certain positions to climb the leadership ladder. Still, all participants demonstrated advocacy by pursuing advanced degrees and participating in many professional growth opportunities. They seemed to know that they must advocate for themselves to grow as leaders. They had to equip themselves with certain knowledge and skills. All of the women in the study hold doctoral degrees. Four of the six completed the Georgia School Superintendent Association's Superintendent Professional Development Program. They are confident enough to stake their claim as knowledgeable educational leaders.

The participants rose to the top of their profession by encouraging others and choosing to serve their homes rather than purposefully climbing the leadership ladder. Betty even specifically said, "It was never about me trying to climb the ladder." The data suggest that participants were more driven and motivated to help others and focus on the children in their school districts rather than exerting their authority over others. Betty kept her students as the central focus of her work. She said,

I think the background with the teaching and learning has really helped me in our journey

to um you know to really put the focus back on students and student achievement and um

you know just looking at the whole child and the things that we can do to um make our

students or to get our students to where they need to be.

She said, "It's just to try to keep the kids at the focus and understanding everything that we are

doing, it's about the kids."

Instead of elevating themselves to a throne of power and prominence, the female leaders

in this study have focused on providing the best education they can for their school districts.

Abigail noted that the best part of being a superintendent is seeing students learn and grow. She

said, "I love to see students learn, I love to see students take control of their lives and make

decisions, and then I love to see them graduate and follow through with that." She also believed

her colleagues and stakeholders in her school district would describe her as having a strong focus

on student achievement.

All of the participants focused on serving others. Teachers described Dorothea as "an

advocate for kids." Others described Inez as a "student-centered leader." She struggled

balancing being student-centered and being teacher-centered. She operates by a "moral

imperative" as an educational leader, and everyone knows where she stands on various

issues. Rebekah never wanted to climb the leadership ladder. Instead, she was more interested in

the superintendent position to make things better for children. No participant enjoyed being a

superintendent because of the power of authority in the position. Participants focused on the

positive rewards of helping children succeed rather than receiving personal attention and

accolades.

Finally, these research participants maintained a social distance yet remained approachable to their school districts' stakeholders. They struggled to cultivate close friendships while also working in the executive role. However, they also made sure others knew they were warm and friendly. Rebekah's teachers described her as "approachable." However, she was also aware of people in the district who were vocal about not "liking" her. He daughter, who is in elementary school, has noticed the negative perception teachers in her school might have of her.

Inez admitted that being a leader isolated her from her colleagues on a level of friendship. On the first teacher workday as principal, she looked around to see that everyone left for lunch without inviting her. She said, "All my friends, nobody invited me to lunch, so I started realizing you sit places by yourself. Nobody wants to look like they are sucking up to the principal." However, she also described herself as "accessible." She said, "I don't have a work number. Everyone has my personal cell phone number. I sleep with my phone over my head; people know I'm accessible. I think everybody, teachers, and everybody would describe me as accessible."

Dorothea also does not have any "friends" in her school district. She said,

I don't have anybody in this school district that I would consider a girlfriend…you just can't, you don't. I don't really have 'friends' in this environment, but I do have people that I know so much about their family, I know so much about them.

She has not cultivated any relationship in her time as superintendent she would describe as a "friendship". Still, she has made connections with her colleagues to know she is approachable. I found this situation surprising since these women worked in their homes, which they considered safe and friendly.

Juliet told a story of a college-aged graduate from her school district coming to talk about what it takes to become a school superintendent. She was most excited; this student was a young woman. Several weeks later, another young woman reached out to Juliet to discuss the same topic. Even though she thinks people might describe her as a "bitch", other people in her community find her an approachable leader who makes time for others.

Even though the participants know they have to adopt certain behaviors that might seem harsh or direct to get the job done, they hold on to their female notions of being supportive and nurturing. This approach is evident in how the women are direct yet soft, competent yet humble, and committed to the work they must do while also demonstrating care and concern for others.

Balancing Work-Life Demands

In this theme, I present the daily struggle participants experienced to balance work and life demands as superintendents. Their workplaces often placed a disproportionate burden on workloads and emotional and relational labor within the districts. Participants were responsible for leading school districts and most work at home. These dual responsibilities increased stress and compromised their physical and emotional health, and led to burnout and lower work productivity in some cases. This situation is consistent with Mavin's (2008) notion of the pressure women feel to be better than men professionally while appearing feminine professionally and socially (Mavin, 2008). The demand to appear feminine socially is seen in the expectations for working mothers to balance being both a doting mother and an effective employee. The female educational leaders in this study adopted behaviors to balance working in a CEO role and being mothers. Sobczak (2018) said prejudices against women are mainly related to their motherhood. As connected to the earlier jungle metaphor, lionesses join forces against outside threats that might harm their offspring (Smith et al., 2020). Just as these mothers in the

jungle exhibit behaviors to help care for and protect their young, hardworking female educational leaders have also developed certain behaviors and techniques to keep their families intact while getting their professional jobs done.

Five participants are mothers. While not a mother, Betty has helped raise many of her nieces and nephews. She felt like she "needed children." Inez had her children in college, so they were nearly grown-up when she became a principal and superintendent. She thought it was easier for her to work in these roles because her children were older. This situation often forced women to work twice as hard as men to stay competitive and gain respect. She said,

> If our children would have been younger, I don't think you could do it. I mean you're there three or four nights a week most of the time doing something, and somebody's having banquet or a program or a concert or something, something all the time.

Dorothea prioritized her kids over her job. Dorothea was reluctant to take the position because her children were in elementary school at her appointment. She was concerned about the amount of time this would take from her role as a mother. She even told the school board that if she got in a place where she needed to be more involved with her children, she would step down from the position. She worked around the clock, prioritizing her family and getting the job done. She thinks her children have had teachers who did not know their mom was the superintendent

Social norms surrounding the expectations of women as mothers may cause women themselves to doubt their ability to build a career and a family (Sobczak, 2018). Juliet felt like the position of superintendent might hinder her ability to be a good mother. She said,

> The most difficult thing for me was deciding, gosh, do I want to be away from my children that much because I really didn't know the time that would be involved in doing and how drastically it may change my schedule.

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There is a double standard for women as Abigail reluctantly accepted the superintendent position that required her to move her children. However, she said the move was easier because her son was in high school at the time. In addition, her children have grown up in and around the schools. She said, "There's a whole little corner area with their stuff in it, and they are very accustomed to spending late nights in my office until we are ready." While commenting on the superintendent's job as being "24/7", Rebekah was only willing to take the superintendent position because her husband was "really good" and could help with childcare.

Juliet attributed her long-term survival in the role of the superintendent to her understanding of how she could find time to be both a mother and a superintendent. Society's double standard of expecting women to split their time evenly between the workplace and home is evident in her concentration on ensuring a work-life balance. Her focus has always been on spending quality time with her children, not just massive amounts of time. Juliet gets up and goes to her office early on Saturday mornings before her children catch up on her work and still spend time with them on the weekends.

The uncertainty of balancing society's demands for working mothers strongly influences women who do not pursue the superintendency. The participants in this study agreed many female educational leaders might decide not to pursue the position of superintendent because it will interfere with familial obligations. In other words, some women may not believe they can survive as both a superintendent and a mother due to the standards society places on women for being hands-on mothers. Women have indicated they are less interested in superintendent positions because of limited time for family and career obligations and a higher commitment to family than career aspirations (Connell et al., 2015). Betty lamented that many women have responsibilities in the home that might keep them from pursuing a top position. Abigail said

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some women might not want the scrutiny of the position of superintendent brought into their homes. Inez said women have to think more about work-life balance than men, which keeps women from pursuing the superintendency. She believes this is "unfair" to women. She wondered "How many husbands are really willing to stay home and cook supper while you're out doing so and so and so and so?"

Rebekah had reservations about how she would maintain a home and the position of the superintendent; it was something the school board never brought up. She said many women do not pursue the position of superintendent based on their concern about the time it would take away from their families. For Dorothea, being a superintendent is a "family sacrifice." She said it is a family decision and many women feel like they cannot balance the demand for the job. She explained, "A school superintendent works more hours than a corporate CEO." Juliet also agreed women might not choose to pursue the superintendency because they do not want to add extra stress to their home lives.

Incidentally, Rebekah and Juliet commented on the comical nature of a panel discussion at a recent superintendents' conference that focused on the experiences of superintendents' spouses. Only one male spouse was on the panel, and the rest of the participants were women. The wives discussed concepts like making sure the husband's clothes are pressed and making the big family decisions because the husband has so many decisions to make at work each day. Both women said the female superintendents in the room were surprised by the "old school" nature. Juliet felt a more robust and pertinent discussion should have included female superintendents discussing how they handle the job demands while also being wives and mothers.

Although the participants try to balance work and home life, they realize the extraordinary strain this puts on them. However, they rely on their support networks and choose

to see the benefits of being working mothers rather than feeling as though one role prevents them from serving in the other role in a way they think is acceptable.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings revealed through data collection with six female superintendents in rural Georgia school districts. I collected data through interviews, participant-provided documents, researcher memos, and observation sheets. A thorough analysis of the data revealed four major findings of this research.

I presented the results in four themes: surviving in the male-dominated jungle of educational leadership, being safer at home, the paradox of female leadership, and balancing work-life demands. These themes connect the experiences of the research participants and the existing academic literature. The findings highlight connections across the participants and reveal existing literature gaps. The next chapter will focus on the conclusions and implications of these research findings and provide suggestions for future research.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

Males dominate the school superintendent position in the female-dominated career field of education (Maranto et al., 2019). In Georgia, 71% of school superintendents are male, and 29% are female (Georgia School Superintendents Association [GSSA], 2020). The disproportionate number of female superintendents has been a neglected area of research (Björk, 2000; Brunner, 1999; Maranto et al., 2018). According to Brunner (2000), "Research focused on women superintendents was and is as scarce and scattered as the women themselves" (p.76). Notably, there is a lack of understanding of deep issues concerning equitable representation and how to raise awareness among school board members and other critical stakeholders of the need to increase the number of women in educational leadership (Maranto et al., 2018).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to fill gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of female superintendents in rural Georgia through the stories of women who have ascended to the position of the school superintendent. Notably, the study focused on perceived barriers for females in the journey to the superintendent position and the strategies and practices allowing them to attain the position. I recruited six female superintendents from six school districts in rural Georgia to participate in this research study. The study intended to give women a voice regarding their struggles to attain and stay in leadership positions. The research questions for this study were:

RQ1. What are the life and career experiences of identified female school superintendents in rural Georgia regarding their career advancement?

RQ2: What do female school superintendents in rural Georgia believe are strategies for increasing female superintendents at school districts in the southern U.S. region?

Narrative researchers treat the story as the data (Patton, 2015). The narrative is the analysis in which the story is interpreted, placed into context, and compared with other stories (Patton, 2015). In this study, six female superintendents' stories were collected, analyzed as narratives, and compared to other female superintendents' stories. I adapted Seidman's (2013) three-series interview model to create open-ended interview guides for a two-part interview with each participant. Open-ended interview questions allowed respondents to share their stories freely.

I purposefully selected six female superintendents from rural school districts in Georgia. I used three data collection methods: interviews, documents, and memos to collect data. Data analysis included various coding, categorizing, and reflective writing strategies. I took necessary precautions to assure the validity of the findings, including collecting detailed, thick descriptions, triangulation of data; identification of researcher bias and reactivity; and increasing generalizability of the results.

Data analysis in qualitative research is complex and ongoing (Merriam, 2002). I systematically searched and arranged the interview transcripts, observation notes, and journal entries in this process. Data analysis involves coding the data - making sense of vast amounts of data by reducing the volume of raw information, identifying significant patterns, and finally drawing meaning from data and subsequently building a logical chain of evidence. I coded data to distill the vast amount of raw information and assigned them into categories. Thus, I used codes as labels for allocating identified themes or topics from the data compiled in the study.

I developed four major themes, which constitute the results of this research. The themes include surviving in the male-dominated jungle of educational leadership, being safer at home, the paradox of female leadership, and balancing the demands of work and home. The remainder

of this chapter includes a discussion of the two research questions, including how the results

connect to previously discussed literature, the themes in the study, and the theories used the

frame the study. I have also included the study's implications, limitations, and suggestions for

future research.

Research Questions: Summary Discussion

In this research study, I examined the experiences of six female superintendents serving

in rural Georgia school districts. I selected the participants because they each have personal

experience navigating a career path to the position of the superintendent as a woman in a field

otherwise dominated by men. These participants willingly shared their first-hand accounts of

their leadership trajectories to top leadership positions. I closely analyzed the data collected from

a series of interviews, researcher memos, participant-contributed documents, and observation

sheets. Chapter IV contains a profile of each participant to provide context for the data analysis

found in Chapter V. In this section, I will respond to the research questions guiding this study. I

will connect my findings with other related literature to provide a holistic impression of women's

leadership landscape.

Research Question 1**:** What are the life and career experiences of identified female school

superintendents in rural Georgia regarding their career advancement?

In this section, I align the research questions with a summary of the literature, themes,

and conceptual framework findings. The participants shared their personal histories through their

responses, beginning with the first interview in the two-part interview series. In the second

interview, the participants shared rich information about their career trajectories to the position

of superintendent. The participants were willing to share the personal stories of their life and

career experiences through detailed responses in both interviews. These stories revealed the details necessary to answer research question 1.

I uncovered many interesting details, similarities, and differences among the participants during the two-part interview series. I will share information about their childhoods and families, school and college experiences, and career trajectories in the remainder of this section. Before digging into the deeper issues involved with being female superintendents in rural districts, it was important to understand the life experiences of the female superintendents. I needed to know about their childhoods, educational experiences, and early life histories to understand them as people with individual histories. Listening to the participants share their stories was also a way to establish trust between the researcher and the participants. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated the importance of using an individual's lived experiences as data sources in narrative inquiry research. Understanding an individual's total lived experience happens through understanding the details of the participants' lives.

Five participants were born into two-parent "working class", "middle-class", or "upper middle class" households. Betty was the only participant who grew up in poverty in the public housing projects with a single mother. Dorothea's parents divorced when she was in high school, but the other four participants' parents remained married. All participants noted close relationships with their siblings in both childhood and adulthood. There was no consistency among the birth order of participants. Betty was the second-born child of seven siblings; Abigail and Dorothea were the first-born with younger brothers, Inez was the middle of five children, Rebekah was the middle of three girls, and Juliet was the youngest of three girls.

All of the participants had mothers who worked outside of the home. Only one participant, Juliet, had a mother with a college degree. Her mother was a teacher. Four of the

participants' mothers worked in clerical positions, and one participant's mother worked in a school cafeteria. All of these jobs are considered traditionally feminine. Betty did not have a relationship with her father, but the other participants' fathers worked in roles perceived as masculine. Two participants' fathers worked in industrial roles; one was a farmer, one was in the military, and one was an engineer.

All participants spoke fondly of their elementary, middle, and high school experiences. Five of the six participants were interested in a career in education from an early age. Dorothea was the only participant who majored in a field other than education in college. All participants completed bachelor's degrees at colleges or universities in Georgia close to their homes.

The women have remained near their childhood homes throughout their lives. Rebekah moved to New York to work as a flight attendant for a short time but was anxious to return home as soon as possible. Five of the six participants live and work within a one county radius of where they grew up and attended K-12 school. Only one participant, Abigail, has moved to accept a superintendent position. Three participants: Betty, Inez, and Juliet serve as superintendents in the same district where they graduated from high school. The lack of mobility for female superintendents also indicates school boards may be more willing to hire unknown males than unknown females or that women must prove themselves to people they know before being hired for leadership positions (Robinson et al., 2017). Many of the participants in this study believe they got their jobs because they were a "known quantity." This concept aligns with the research that shows school boards are willing to hire known females for the superintendent position but are less inclined to hire a female as an outsider.

Five of the six participants were involved in sports and extra-curricular activities while in high school. They traced leadership experiences back to their school days. They were involved in

student government experiences, drama, debate, homecoming court, community events, and sports like cheerleading, softball, tennis, and basketball. They all valued these events in their development as leaders. Inez was not involved in any specific extra-curricular activities. She believes time spent working in a special education classroom while in high school influenced her career path. They all feel their school experiences shaped their career journeys.

The participants' career pathways are consistent with the career journeys of female superintendents in several research studies. Wallace (2015) determined 73.01% of female superintendents in six southeastern states served as teachers during their journey to the superintendency. All of the participants in this study began their educational careers as classroom teachers. Betty and Dorothea taught middle school English/Language Arts, Abigail and Inez middle and high school special, Rebekah kindergarten teacher, and Juliet middle and high school home economics. This trajectory is different from what some researchers have found. Garn and Brown (2008) determined female educational leaders often have experience in elementary education. Rebekah was the only participant in this study with elementary school experience.

The participants also left classroom teaching positions for leadership positions in schools. Betty became an instructional coordinator; Abigail became a learning specialist; Inez became a coordinator at a school for students with special needs; and Rebekah, Dorothea, and Juliet all transitioned into roles as assistant principals. From there, their careers all took different paths. Betty also served as a high school assistant principal, elementary school principal, and curriculum director for the district. Abigail worked as a special education coordinator, a specialist with the Georgia Department of Education, an assistant principal, a special education director, a private educational company, and an assistant superintendent. Inez worked as a high school principal for over a decade. Rebekah moved from the assistant principal position to the

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district's federal programs director. After serving as an assistant principal, Dorothea became a middle school principal and worked in several different curriculum roles in two different school systems at the district office. Juliet moved from her assistant principal role to an assistant superintendent role at the district office, where she now serves as superintendent.

Men enter superintendent jobs from secondary school administration at a rate of 70% (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Fewer women tend to be secondary school administrators, yet this position has been the most frequent position from which superintendents of schools are selected (Sharpe et al., 2004). All participants had experience as building-level administrators, but only Inez served as a high school principal. She was also the only participant to go straight to the role of superintendent from a building-level administrative position. Inez also worked in the smallest and most rural districts of those involved in the study. With a lack of other district-office level positions available, this may have been her only potential position to earn the superintendency. She was also the oldest participant but had many years to prove herself worthy as a leader in her small town. Juliet, Rebekah, and Abigail never served as principals, only as assistant principals. Five participants had experience working at the district office before becoming superintendent. Their roles at the district office included a variety of positions: federal programs, curriculum, instruction, special education, assistant superintendent.

Early studies on female administrators indicated women had little support, encouragement, or counseling from either family, colleagues, or educational institutions/organizations to pursue careers as school administrators or superintendents (Baughman, 1977; Schmuck, 1976; Shakeshaft, 1985). The results of these early studies do not align with the results of this research study. The participants all mentioned having the support of family, friends, colleagues, and professional organizations to apply for or accept the position of

superintendent. The participants all mentioned mentors they continue to call on for support in their careers.

Women also may not plan to become superintendents but instead end up pursuing the position of superintendent due to the encouragement or suggestions of others (Gupton & Slick, 1996). Garn and Brown (2008) suggested that the combination of successes and encouragement from others leads women to consider a path to the superintendency. Only one superintendent, Abigail, ascended to her position by intentionally climbing a leadership ladder and positioning herself in a way for promotions. External pressure propelled the five other research participants into leadership positions or accepting promotions. Allred et al. (2017) conducted a study with female school superintendents in rural districts in Texas. The researchers interviewed seven female superintendents to determine their aspirations, motivations, needs, and constraints. In this study, five out of seven superintendents decided to pursue the superintendent position only after a mentor, supervisor, or professor suggested it. These results are in line with the results of this study. Female superintendents seem to thrive after being encouraged by others to pursue the position.

Glass (2000) indicated spousal dynamics might serve as a barrier to the superintendency for women. Five of the six participants are married. Betty was the only participant who was not married. She is divorced, but she is engaged to be married again soon. Betty feels her divorce happened because her husband did not understand why she worked such long hours. This divorce occurred before she became superintendent and was still working in a school leadership role. Rebekah is divorced, but she has remarried. The other five participants described being happily married with spouses who have supported their career advancements. The five married participants' husbands have a variety of careers. Abigail's husband is an engineer, Inez's

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husband is a self-employed small business owner, Rebekah's husband works on the family farm, Dorothea's husband works for the postal service, and Juliet's husband is an attorney.

Barrios (2004) found that women often put their career aspirations after their family responsibilities. Shakeshaft et al. (2007) wrote, "pursuing career goals can be very difficult in comparison with the norm established by their male counterparts" (p. 114). The same five participants who have married also all have exactly two biological children. Rebekah also has one stepson, Abigail has a teenage son and daughter. Inez has two adult sons. Rebekah has a daughter and son who are in elementary school. Dorothea has twins (a boy and a girl) who are high school seniors, and Juliet has two teenage daughters. The research participants have developed strategies for being both mothers and executives. Through their support systems and finding unique ways of combining motherhood and their work life, the research participants have been successful as both mothers and educational leaders. Inez waited until her children were older to pursue career advancements. Dorothea worked through her vacations to respond to emails and phone calls. Abigail reserves physical space in her office for her children. Juliet wakes up early on Saturdays to go to the office before her children wake up. These practices have helped the participants balance the demands of motherhood with the demands of the job.

All participants are first-time superintendents who have only served in this role in their current districts—Abigail, 47, Inez, 66, Betty 52, Rebekah 50, Dorothea 51, and Juliet is 49. Traditionally, women have entered into educational administration later in life and more years of classroom experience (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). Robinson et al. (2017) determined the average age women first became a superintendent was 47. In this study, the average age of the participants when they became superintendent was 46, which is slightly younger but very close, to the results of the previous research (Robinson et al., 2017). All participants became

superintendent during their 40s, except for Betty, who had just turned 50 when she accepted the position. Inez has been in the superintendent position for the most extended time: 12 years. Dorothea and Juliet have been superintendents for nine years, Rebekah and Abigail have been in their jobs for three years, and Betty is in her second year. Robinson et al. (2017) determined the average number of years women serve as superintendent is 6.9. Inez and Dorothea, who plan to retire this year, have exceeded that average, serving 12 years and nine years, respectively.

All participants assumed their positions as the results of unanimous school board votes. Betty, Abigail, Inez, and Juliet had to apply for their jobs and compete against other finalists, but the school boards promoted Rebekah and Dorothea without a formal interview process. All participants followed male superintendents. Five of the six participants worked with their predecessors. Only Abigail, who moved for her position, did not work with the man she replaced as superintendent.

Females often express their aspirational desires through preparation by obtaining superintendent credentials and advanced degrees (Allred et al., 2017). Four of the six participants completed the Superintendent Professional Development Program (SPDP) through the Georgia School Superintendent's Association (GSSA). Even though the number of female superintendents is still not at an equitable percentage, the number of females earning doctoral degrees outweighs the number of men (Shakeshaft et al., 2007). More than half (60.5%) of all women superintendents have a doctorate (Robinson et al., 2017). All of the participants in this study earned doctoral degrees before becoming superintendents.

Glass (2000) determined a reluctance among school board members to hire female superintendents. The participants in this study found themselves in situations where the board was willing to hire a female superintendent, but these were "glass-ceiling" breaking moments in

their districts. Four of the superintendents are the first female superintendents in their school districts. While not the first female superintendent, Betty is the first Black female superintendent. Marietti and Stout (1994), in their study of 114 school boards in 19 states, found male-majority school boards hired female superintendents less frequently than female-majority school boards did. Research participants all mentioned the opposite of this research: mostly male school boards hired them.

Initially, I framed this study through the lens of three theories: the feminist theory (FT), the gatekeeping theory (GT), and the structural empowerment theory (SET). The career advancement experiences of the research participants revealed all of these theories.

The most central notion of the FT is that women have fewer opportunities than men, particularly related to career advancement (Reinharz, 1992). The women in this study noticed the gender disparity as they advanced their careers. They felt the effects of the network of "Good Ole Boys". However, all of the women in the study benefited from strong male mentors in their careers. The females themselves can better describe their journey to the superintendency because they understand the gender disparity rooted in the feminist theory.

Lewin (1951) and Shoemaker (1991) founded GT based on people, events, and situations that influence social change and exert social control. In other words, there are "gates" in organizations that prevent some from advancing their careers and allow others to pass through. Before this research, I expected participants to focus on barriers and how they climbed the leadership ladder. The women talked about situations that aided their career advancement, contrary to this notion.

In the SET, Kanter (1977) proposed a better placement of an individual in an organization allows the individual to develop higher career aspirations. I assumed the

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participants in this study intentionally positioned themselves in roles that would enable them to ascend to the rank of superintendent. However, five of the six research participants indicated their career advancement was because of the encouragement or insistence of others. They did not intend to navigate a career journey to the highest office in the organization but through a solid work ethic and with encouragement from others.

I aligned the life and career experiences of the female superintendents in rural Georgia districts with the themes in this study. First, surviving in the male-dominated jungle of educational research explored participants' ability to adapt their behaviors to survive and advance in a male-dominated career. The second theme of safer at home explains how the women have remained near their hometowns throughout their adulthood and career advancements. Only one female superintendent has moved for her career advancement. The theme of the paradox of female leadership demonstrates how the women have had to be demanding yet caring, authoritative yet participative, advocate for themselves yet serve others, and distant yet approachable. Finally, in the theme of balancing motherhood demands, the women show their ability to balance home and work demands.

Research Question 2: What do female school superintendents in rural Georgia believe are strategies for increasing female superintendents at school districts in the southern U.S. region?

Many participants stated they believe it is important for more women to be in leadership positions. Dorothea thinks, "More females should be in leadership positions including superintendency." The participants in this research study echoed similar ideas like those found in the literature about what would lead to this increase. Researchers have determined mentorship programs, especially for female superintendents, can help provide female superintendents with the support needed for the position (Melendez de Santa Ana, 2008; Wallace, 2015). Participants

in this study emphasized the importance of encouraging others and finding ways to see their potential. Juliet said women are willing to take leadership risks when they find others who recognize their potential. She said "planting those seeds" is very important with young leaders. She asks young leaders in her district, "Have you ever thought about pursuing a leadership position?" She believes that many women do not start learning leadership until someone else talks them into it. Dorothea also said, "We have to build up other females and encourage them… you need to know who your supporters are". Abigail mentioned the importance of intentional female support of other females. She said, "I believe we've got to support other females, and I don't necessarily know that we are as intentional on that as we need to be." Betty suggested that aspiring superintendents benefit from encouragement from current superintendents. She believes current leaders need to bring new leaders "along with them." She said it is important to "push people who we see that potential in."

While encouragement can help propel potential leaders, the participants reinforced the belief mentorship is necessary for assisting potential leaders in flourishing. Dorothea said there is a "great need for female mentoring females and putting some structures in place to encourage people to do that and be willing to take that step." Betty recommended finding "a good mentor…someone who's really strong in building people and bringing out the best in people, and then let that person be your guide." Participants appreciated the value of having various mentors with different backgrounds and experiences. Researchers have found that the "good-ole boy system" has impeded the ability of female mentors for female leaders in the superintendency network (Lemasters & Roach, 2012).

Additionally, Barrios (2004) indicated limited access to mentors within the educational community. However, mentors play a crucial role in developing the skills of a superintendent

(Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009). However, 94% of women who completed the 2015 AASA Mid-Decade Survey of Superintendents indicated they had been mentored, while 72% reported they have served as mentors (Robinson et al., 2017). The participants in this study all said they have served as mentors, but they believe this could be done in a more structured approach.

According to the participants, mentorship can also help female leaders understand the realities of the job. Dorothea warned aspiring female superintendents that "the general public can be terribly hateful." Having a female mentor would help other people keep public criticism from feeling personal. She said, "You have to be real honest with people about what this job is going to be like". Through mentorships, female leaders can also help other female leaders navigate school boards.

Additionally, Abigail said potential superintendents need a deep understanding of how difficult the job is and how you cannot satisfy all people. Inez said women should understand they will run into sexism that men will not encounter in the job. She said, "You're eventually going to run into sexism. Are men going to run into that? No, not as a given but women one hundred percent, you're going to experience it." She said female mentors could help female leaders approach sexist situations. Betty said, "We need to change the mindset in general about the expectations of the job." Grogan and Brunner (2005) said it is important for women in leadership to help other women understand how to balance job responsibilities and family responsibilities successfully.

Research suggested the importance of female leaders developing self-confidence to prepare for the superintendency. Rebekah's self-confidence has helped her the most in her career advancement. Self-confidence helps her deal with difficult people. She always asks herself, "Am

I going to do what's right for these kids, or am I going to make everybody happy?" She contends potential leaders should understand the role confidence plays in their ability to get the job done. Dorothea believes confidence is also rooted in knowing your purpose. She said, "If you don't have a pretty strong faith in what your goals and your purpose is, you could easily fold. It'd be a whole lot easier to fold".

Research participants encouraged female leaders to participate in a wide variety of career experiences to prepare for the position of superintendent. Juliet advised to "have as many experiences as you can have." She did not intend to start her career as a middle school teacher, but she knows the years she spent teaching middle school helped her become a superintendent. She also said, "No matter what job you have, whether you're responsible for the homecoming dance or you're responsible for the junior-senior prom, you do the best job that you can do." Rebekah appreciated the mentors who exposed her to a variety of career experiences. She said, "Mr. X and Mr. Y were willing to share the good, the bad, and the ugly and share the responsibility with me." Abigail said, "Leaders must be willing serve on committees and willing to do the work." She urged prospective female leaders to continue to push themselves into areas where they do not always feel comfortable. She believes women are often restricted by "staying in a box" and believes society should encourage them to have new experiences and prepare for whatever positions become available. Betty encouraged female principals to consider becoming superintendents because of their experiences on the job. She said, "That's where you learn to manage a large number of people, and you get to deal with all of the things the superintendent deals with." She told women to demand leadership experiences. She said, "You can really grow. Sometimes you think there are things you don't have the capacity for, and it might be something you're really good at."

The three theories used to frame this study explain what the participants think would increase the number of female superintendents. The Feminist Theory helps understand how participants believe potential female superintendents should prepare to navigate the double standards for women in leadership. This preparation comes through mentorship that reveals a realistic view of the nature of the job. The Gatekeeping Theory explains how societal expectations open and close doors for women striving to advance their careers. The participants believe women can open gates that might otherwise be closed for them by preparing themselves for the realities of the position and understanding how to navigate difficulties through mentorship and professional learning. Women encouraging other women can also help them open a gate that might be closed due to a lack of self-confidence. Finally, the Structural Empowerment Theory illustrates how the women ascended to higher positions of power and authority based on their place in the organization. The research participants believe women put themselves in better positions by being willing to take on various responsibilities in their positions.

The themes in the study also emerged through the participants' ideas of what would increase the number of female superintendents. The participants shared how they have navigated the male-dominated landscape of educational leadership and how encouragement and mentorship can help other women know how to do the same. Inez insisted it is important for women to understand they do not have to act like a man or dress like a man to command respect. While she said sexist situations exist, women need to understand they do not always have to take the masculine approach. She said, "I want to say, look, you are making it hard on everybody, you don't have to do this. You can be yourself. You can be a woman". Betty also said it is important to change the notion that a powerful leader is a "man with a deep voice." Female leaders need

the opportunity to understand situations in which they may have to take a tougher approach than feels normal. This understanding can only come through professional conversations and mentorship.

Additionally, the participants discussed that mentorship and professional learning for women should support them in moving locations for a position instead of feeling as if they have to stay in their respective homes, as referenced in the "safer at home" theme. If they think they have to stay close to home, they feel it is important to develop extensive knowledge of the school system and its functions. Rebekah said, "I think a lot of women don't see the superintendency as the right fit because nine times out of ten you've got to move." All women suggested that professional learning and mentorships can help women understand the necessary steps for relocating or choosing to serve their homes.

The women demonstrated strategies to increase the number of female superintendents through the paradox of female leadership theme. One of the paradoxes is maintaining distance yet remaining approachable. In this paradox, Juliet remained approachable, and having an open-door policy can help her mentor and guide others. She committed to checking in with women in her district pursuing advanced degrees. She said, "You just listen to them. They may not even want advice." She even helps these women with open positions in other districts because she believes in assisting them in growing even when she cannot put them in leadership positions herself. She said, "Doors opened for me, so that's the least I could do for them." Dorothea listened to others' ideas and realized the value of not always appearing as if you always have the answers. She said, "I have been doing this for nine years but I still consider myself green, and I still ask questions when I go to a meeting… I am listening intently. Women need to understand they should be vulnerable and ask questions." Rebekah thinks women should understand

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leadership so that people do not mistake their "kindness for weakness." In other words, they know female leaders need to be strong and concerned for others. This approach translates into how others perceive their leadership styles.

The final theme, "balancing work-life demands," shows the female leaders' realization of how mentorship can help them leaders understand how to balance the demands of motherhood with the demands of the job. This theme illustrated the women's understanding of the realities of the job, and having a mentor helps them understand how they have been able to find success in both roles: mothers and executives.

While many difficulties face females who aspire to the superintendent position, current superintendents believe women can become successful educational leaders through committing themselves to learn as much as they can and having various career experiences. Additionally, the participants think female superintendents need to encourage other women to pursue leadership positions and provide them with the mentorship necessary to understand the harsh realities of the job.

Implications

Although this study focused on the experiences of six female school superintendents in rural Georgia, it has broader implications for several groups. Those groups include women who aspire to the position of superintendent, organizations who design professional learning for educational leaders, school districts, and school boards that hire superintendents.

Only one of the research participants aspired to become a superintendent, but many female educational leaders may be on the fence about pursuing the top-ranking position of superintendent. Professional organizations may not deeply understand the gender disparity in the

position of the school superintendent and its causes and effects. School districts may not understand the importance of noticing and developing potential leadership candidates. Additionally, school board members may not understand how their actions can reinforce the societal norms contributing to the lack of female school superintendents.

I do not believe the women in this study believe gender discrimination has been overwhelmingly oppressive in their career journeys. Some of the participants noted they had noticed the gender disparity in the role of superintendent, but they have never been victims of overt discrimination. Repeatedly, the women expressed how they did not set out to be superintendents but ended up in the position through hard work and dedication to their homes and communities. However, their stories feature examples of the gender disparity in educational leadership, especially in the role of superintendent. Only one of the participants mentioned participating in gender-specific professional learning. An increase in awareness of barriers and strategies for female superintendents may have given these women more tools for feeling successful in their career trajectories.

Aspiring Female Superintendents

This research study reveals the experiences of six female superintendents in rural school districts in Georgia through the voices of the women themselves. Through the stories of these leaders, other female leaders can understand that successful female leaders have sometimes acted against their instincts as women to survive in the position of superintendent. Potential female leaders can know that, while unfair, the preponderance of male superintendents has reinforced traditional patriarchal male stereotypes for leadership. Double leadership standards require women to behave in new ways perceived as masculine. Women have survived the male-dominated landscape of educational leadership by reinforcing their natural self-confidence with

the knowledge, skills, and credentials necessary for the position. Potential female superintendents should also understand the history of feeling safer when they stay near their homes. This information should not prevent women from wanting to relocate for a position but is helpful to understand that female superintendents often live and work in areas near their homes. Women can experience situations of hostilities when they move from their homes. Moving away from home may require female leaders to adapt and survive in a new environment.

Furthermore, potential female leaders should be aware of the paradox of female leadership. On the one hand, they may feel they have to "act tough" to get the job done while still leaning into their instincts of being soft and approachable. It is necessary for all leaders, especially female leaders, to be aware of their leadership style and how others might perceive their effectiveness and approachability. Finally, female leaders should understand ways to balance the demands of motherhood along with the demands of working as an executive. Increasing this knowledge comes with hearing the stories of other women who can successfully navigate these dual roles.

Professional Organizations

While aspiring female superintendents need to understand the gender disparity in the position and ways to navigate the double standards for female leaders, it is incumbent on professional organizations to help women find ways to be successful educational executives. Leadership programs can help aspirational female leaders receive the training and mentorship necessary to become effective (Hill et al., 2016). Researchers have shown that simple actions like carefully choosing language surrounding leadership in professional learning can alter perceptions of masculinity and femininity (Hill et al., 2016). Professional learning opportunities should center on how women have adapted to survive, how they can better understand how to

serve the communities in which they live, how to navigate the paradox of female leadership, and how to balance the demands of motherhood.

Professional organizations can also provide structured mentorships for female leaders from other female leaders. This situation leads to an increase in female superintendents and the length of a superintendent's tenure. The recent increase in the percentage of female superintendents means an increase in the number of female leaders available to serve as mentors. These mentorships can help women understand how other women have survived in the male-dominated landscape and how to serve their communities or adapt to new homes. Women should also learn how to navigate the paradox of female leadership, and there is no better way to do this than hearing the stories of the women who have lived them. Female mentors can also help other women learn how to balance the demands of motherhood.

School Districts

Current school district leaders should begin noticing talented female teachers and leaders early in their careers and encourage their leadership development. Female leaders report pursuing leadership positions and the insistence or encouragement of others. District leaders need to understand women may not plan to become superintendents but instead end up following the position of superintendent due to the motivation or suggestions of others (Gupton & Slick, 1996). Garn and Brown (2008) suggested that the combination of successes and tips leads women to consider a path to the superintendency. Five of the six participants in this study reported pursuing leadership positions because others told them they would be suitable for the job. District leaders should notice and develop potential leaders to help prepare them for positions in the future. If leaders identify potential leaders early in their careers, women can start their educational leadership journeys sooner and be more qualified for promotions.

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School Board Members

School board members hire superintendents. It would be beneficial for school board members to understand the existence of the gender disparity and the factors contributing to the reinforcement of the difference. School board members likely do not even realize the statistics on female educators vs. the percentage of female school superintendents. Furthermore, they may lack an understanding of the double leadership standards for women and how they have to learn how to navigate deep-seated societal differences in leadership expectations. An awareness of the disparity is essential, but implicit bias training may help school board members realize biases they are not aware of. These biases might influence an unwillingness to hire female school board members and help board members become aware of unconscious opinions they hold. Hill et al. (2016) said studies on implicit biases show people might not always consciously control their actions. These researchers also determined leaders who hire for positions should do the following: Understand that people have preferences, decide on their own biases and stereotypes, and determine ways to avoid shortcuts in judgment (Hill et al., 2016).

Limitations

The researcher must include limitations in qualitative research to provide credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Patton, 2015). The limitations identified can also help influence the implications and recommendations explored in later sections in this chapter. This study is limited to the narrative stories of six female superintendents in rural Georgia districts purposefully selected. One limitation is the small sample of participants. The study is also limited to the experiences of female superintendents from rural Georgia districts. The study is limited to the experiences of practicing female superintendents and not aspirational female superintendents or retired female superintendents. Another limitation is the racial diversity of the population. Five

of the participants were White, and one was Black. I did not discuss issues of race with the participants other than asking them to identify their race. Therefore, transferability to groups not represented in the study could be a limitation.

Many female superintendents who live close to my home would not agree to participate in the research study for unknown reasons. They may be reluctant to share their stories or to be put in a situation where they feel vulnerable. I could only find one participant who lived within a relatively close driving distance. Due to travel demands and rising COVID-19 cases during the fall of 2021, I could only conduct one interview with the participants in an in-person setting. For one of the participants, both interviews took place virtually. However, I could drive past her office building when conducting my other in-person interviews. All of the in-person interviews took place in the superintendents' offices, and I took as many notes about the physical setting in my research journal and on the observation sheets. One of the interviews with each participant took place via videoconferencing software. Seidman (2013) indicated phone interviews are acceptable, and the video-call format did allow me to view the participants' facial expressions and office settings. Doing two in-person interviews might have allowed me more opportunities to observe the participants in their natural habitats.

I collected data during the fall of 2021 over four months—this research project aimed to present the stories of female superintendents in rural Georgia districts. I found the participants to be eloquent, thoughtful, and willing to share rich data and personal stories about their life experiences related to their career advancement. I received curriculum vitae documents from most of the participants, but I trusted that participant responses in the interviews were accurate. Maxwell (2013) said inaccuracies in participant responses are not the researcher's fault. It would be nearly impossible to rule out embellishments or half-truths in the participant responses.

The narrative inquiry is also limited to the stories of the female superintendents who participated in the study. I did not talk about the perceptions of female leadership from other stakeholders, including students, teachers, and other school staff, school administrators, or school board members. Additionally, I did not talk to women who aspire to be the superintendent or other educational leaders who do not desire the superintendency. I also spoke to practicing superintendents, not those who have retired or left the profession.

An additional limitation is my own bias. Qualitative researchers must carefully consider their background and prior experiences to eliminate potential biases (Creswell, 2018). I am a female educational leader. While I have never been a female superintendent, I have worked for two different female superintendents and may hold unconscious biases based on my experience with these women. I limited my bias by collecting rich data, triangulation, and member checking. Creswell (2018) defines rich data as detailed descriptions of the setting and many perspectives about the themes in the study. I provided detailed contextual reports for each of the six participants. Rich data also included the interview transcripts, observation notes, and researcher memos about potential biases. I sent each participant a copy of their interview transcripts to verify their responses in a member checking process.

Recommendations for Future Research

A recent study of superintendents indicates that female superintendents increased to 26.7% in 2020 from 24.1% in 2010 (Grogan & Nash, 2021). Although there is a slight increase in female superintendents, the gender disparity remains alarming. This study substantiates the idea that different societal expectations for men and women continue to influence school superintendent's positions. As I began to analyze the data, not only did themes emerge, but limitations and recommendations for future research became evident.

One suggestion is to study minority female superintendents. Women of color only comprise 12.9% of all female superintendents (Grogan & Nash, 2021). Betty's story in this study highlights how the intersection of race and gender can impact a minority female superintedent's career journey. Betty was the only participant out of the six who was divorced and she attributed her divorce to her husband's lack of understanding of her unlimited work hours. She had less spousal support than the other participants. Betty also came to the superintendency at an older age, had less mentorship and professional learning opportunities, and was not asked to apply for the position. Rather, she had to apply and interview against five other men from her district in order to prove herself ready for the position despite many years of leadership and experience. Betty was the only Black superintendent in the study and her journey to the superintendency was filled with more barriers than the other participants who were White.

Additionally, researchers should examine the experiences of female superintendents in urban districts. Researchers may include a larger sample size in a quantitative study of female superintendents. Furthermore, an examination of aspiring female superintendents would reveal a different perspective. Researchers should also example the view of female superintendents by stakeholders including students, teachers, school building administrators, school board members, and retired female superintendents or those who have left the profession. A research sample that includes male and female superintendents would reveal potential differences in experiences between genders. A deeper understanding of pay discrepancies between male and female superintendents would also add to the body of research. Finally, a study of female leaders who choose not to pursue the superintendency would provide a different view of the gender disparity in the position of the school superintendent.

Final Conclusions

A gender disparity exists in the position of the school superintendent. Despite teachers and administrators in the field of education being primarily female, males dominate the highest-ranking position of superintendent (Maranto et al., 2019). Female superintendents make up only 29% of all the school superintendents in Georgia (Georgia School Superintendents Association [GSSA], 2020). This disproportionate representation of female superintendents calls for an understanding of issues concerning equitable representation and how to raise awareness among school board members and other critical stakeholders of the need to increase the number of women in education leadership (Maranto et al., 2018).

Researchers have uncovered a variety of barriers for women to the superintendency (Brunner, 2000; Glass, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Maranto et al., 2018). Some identified barriers included gender biases of school boards that hire superintendents. Several ideological and cultural causes affect women's ability to earn the highest-ranking position in a school district (Maranto et al., 2018). Several problems are commonly associated with the barriers preventing women from reaching the school superintendent's position and the lack of females in this position. The percentage of females in the superintendent position does not match the rate of females working in education. Glass (2000) noted 72 percent of educators were female while 14.5 percent of superintendents were female. Since the AASA study in 2000, the statistics have improved nationwide. Approximately 24% of superintendents are women (Maranto et al., 2018). However, this percentage still does not match females enrolled in public schools, teaching in public schools, or the total population (Kowalski et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study was to identify the professional experiences regarding their career advancement and strategies used by women who ascend to the position of school

superintendent in rural Georgia districts. The research provides nuanced current literature regarding the experiences of female superintendents through the stories of women who have earned the position. I projected the voices to six female school superintendents, revealing strategies for increasing the number of female superintendents. The real-life stories of female superintendents paint a clearer picture of how life and career experiences contribute to females' rise into the superintendent's job. I included a complete overview of the study in Chapter I.

I designed the study using a conceptual framework that described my interest in the study, existing theory, and existing research related to the topic. I based my interest in the research to gain immediate insight into other female leaders' experiences by listening to their stories. The existing theory helped me create a framework for making sense of the study's concepts. The first theory used was the Feminist theory. Central to the feminist theory is that women have fewer career advancement opportunities than their male counterparts (Reinharz, 1992). The Gatekeeping Theory (Lewin, 1951; Shoemaker, 1991) and the gatekeeping theory helps understand situations related to social change and social control. Finally, Kanter's (1977) structural empowerment theory shows how the individual women developed higher aspirations and sought advancement. My findings are mostly consistent with the research on the gender disparity in the school superintendent position. I have shared the details of the experiences of six women who are currently serving in the position of superintendent in rural Georgia districts. This study differs from many other research studies about female superintendents because the women tell their stories.

I used the narrative inquiry design to explore the ways female school superintendents experience the world. I collected the stories of six female school superintendents, analyzed these stories, and compared them to the accounts of other female school superintendents. I included a

detailed description of the research methodology in Chapter III. Gathering participants for the study was one of the most challenging parts of this research study. I initially contacted six superintendents suggested by an executive with the Georgia School Superintendent's Association (GSSA). Only two of those participants responded to my email request for participation. I followed up with additional emails and a phone call to the other four suggested participants but decided to expand my list of potential participants. I gathered a list of additional potential participants from my superintendent, a female. None of those participants would agree to participate, so I went to the GSSA website to look at the list of other potential participants. Finally, I could solicit the other four participants through phone calls, emails, and letters sent in the mail. The process of gathering participants took approximately three months. I do not know if I was reaching out during a hectic time of year, if superintendents do not have extra time to dedicate to research studies, or if women might be reluctant to share their personal stories.

Once I received agreement for participation, I thoroughly enjoyed meeting with the participants and hearing their stories. In addition to conducting two interviews with each participant, I also completed an observation sheet and researcher memo journal. Many of the participants also sent me copies of their curriculum vitae. I included a detailed profile based on the data for each participant in Chapter IV.

As I coded and analyzed the data, four themes emerged. These themes include surviving in the male-dominated leadership jungle, being safer at home, the paradox of female leadership, and balancing the demands of motherhood. I described each theme in detail in Chapter V.

In the first theme, surviving in the male-dominated leadership jungle, I discussed how the women in the study had to adapt to survive. As animals have adapted over centuries to survive in the wilderness, women in the research have also adapted to survive in an unfamiliar educational

leadership landscape. Women have had to adopt new behaviors based on the gender disparity in the position of superintendent. They have had to gather extra credentials, become more knowledgeable, and take on new behaviors perceived as masculine. Women have also had to exude self-confidence and adhere to a strong work ethic to succeed in the superintendent's role.

In the second theme, safer at home, I described how women have remained near their homes where they feel supported to advance their careers. The omnipresent discrimination against women contributes to their fears of being unfairly treated and prohibits them from seeking senior leadership jobs outside their communities. They also feel a strong sense of loyalty in protecting their habitats. Despite feeling safer at home, I also discussed how the women have learned how to deal with small-town politics in rural districts.

In the third theme, the paradox of female leadership, I revealed how women have dealt with a double standard as leaders. They have had to appear demanding yet caring and authoritative yet participative. In addition, they have had to advocate for themselves and serve others while maintaining an arms-length distance and remaining approachable. These paradoxes have required women to adopt behaviors seen as masculine while not losing their feminine tendencies.

The fourth theme is balancing the demands of motherhood. Women executives have to work to balance the full-time nature of the executive role of superintendent while also caring for their children. Social norms surrounding the expectations of women as mothers may cause women to doubt their ability to perform well in both roles. Women have relied on their support networks and chosen to see the benefits of serving dually in both the role of mother and superintendent in order to feel successful.

In Chapter VI, I have answered the two research questions in this study following the existing literature, established theories, and elicited themes. The first research question is, "What are the life and career experiences of identified female school superintendents in rural Georgia regarding their career advancement?" The second research question is, "What do female school superintendents in rural Georgia believe are strategies for increasing female superintendents at school districts in the southern U.S. region?" I also included information about the study's implications and limitations, and suggestions for future research.

One major takeway from this study is the way the research participants have responded to the gender disparity in the position of superintendent. The women noticed the difference in the percentage of female superintedents as compared to male superintendents. Despite noticing the difference in numbers, many of the women in the study said they did not feel they had been overtly discriminated against in their career journeys. However, their stories were filled with examples of how their career journeys have been impacted by their gender. They did not describe these experiences using the word "discrimination". Juliet's husband told her the school board paying her less than her male predecessor was "the definition of discrimination", but her response was, "I don't see it that way." The participants in this study were more likely to see barriers as opportunities. Their success can be attributed to the resiliency they developed as a result of gender disparity in the field.

Additionally, it will take years and major effort to eradicate the gender disparity in the field of superintendent. However, there are women who have achieved and maintained success in the role of superintendent despite the many barriers and challenges. None of the women found the role of superintendent to be glamorous or easy. They discussed working around the clock; adapting to challenges related to gender, politics, and social norms; figuring out how to raise

children and lead school districts simulationusly; and how to be accepted and taken seriously as female leaders. The success women have found in this difficult role can be attributed to the power of connections. These connections are with their communities, their mentors, and themselves. In order to find success, they have understood where they live and who they work with, they have listened to and valued the knowledge of those who have guided them, and they have understood how they have to speak, act, and portray themselves as female leaders.

Welteroth (2019) posited, "There is so much wisdom locked up in the stories women never tell" (p. 47). This study allowed women to freely tell their own stories of both hardship and triumph, challenge and success. While all six of the participants revealed different career experiences and pathways to the position of superintendent, they have all overcome the odds to become female superintendents in rural Georgia districts. The participants in this story adapted to the existing power structures and felt safer at home serving their communities. They also navigated the paradoxes of female leadership and knew when to be tough and when to remain approachable. Furthermore, women have learned to balance the demands of work and home lives. They have made a name for themselves through their adopted strategies and practices and led their school districts bravely with astute resolve.

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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Letter

To: Participant

From: Erin S. Rehberg

Date: June 2021

Subject: Request to participate in research study

My name is Erin Rehberg and I am an Educational Leadership doctoral student from the Department of Curriculum, Leadership, and Technology at Valdosta State University. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study that will identify the life and career experiences of female superintendents in rural Georgia as well as strategies for increasing the number of female superintendents

You seem like an ideal candidate for this qualitative study. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a female school superintendent currently serving in a rural Georgia school district.

If you agree to participate, three interviews that will last approximately an hour each will be scheduled at your convenience this summer. My goal is to space the three interviews roughly a week apart. Interviews will be recorded and any audio recordings will be destroyed upon completion of my dissertation.

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

All data collected will be confidential. A pseudonym will be used for your name as well as the name of your school district. In the data analysis portion of my dissertation, quotes from the interviews will be used to support themes in the study. No one will be able to associate your

responses with your identity. You can expect data from the interviews to further add to the

research on female superintendents.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate in the

interview, to stop answering questions at any point in the interview, or to skip any questions you

do not wish to answer. You must be a female currently serving as superintendent of a rural

Georgia district to participate in this project. Your completion of the interview series will serve

as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you

meet the criteria outlined.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of this research study should be directed to Erin

Rehberg at 229-413-3792 or estrickland@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from

Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a

university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and

welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a

research participant, you may contact IRB administration at 229-259-5045 or by email at

irb@valdosta.edu.

I greatly appreciate you taking the time to consider being a part of this research study and I look

forward to hearing from you very soon.

Sincerely,

Erin S. Rehberg

Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership

Cell: ***-***-****

estrickland@valdosta.edu

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Interview Questions

Initial Interview

1. To begin, please tell me a little bit about your childhood.
   a. What was your family structure?
   b. What were your parents' careers? Did your mother work outside of the home?
   c. Where did you grow up?
   d. What was your relationship like with your parents?
   e. If you have any, what was your relationship like with your siblings?

2. Next, let's discuss your childhood educational experiences.
   a. What are your first memories of school?
   b. Tell me about the best teacher you ever had.
   c. Tell me about a positive school memory.
   d. Tell me about a negative school memory.
   e. Do you have any elementary, middle, or high school memories that have to do with being unable to do something because of your gender?
   f. Did you play sports as a student?
   g. What other types of school or community activities were you involved in?
   h. Were you considered a "leader" during your school years?
   i. How do you think your peers would have described you in school?
   j. Would you describe your elementary, middle, and high school experiences as positive? Why or why not?

3. Now I'd like to talk about your career journey.
   a. What were your career aspirations as a child?
   b. What were your immediate steps after high school graduation?
   c. Tell me about your post-secondary (college) experience.
   d. Did you ever change your college major or career plans?
   e. Did you have a job when you were a college student. If so, what was it?
   f. Please give a brief summary of all of the positions you have held as an educator.
   g. If not answered specifically --- Have you ever been an athletic coach? If so, please give details about this experience.
   h. What and where was your first job in the field of education and how many years did you stay in that position?
   i. What were your early career experiences like? Can you share specific memories of your early career experiences?
   j. When did you decide to go on a journey into educational leadership?
   k. Was this a decision you made on your own or something someone else suggested to you?

l.   Tell me about any mentors you have had in your career journey. How have they shaped your career?

m.   For you, what are the most positive aspects of choosing a career in education?

n.   For you, what are the most negative aspects of choosing a career in education?

o.   When did you decide you would like to pursue the position of superintendent?

p.   How did you announce your intentions to pursue the superintendency and how did your family react? How did your friends react? How did your peers react?

q.   What were your first steps in pursuit of the position of superintendent?

r.   Have you ever had to move for your career?

s.   What are the best experiences you have had as an educator?

t.   What are the most difficult experiences you have had as an educator?

Follow-up Interview(s)

1.   Please share your age, race, and gender.

2.   How many years have you been superintendent in this district?

3.   Was the previous superintendent in this district male or female and what was their departure like?

4.   Have you ever been a superintendent in any other district? If so, for how many years?

5.   We talked about your career journey in our last interview, but can you please give me a general overview of your journey to the superintendency?

6.   What was the most difficult part of your pursuit of the position of superintendent?

7.   What specific resistance, if any, did you face when you decided you wanted to become a superintendent? (from family, peers, school board, etc.)

8.   What professional learning did you receive to become qualified to become a superintendent?

9.   What other positions have you held in your current district?

10. Describe the hiring process you went through when you were hired as superintendent. What was the board vote like? How many finalists were named?

11. Since you have been a superintendent, have you ever been aware of being in the minority as a woman in your position?

12. What do you believe is the typical career path for a female superintendent?

13. Do you think most superintendents have been athletic coaches at some point in their career?

14. As a superintendent, do you feel like you have ever been discriminated against because of your gender?
15. Who has been your chief mentor as a superintendent? Is this person a male or another female?
16. Do you serve as a mentor for any female educators?
17. Did you feel confident as a fiscal leader when you became a superintendent?
18. How would you describe your self-confidence? Do you think self-confidence keeps other women from working to become a superintendent?
19. What is your marital status?
20. What does your spouse do for a living?
21. Do you have children? If so, how old are they? How old were they when you became a superintendent?
22. How do you balance having a family and working in the demanding position of superintendent?
23. Do you think some school boards are reluctant to hire females for the position of superintendent?
24. Have you ever felt aware of a "Good Ole Boy" presence in superintendent circles? Describe this experience.
25. Describe the political nature of the superintendency.
26. Did you ever have gender-specific professional learning as you prepared to become a superintendent?
27. How old were you when you decided to pursue the superintendency? When you became a superintendent?
28. How would you describe a typical day in your position?
29. What is your relationship like with your school board?
30. How do you maintain a good working relationship with your school board?
31. How do you think you would be described by your district office staff? School-level administrators? Teachers? The community?
32. Do you think there is a difference between feminine and masculine leadership styles?
33. How do you balance all of the demands of the job of superintendent?
34. Ultimately, do you believe it is more difficult for a woman to become a superintendent than a man?
35. What is the most difficult aspect of the position you are in?
36. What is the most rewarding aspect of the position you are in?
37. Why do you think the gender disparity exists in the position of superintendent?
38. What do you believe would increase the number of female superintendents in Georgia?

39. Do any specific stories come to mind as it relates to females in the position of superintendent?
40. What do you believe has helped you the most in your career advancement?
41. What would you tell yourself at the beginning of your career about what it takes to become a superintendent?

Appendix C

Participant Consent Agreement

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled *"Career Pathway Barriers, Strategies, and Practices of Female Superintendents in Rural Georgia: A Narrative Inquiry"*, which is being conducted by Erin Rehberg a student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to identify the life and career experiences of female superintendents in rural Georgia as well as strategies for increasing the number of female superintendents. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about the gender disparity in the position of superintendent of schools. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 2 hours. The interviews will be audio and/or video recorded in order to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview will serve as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Erin Rehberg at estrickland@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Appendix D

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04188-2021   **Responsible Researcher(s):** Erin S. Rehberg

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Rudo Tsemunhu

Project Title: *Career Barriers, Pathways, and Strategies of Female Superintendents in Rural Georgia: A Narrative Inquiry.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2.** If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Your research study may begin at the following research sites;*
  - ███████████ ███

- *A revised Protocol Exemption Report will be reissued upon the IRB's receipt of a letter of permission (LOC). Research is not authorized to begin at any additional sites prior to receiving an updated Protocol Exemption Report.*

- *Upon completion of the research study collected data must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed. If applicable, Pseudonym lists are to be kept in a separate secure file from corresponding name lists., email addresses, etc.*

- *Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** the recording of interviews provided the recording is made for the sole purpose of creating an accurate transcript. Upon creation of the transcript the recorded interview must be immediately deleted from all devices. Recordings are not to be collected, shared, or stored.*

- *The research consent statement must be read aloud to each participant at the start of each interview session. The reading of the statement, confirmation of understanding, and willingness to participate must be included in the recording and documented in the transcript.*

  ☒   *If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.*

Elizabeth Ann Olphie   *07.01.2021*   *Thank you for submitting an IRB application.*

Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator   *Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.*

Revised: 06.02.16