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FEMALE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS IN TENNESSEE:
OVERCOMING BARRIERS

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Education
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Vicki Cameron Violette

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. First and foremost, I will forever be grateful to my husband who supported me emotionally and financially through this endeavor. To my daughters, Laura and Amy, who sacrificed time with their mother so that I could achieve my dream. To my mother, whose drive to excel was passed on to me, and to my father, who taught me the importance of personal integrity and Christian faith.

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ABSTRACT

The school superintendency is the most gender stratified executive position in the United States, with men 20 times more likely than women to advance from the level of teacher to the top leadership role in a school district (Skrla, 1999). Although the majority of teachers in public schools are women, the majority of superintendents are men (Bell & Chase, 1993; Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1999; Grogan, 1996; Mertz, 1991; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, 1999; Young, 1999). Though women have made slight progress in moving into superintendent positions during the past few years, there is still a disproportionate under representation of females nationwide in these top-level positions (Bell & Chase, 1993; Grogan, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1989).

Of the 136 school systems in 2003 in the state of Tennessee, 19 systems were led by women (Tennessee State Department of Education, 2004). The purpose of this study was to examine what barriers to the superintendency exist and how some females in the state of Tennessee have overcome these obstacles in achieving the position of superintendent of school systems. This phenomenon was investigated using the theory of “Gatekeeping” (Lewin, 1947, 1951; Shoemaker, 1991) as a theoretical framework and focused on the 19 female superintendents in the state of Tennessee. Furthermore, this qualitative study utilized a multiple case study design, with questionnaires, interviews, and field notes as sources of data.

When investigating the barriers that women face, the findings included: a lack of aspiration and motivation; personal beliefs, attitudes and self-image; gender discrimination; and family responsibilities and expectations. When researching how barriers were overcome, the findings included: experience and education; sponsorship and mentors; preparation; family support; leadership style; right fit; and personal characteristics.

There were two major conclusions from this study of perceived barriers and how women overcome these barriers associated with seeking a superintendent position. First, it appears that women continue to face barriers in reaching the level of superintendency. Second, mentors and supporters appear to make a difference for women in successfully reaching the level of superintendent.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Chapter Introduction

In 1909, when Ella Flagg Young was appointed the first female superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools she stated, “Women are destined to rule the schools. . . .In the near future we will have more women than men in executive charge of the vast educational system. It is woman’s natural field. . . .” (Hansot & Tyack, 1981, p.1). In spite of this optimistic destiny predicted by Young, the reality is that women have never dominated public school administration. Although the majority of teachers in public schools are women, the majority of top-level administrators are still men (Bell & Chase, 1993; Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1999; Grogan, 1996; Mertz, 1991; Shakeshaft, 1989; Skrla, 1999; Young, 1999).

This research will examine the under representation of women in educational administration and will specifically focus on the position of superintendent. This research will seek to increase understanding of how females overcome barriers and access the school superintendency in the state of Tennessee.

Educational Administration in the United States

According to Grogan (1999), 85% of teachers in the United States are women, but females only account for 37% of assistant or associate superintendents and 10% of superintendents. Nationwide, approximately 26% of

secondary school principals are women (Shakeshaft, 1989). Although recent research (1970 to present) indicates an upward trend in the number of women accessing administrative positions (Mertz, 2003; Mertz & McNeely, 1988; Tallerico & Blount, 2004), there is still a disproportionate under representation of women nationwide in educational administration (Bell & Chase, 1993; Grogan, 1999). Shakeshaft (1989) states that:

The percentage of women in school administration in the 1980's was less than the percentage of women in 1905. Women have seldom attained the most powerful and prestigious administrative positions in schools, and the gender structure of males as managers and females as workers has remained relatively stable for the past 100 years. Historical record, then, tells us that there never was a golden age for women administrators, only a promise unfulfilled. (p. 51)

More than 30 years ago Congress passed Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972 prohibiting gender discrimination in all aspects of education in institutions receiving federal financial assistance, yet females continue to be under represented at the top-level positions of public school systems (Ortiz, 1982; Shakeshaft, 1989). Although some researchers believe that women have made some progress in advancing into the ranks of school administration since the implementation of Title IX, it is apparent that there is still a disproportionate under representation of women nationwide as secondary school principals, assistant superintendents, and superintendents (Bell & Chase, 1993; Grogan, 1999; Young & McLeod, 2001).

Qualitative research studies regarding women in educational administration reveal many critical barriers that women face in entering and being successful in administrative careers. Ortiz and Marshall (1988) believe that females do not have the same opportunities as men in administrative selection processes due to stereotypes associated with gender and leadership styles. Furthermore, society conditions males and females to believe women are not as capable as men of holding leadership positions (Bell & Chase, 1993; Shakeshaft, 1987). Also, some researchers believe that external barriers, such as recruitment, selection, and norms and expectations in school districts, ensure that women are less likely than men to serve in leadership positions (Hearn, 1990). In addition, the criteria used to recruit and hire administrators favor men over women (Walby, 1990). Nevertheless, female educators continue to enter the upper echelons of school administration in spite of these barriers (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Shakeshaft, 1989).

Females Superintendents in the United States

Skrla (1999) stated that the school superintendency is the most gender stratified executive position in the United States. She explains that men are 20 times more likely than women to advance from the level of teacher to the top leadership role in a school district. Although this under representation of women in superintendent positions has been brought to the public's attention through the Women's Movement, the passage of Title IX of the Educational Amendments Act of 1972, and the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) (a funding program for

projects to help in the achievement of equity), men continue to dominate top-level administration positions in education (Brunner, 2000a,2000b; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000).

Several longitudinal studies (Blount,1998; Brunner, 1999; Mertz, 2003, in press) and surveys of nationally compiled data (Brunner, 2000b; Brunner & Grogan, 2005; Hodgkinson & Motenegro, 1999) suggest that female representation has increased in the superintendency in the past few years. Blount (1998) states that the percentage of women in superintendent positions increased from 0.70% in 1970 to 3.94% in 1990. Similar research conducted by Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) found that 1% of all superintendencies were held by women in 1980; 4% in 1988; 7.1% in 1993; and 12% in 1998. Women held 14% of the superintendent positions in 1999 (Brunner, 2000b). The most recent study to date (Brunner & Grogan, 2005) found that approximately 18% of school districts were led by women in 2000, the highest national figure to be recorded.

Female Superintendents in the State of Tennessee

The state of Tennessee is reflective of this national trend of a disproportionate number of women at the top level of educational administration. In 1997 there were 139 school systems in Tennessee and 18 of these districts were led by a female superintendent (Tennessee Department of Education, 2002). This represented 12.9% of superintendent positions being held by women. In 2001 there were 138 school systems and only 18 of these districts were

managed by a female superintendent (Tennessee Department of Education, 2002). This constitutes 13% of superintendent positions being held by women in 2001. There were 136 schools systems in this state in 2003, and 19 of these school districts were led by a female superintendent (Tennessee State Department of Education, 2004). This represents 13.9% of superintendent positions being held by women in Tennessee in 2003, a percentage that is similar to the national average.

Beginning in the year 2000, Tennessee law required that the method of school superintendent selection become an appointed rather than an elected process; therefore, 1996 was the last year superintendents could be elected (Office of Education Accountability, 2003). Although some school districts had moved to the appointed process earlier than 2000, data from 1997 indicate that 18 women held Tennessee superintendencies. In 2001, one year after the new law went into effect, women again accounted for 18 superintendent positions in the state. It appears that the change from an elected to an appointed process did not significantly altered the number of females leading school systems in Tennessee.

Statement of the Problem

Although the number and percentage of females serving as superintendents are increasing, males historically have dominated, and continue to dominate, this position (Blount, 1998; Glass, 2000; Mertz, in press; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tallerico, 2000a, 2000b). Although women have made slight

progress in attaining superintendent positions during the past few years, Mertz (2003) believes that female “scarcity in the position of superintendent . . . suggests that the position has been little affected by Title IX and that females continue to have a long, uncertain way to go to reach the top spot” (p. 5).

Despite the high numbers of superintendent vacancies that are predicted for the near future (Glass, 1992), the increasing number of women in leadership preparation programs (Grogan, 1996; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999), and the increase in the number of females moving into administrative positions that are considered pathways to the superintendencies (Brunner & Grogan, 2005; Tallerico, 2000a, 2000b), males continue to dominate school superintendent positions. Although women comprise over 70% of the candidates for superintendent vacancies, fewer than 10% of the positions are actually filled by women (Brunner, 1999). Based on the disproportional number of females in superintendent positions, additional research is needed to determine what obstacles may be preventing women from advancing to the top-level administrative position in public school systems.

Purpose of the Study

Statistics show that only a small percentage of women actually advance into superintendent positions despite the fact that a majority of teachers are women (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1999; Grogan, 1996; Young 1999). If we can understand what barriers exist that prevent women from moving into the superintendent position, then we may be able to change this gender

phenomenon. Pigford and Tonnsen (1993) suggested that in order to overcome barriers, one must first be aware of the potential barriers. Using this logic as it applies to women aspiring to the superintendency, women must have a clear understanding of what obstacles they face and have knowledge of how to overcome these barriers. This knowledge is especially important in the study of school superintendency due to the fact that “the negative effects of gender bias appear to be greater rather than lesser for women who occupy the most powerful administrative office in public schools” (Brunner, 1999, p. 196).

Due to the lack of empirical research on how women in Tennessee are overcoming barriers to reach the superintendency, there is a need for additional research. The purpose of this study is to examine how some females in the state of Tennessee have overcome these obstacles and reached the top level of educational administration. More specifically, this phenomenon will be investigated using the “Gatekeeping” Theory (Lewin, 1947, 1951; Shoemaker, 1991) as a theoretical framework and will focus on women in Tennessee who presently hold superintendent positions (See chapter two for a more in-depth discussion of the “Gatekeeping” Theory).

Research Questions

In the process of investigating the barriers women face in obtaining the position of superintendent, two questions will be explored from the perspective of female superintendents in the state of Tennessee. These questions include:

(1) What barriers (gates) do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee?

(2) How were these barriers (gates) overcome?

Definitions

When researching this topic, it is important to note that school superintendents are often referred to as “directors of schools.” This term is used synonymously with school superintendent. Therefore, to ensure reader clarity, one should understand that any reference to a director within this study should be interpreted as a person who holds the title of superintendent of a school system.

Delimitations

The following delimitations created the boundaries for this study. First, due to the nature of my study, only women superintendents will be studied. Furthermore, only superintendents from the state of Tennessee will be researched. Finally, this group of current superintendents is a very small group of individuals.

Limitations

This study is limited by the following factors. First, the ability to generalize will be limited because of the small number of participants in this study (Herriott & Firestone, 1983). Second, this study will use semi-structured interview questions with the participants and some answers to interview questions may reflect a response bias, inaccuracies due to poor recall by participants, or reflexivity (i.e., interviewees give answers that they feel the interviewer wants to hear)

(Yin, 2003). Third, participants may be unwilling to share information (Keefe & Parmley, 2003).

Significance of the Study

It is important to increase understanding of access to the superintendency and the lack of females in the position of superintendent for several reasons. First, the immediate future ensures abundant superintendent vacancies and, therefore, opportunities for women to move into these positions (Tallerico, 2000a). A majority of the nation's 15,000 school districts will need to hire a new superintendent within the next few years (Glass, 1992) providing multiple opportunities for females interested in obtaining these positions.

A second reason for understanding gender barriers to accessing this position is that the majority of students presently gaining certification in school administration are females (Pounder, 1994; Shakeshaft, 1987). Since an administrative preparation program can be a stepping-stone to the superintendency (Grogan, 1996), understanding possible hurdles and including discussions of how women could overcome the barriers to access the superintendency may increase the number of women who are successful in reaching this position.

Bjork (2000) further suggests that it is important to seek additional qualitative studies that focus on "understanding women's ways of leading and their understanding and use of power, as well as investigating causes for the appalling level of under representation of women in the superintendency" (p. 14).

Greene (1984) also believes that more qualitative studies are needed to contribute to the existing knowledge in educational administration research by including individual accounts of the actual experiences of women superintendents in order to determine their experiences of inequality.

Moreover, some researchers (Schmuck & Wyant, 1981) have predicted that as more women filled central office positions, including the position of assistant superintendent, more females would ultimately occupy the top spot of leadership within a school district. The results of a national survey conducted by Brunner and Grogan (2005) have shown that this prediction has not occurred. This study indicated that only a fraction of superintendency positions have been filled by women despite the greater number of women moving into central office positions.

The data from this research will also be compared to data gathered from a research study conducted 15 years ago in the state of Tennessee. In this 1990 qualitative study, female superintendents and high school principals were interviewed to determine gender discrimination in their attainment of male-dominated administrative positions. The perceived barriers of the participants in the 1990 study will be compared with the perceptions of participants from this research in 2006 to determine if the same barriers still exist or if the barriers have changed for females in the last 15 years in the state of Tennessee.

There is obviously a need for more research to better understand the under representation of women at the top level of educational administration.

This qualitative research will add to the knowledge base in this area, as well as provide insight into the female perspectives and experiences within the male dominated profession of school superintendency.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 introduces the research study, provides a discussion of educational administration, and presents a brief overview of superintendents in the United States and in the state of Tennessee. The statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and the research questions to be answered are also included in this chapter. This section concludes with the delimitations, the limitations, and the significance of the study.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature on women in superintendent positions in the United States including: a statistical overview of females in educational administration, recent upward trends of women moving into the superintendency, the perceptions of a “glass ceiling,” and gender stereotyping. Empirical research is also reviewed to give the reader a clearer understanding of the lack of women in the superintendency. The second section of this review of literature briefly outlines the research on females in the position of Chief Executive Officers (CEO) to draw a parallel between business and education. The third section of this literature review describes “Gatekeeping” (Lewin, 1947, 1951; Shoemaker, 1991), the theoretical framework of this research. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the methods most commonly employed, an

overview of what is missing from the literature, and the most frequently cited authors in the area of female leadership in education.

Chapter 3 describes the research methods and design, the role of the researcher, the participants, data collection procedures, and the data analysis procedures. This chapter also explains the triangulation of the findings.

Chapter 4 gives an overview of each superintendent who was interviewed, allowing the reader to understand the journey of each individual in her quest to the superintendency. In addition, this chapter presents an analysis of the data collected from the interviews, field notes, and questionnaires. The chapter concludes with the presentation of the findings and includes an interpretation and summarization of all data.

Chapter 5 concludes this study with a discussion of how the findings relate to the literature and to the theory of "Gatekeeping." The two conclusions from this research will be presented in this chapter. A comparison of this research with data from a 1990 study of women superintendents in Tennessee will also be discussed. This final chapter offers advice for aspiring female superintendents and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Chapter Introduction

Despite increased attention to the role of women in school administration (Young & McLeod, 2001), high numbers of females enrolled in administrator preparation programs (Grogan, 1996; Tallerico, 2000a), increased numbers of females in the pipeline (Mertz, in press), and increased scholarly interest and discussion around gender and social justice concerns (Riehl & Byrd, 1997), the American school superintendency remains heavily dominated by men. This review of the literature looks at some of the possible reasons that this under representation of females in the superintendency may be occurring and will review journal articles, books, papers presented at conferences, empirical studies, and dissertations.

This review of literature will be divided into three main sections. This first section will provide the reader with an overview of women in public school superintendency positions in the United States. The second section of the literature review will briefly outline the research on females in the position of Chief Executive Officers (CEO) to draw a parallel between business and education. The third section of the review of literature will include an overview of the “Gatekeeping” Theory (Lewin, 1947, 1951; Shoemaker, 1991), the theoretical framework that I will use to discuss the phenomenon of under representation of females in school superintendent positions. This chapter will conclude with a

discussion of the methods most commonly used when researching women in educational leadership positions, an overview of what is missing from the literature, and the most frequently cited authors in the area of female leadership in education.

Women in Superintendent Positions in the United States

The extraordinary disparity between men and women in the superintendency is paradoxical in the field of education, an enterprise dominated by women serving as teachers, principals, and central office staff. Of the more than four million professional educators in the nation (Blount, 1998) less than 2,000 women serve in executive leadership positions. Although recent studies and longitudinal data indicate an increase in women moving into superintendent positions, they also confirm a dramatic under representation of women in the top leadership position in American public schools.

Statistical Overview of Women in Educational Administration

Historically, it has been difficult to find exact numbers and percentages of female school administrators for a particular year or geographic location. Although the numbers are available, they often are not comparative by positions and by gender (Bell & Chase, 1993; Brunner, 1999; Mertz, 1991; Ortiz & Marshall, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1989). Hansot and Tyack (1981) state that the National Education Association (NEA) reported data by gender early in this century, but ceased gender stratification of data by 1930. They reported that:

Amid proliferation of other kinds of statistical reporting in an age enamored of numbers - reports so detailed that one could give the precise salary of staff in every community across the country and exact information on all sorts of other variables - data by sex became strangely inaccessible. A conspiracy of silence could hardly have been unintentional. (p.13)

This “conspiracy of silence” has made it difficult to determine exactly how many women have attained administrative positions in schools. Incomplete information and data make it easier to perpetuate the “belief that things are better for women” (Shakeshaft, 1989). According to Mertz (1991):

the most obvious problem encountered in attempting to trace the place and role of females in educational administration over time is accessing the necessary data. What is required is systematic historical and current data, by comparative position, on a national and/or regional basis. The data are either not available, spottily available, noncomparable or questionable. (p. 35)

According to Mertz (1991), a greater interest in national data on gender in educational administration began in the 1970s due to a response from civil rights legislation. At this time, the federal government required statistical information from each school district by race and gender. Although the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) continues to require school districts to report this information, “the federal government stopped publicly reporting the data with the 1979 statistics” (1991, p. 36). Although the EEOC information was potentially an important way to track the progress of women in school administration, the data were not systematically reported. For example, in some reports only percentages were given and in other reports the information was not

disaggregated by position. Therefore, the tracking and comparing of exact data of female representation in administration positions has been difficult to access.

Blount (1998) recently conducted a statistical study of female superintendents that provided the groundwork for her historical account of women in the top level of educational administration. This comprehensive statistical study used gender as the category of analysis and utilized *Patterson's American Education* as a source of data. This annual volume dating from 1904, is the only known source of data on the school superintendency that has been collected systematically throughout the twentieth century. While *Patterson's* has provided consistent data on the names of all school superintendents, their school system, states, and district population/enrollment, it did not list the gender of superintendents. Blount (1998) determined the sex of all superintendents by the names of the individuals. Data for a total of 51,661 superintendents were entered by Blount into a data base and the number and percentages of women superintendents were determined: for each of the years of the study; by type of district (state, intermediate, or local); by state and region, and by district population/enrollment.

Findings from this study indicated that women held between 9% and 11% of all superintendencies from 1910 to 1950. From 1950 to 1970, women's representation in the superintendency declined dramatically to only 3%. From 1970 to 1990, women made small gains in attaining superintendencies, increasing their representation from 3% to 5% overall. Women also served as

superintendents in greater numbers earlier in this century than at present.

Additionally, this study revealed that western states have employed more female superintendents than those in any other part of the country, and women have had less opportunities for superintendencies in the northern and southern states. This research further showed that women have reflected the greatest success in attaining intermediate districts (administrative organization where chief administrators do not directly supervise schools) rather than local district (administrative unit where the chief administrator provides direct supervision of schools) or state superintendencies.

Recent Upward Trends

Recent research (Blount, 1998; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999; Mertz, 2003, in press; Mertz, Venditti, & McNeely 1988; Tallerico & Blount, 2004) has provided evidence that there is an upward trend of females moving into educational administration. Data from Mertz's (in press) longitudinal study of gender in *Urban Education* reported the significant movement of females into all of the line administrative positions in the largest school districts in the country, with the exception of the position of superintendent. In this study, paired data were collected at 10-year intervals, 1972, 1982, 1992, and 2002 to explore whether females had continued to advance or if their advancement had been slowed or stalled. By looking at data over a thirty-year period, Mertz felt that the trend in women in school administration could be assessed, as well as the impact of Title IX on gender in school administration.

The 50 largest school districts in the United States in 1972 (by student population) constituted the population for Mertz's (in press) study. Matched data were secured for 44 of the districts for the first twenty of the thirty years and from 37 of the 44 school districts for the entire 30 years (84% return rate). Each school district was asked to compile the total number, the number of males, and the number of females in each of the following administrative positions: superintendent; deputy or associate superintendent; assistant superintendent; high school principal and assistant principal; middle or junior high school principal and assistant principal; and elementary principal and assistant principal. The data were compared for ten-year intervals and for the 30-year period.

Mertz's (in press) findings revealed an increase in the total number and percent of females holding administrative positions in each time period. Over the 30 year period from 1972–2002, the number of females holding positions almost tripled, the percentage of females holding positions had come near to doubling, and females outnumbered males as total position holders (8532 females compared to 5229 males). Whereas the pattern of females increasing in each position during each time frame is evident, the magnitude of those increases differs by position. The trend in the superintendency showed only modest gains in the number and percent of females moving into this position (8; 19%), causing Mertz to conclude that females have moved into educational administrative positions in significant numbers, except for the position of superintendent.

Glass Ceilings and Walls

Only a small percentage of women actually advance into superintendent positions despite the fact that a majority of teachers are women (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1999; Grogan, 1996; Skrla & Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Young 1999), thus offering support of the perception of a “glass ceiling.” Additionally, the small percentage of females who obtain superintendent positions describe problems associated with gender issues, including discrimination and a marginalized status (Beekley, 1999).

Meier and Wilkins (2002) found that school districts are classic glass ceiling organizations. She conducted a quantitative research study over a four-year period of over 1,000 school districts in Texas to assess gender discrimination in superintendent salaries. Women in these Texas districts comprise 75% of the teachers, 51.3% of the assistant principals, 47% of the principals, 35.8% of the assistant superintendents, but only 8.4% of the superintendents. Meier found evidence that support subtle rather than systematic gender differences in superintendents’ salaries and discovered that female superintendents who replace male superintendents receive lower compensations.

Haller (1995) found that females encounter not only glass ceilings but also “glass walls” in the process of attaining superintendent positions. Glass walls are barriers that prevent lateral movement into other superintendencies and barriers between themselves and others that affect their professional development. She

conducted her qualitative research using ten female superintendents from the states of Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky. Data from each of these women were collected through interviews, observations, field notes, and document reviews. Haller found that the most common barriers for the ten superintendents in this study were:

1. Societal expectations regarding a certain role for men and a certain role for women,
2. Traditional thinking from board members,
3. Salary issues and lack of negotiating skills for salary,
4. Accepting lesser roles on committees of male colleagues,
5. Unacceptance by other women in education,
6. Having to constantly prove themselves,
7. Family responsibilities, and
8. Unacceptance and exclusion by male colleagues

Gender Stereotyping

Of the approximately 75 years worth of extant scholarship relevant to the superintendency, most studies have either relied mainly on white, male samples, or have made no mention of the gender, racial, or ethnic backgrounds of their subjects (Tallerico, 1999). “Only within the past twenty years has attention been directed specifically to female superintendents” (Tallerico, 1999, p. 29). For instance, *Patterson’s American Education* (1998), an annual volume begun in 1904 that includes data which have been collected throughout the 20th century,

does not identify the gender of school superintendents. Any study conducted using these data would have to determine gender by analyzing first and middle names, an unreliable data collection method. Additionally, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) has been publishing a survey of superintendents every 10 years since 1923, yet gender was not included as a category until the 1952 report (Brunner, 1999).

A theme common to researchers when examining data on educational administrators is the fact that although female movement into the position of school superintendent has increased, the superintendency remains overwhelmingly male (Brunner, 1999; Mertz, 2003; Shakeshaft, 1987, 1999; Tallerico, 2000a, 2000b). Blount (1998) found that 0.07% of superintendents were female in 1970, and women's representation increased to 3.94% by 1990. Similarly, Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) state that 1% of all superintendent positions were held by women in 1980; 4.0% in 1988; 7.1% in 1993; and 12% in 1998. Brunner and Grogan (2005) found that approximately 18% of school districts were led by women in 2003. These data confirm the fact that although female representation has increased in superintendent positions, males continue to dominate this position (Blount, 1998; Glass, 1992, 2000; Mertz, 2003; Mertz & McNeely, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1989).

Tallerico and Blount's (2004) longitudinal study used data gathered from 1910 to 1998. The source of numbers was *Patterson's American Education*, but since sex is not identified in this annual volume, gender had to be determined

from the names of superintendents. The historical analysis indicated three patterns or trends in the study of women in superintendent positions. The first trend indicated that the superintendency has remained male dominated during the entire 20th century with men occupying 85% to 96% of all superintendencies. Second, there was an initial increase in female representation in the superintendency from 9% in 1910 to a high of 11% in 1930, with the lowest female representation of the century occurring in 1970 when women represented only 3% of superintendent positions. The third pattern that became transparent through this research was the integration of females in the superintendency for a second time in the century between 1970 and 1998 with women representing 10% in 1998. Yet, despite increasing percentages of women gaining access to the superintendency, Tallerico and Blount (2004) concur with other researchers (Brunner, 1999; Brunner & Bjork, 2001; Grogan, 2000; Mertz, 2003) that caution is urged

. . . about drawing overly optimistic conclusions from recent gains. The accumulated scholarship reminds us that women have not yet attained, or ever sustained over time, equitable representation in school administration; that affirmative action legislation, Title IX of 1972, and other policies prohibiting sex discrimination have been enforced weakly and intermittently; that sex stereotypes and bias against women in leadership persist; and the accordingly, continued vigilance is warranted if occupational integration by sex is to be achieved. Even in 1998, men occupied 85% of all superintendencies nationwide. (2004, p. 647)

Mertz (in press) further concluded from the findings in her longitudinal study that women's scarcity in the position of superintendent, even after thirty years,

suggests that the position has been little affected by Title IX and that females continue to have a long, uncertain way to go to reach the top level of educational administration.

Empirical Research on Women and the Superintendency

This section of the literature review focuses on some of the research that seeks to explain the under representation of women in public school superintendent positions. My goal is to acquaint readers with studies relevant to women and the superintendency in the United States.

Patterns of Inequality

A qualitative study of female superintendents was conducted by Brunner (2000b) from 1992 to 1997 that examined the experiences of 12 women superintendents to determine if their discussions contained evidence of patterns of inequality. The participants in this study included women from the Northeast, Midwest, and Southeast regions of the United States. These 12 women were responsible for leading school districts ranging in size from approximately 1400 students to 130,000 students. All participants had reputations for outstanding, successful performance as superintendents. Twenty-four additional participants were included in the study who had direct knowledge of the superintendents' practices. A total of 54 interviews were conducted with 36 participants. Brunner's research focused on the "myth that successful women either do not believe that they experience gender bias or are unwilling to discuss it" (p. 79).

Brunner (2000b) found that female narratives were filled with stories of their experiences of inequality. “Although they occupied the most powerful position in public education, the women experienced gender bias” (p. 106). Inequity, due to gender bias, was a consistent part of the women’s experiences with dominate male notions shaping the behavior of female superintendents particularly with regard to their ideas of power as control, cultural norms prescribing women’s silence, the negative consequences of forthright professional dialogue, barriers to verbal communication, and delegating to surrogate administrators messages intended to influence policy making and decision processes. Whenever the women broke the normative cultural rules governing gender-appropriate behavior, they faced negative consequences.

The second finding of this study (Brunner, 2000b) suggested that women superintendents’ settled discourse, conversations that accept traditional patterns of authority and constrain actions over time (Swindler, 1986), confirmed the idea that women either dismissed or reified gender bias and therefore participated in their own experiences of inequality. The third finding showed that although the women in this study participated at times in the reification of gender bias, their settled discourse and ways of leading are significantly different from traditional views in educational leadership. Rather than embracing traditional male tendencies to view power as dominance and assert an authoritarian role, women adopted ideas of power as shared and exhibited softer approaches to leadership.

The implication from this research (Brunner, 2000b) reflects the possibility of women's experiences being used to reform the superintendency. Grogan (1996) supports this idea when she asserts that educational administration is currently undergoing a shift, with directive, top-down administrative styles losing favor to shared leadership. "Uncovering significant changes in traditional settled talk . . . could reveal models for the actions that constitute and support reform" (Brunner, p. 109).

Silence on Gender Issues

Research by Skrla, Reyes, and Scheurich (2000) found that both women and school systems remain relatively silent about issues of gender inequality and the discrimination that women face. This study was designed as a qualitative, multiple case study that gathered data from women participants' own analyses of their experiences. In order to eliminate the pressure of having to maintain employment and possibly constraining what the superintendents were willing to discuss, the researchers purposefully chose three women who had exited the superintendency as participants. The researchers sought participants who were, by reputation in the profession, successful, capable superintendents who each had more than three years of experience in the same superintendency and had left the superintendency for employment in another field. Three interviews were conducted with each participant.

The results of this study indicated that each participant described many instances of differential treatment in the superintendency based on gender.

Sexism was noted in the areas of competence, sex-role stereotyping, and intimidation. Competence issues were reflected in both overt and covert challenges to their abilities, which they, consequently attributed to being seen as women rather than as superintendents. Sex-role stereotypical expectations from school board, school, and community members fell into three categories: perception of malleable personalities, assumptions about appropriate activities, and expectations of feminine behavior. The pressure that the superintendents felt to maintain appropriate feminine behavior was evident as participants described the impossibility of being seen as an assertive leader while also maintaining an appropriately feminine demeanor. The third area of sexism indicated by the participants included intimidating tactics and behaviors of the school board and community members.

A major finding of this study (Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000) was the widespread silence associated with experiences of sexism. All the participants described incidents of their own silence while they were superintendents concerning issues of sexism as well as the silence of other individuals, organizations, and institutions connected to the superintendency. These former superintendents stated silence on gender issues as characteristic of their superintendency preparation programs. The participants described educational administration as a profession in which

the concerns of women superintendents about discriminatory treatment and sexism were not addressed nor even heard. From state legislatures and state education agencies to professional

organizations for boards and administrators, the institutions of the profession were seen as places where women's issues were ignored. (p. 64)

Aspiration

The most recent research to date on female superintendents was commissioned by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and was conducted by Brunner and Grogan (2005). This study focused on the “largely untapped resource of qualified women superintendency candidates and asserts the position that not only are women underutilized, but also due to numerous factors, may lack the aspiration to pursue the positions” (p. 2). Focus in this study was on the women in top central office administration who were poised to move into the superintendency, but were not aspiring to the role. This nationwide study used the AASA membership database and data from Market Data Retrieval, the United States' provider of education mailing lists and databases. This purposeful sampling included 2,500 women superintendents and 3,000 women who held central office positions of Assistant Superintendent or higher. Each of these women was mailed a survey with approximately 100 short-response questions and 8 open-ended including questions such as: What are your experiences? Does the superintendency appeal to you? What changes would you like to see? How do you lead? What are your issues? The respondents included 723 superintendents and 472 central office personnel. The results of the data analysis indicated that “approximately 18% of school districts are led by women – the highest national figure to be recorded” (p. 14).

Additionally, the data from this study revealed the primary reasons non-aspiring women give for not aspiring to the superintendency. The top four reasons and the percentage of non-aspiring women who indicated them are: satisfaction with their current position and no interest in changing jobs (58%); politics of the job do not appeal to them (43.7%); high level of stress of superintendents (32.4%); and superintendent's salary not high enough for weight of the job (21%) (Brunner & Grogan, pp. 39-40).

Some of the findings from this research (Brunner & Grogan, 2005) indicated: aspirants over non-aspirants perceive accessing the superintendency to be very difficult; women who enter the superintendency have had some type of prior administrative experience either at the building level or district level; the earlier that aspiring women become assistant/associate/deputy superintendents, the greater their opportunities to become superintendents; women's aspirations for the position of superintendent occur early and do not disappear until after 60 years of age; women are entering the superintendency at an earlier age; the move from principalship to superintendency takes at least 10-12 years; and aspirants and seated superintendents appear to be raising more children overall than non-aspirants.

Additional research by Grogan (1996) focused on 27 women in a north western state who were aspiring to the superintendency, and on two consultants who were experienced in conducting superintendent searches. This qualitative research used a theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism to

understand what makes women believe that they are qualified to be superintendents and to discover what strengths and leadership skills they would bring to the position. Data were gathered by use of interviews, participant observations, and field notes. Through this study, Grogan found gender to be a predominant factor in these women's preparation for the superintendency.

Grogan (1996) found that although candidates are expected to have a high level of formal training and credible prior experience as an administrator, women in this study felt that other experiences (instructional leadership at the building and district levels, district-wide program development, supervision of personnel, budget management, and relational and interpersonal approaches to leadership) had equally prepared them for the superintendency. Furthermore, the findings from this study (Grogan, 1996) reflected many examples of a gendered environment in educational administration such as: aspects of the job influencing administrative styles (male/female behaviors; and treatment by community members, peers, superiors, and subordinates); the absence or presence of support groups; and how marital status and other issues of sexuality have an impact on the lives of women administrators. This study found that women aspirants to the superintendency are seen as women first and administrators second. Grogan (1996) also concluded that women in this study were strongly qualified for the position of superintendent and many of these women had derived a "particularly useful administrative strength from balancing other demands made upon them" (Grogan, 1996, p. 181). Yet, women expressed

tensions resulting from their being positioned in conflicting discourse that included: fear of failing as a mother; responsibility for the maintenance of relationships; and coping with household labor. Furthermore, the findings from this study revealed that many of these women brought non-traditional leadership practices to educational administration such as: possession of strong relational skills, a focus on curriculum and instruction, and the reflection of a strong ethic of care and an emotional connection with members of the organization.

Conclusions from this study (Grogan, 1996) provided a background against which to understand women who aspire to the superintendency. From a feminist poststructuralist point of view, tensions caused by being simultaneously subjectified within conflicting discourses can be detrimental to an individual, and many of the participants in this study struggled to find a balance between their personal and professional lives. There also appeared to be a resistance, not only to the discourse on educational administration, but also to other discourses such as those on partnering, mothering, and homemaking. Grogan arrived at the largely hopeful conclusions about how her study's participants successfully negotiated potential obstacles, held on to their aspirations, and resisted discouragement.

The most recent research (Brunner & Grogan, 2005) in the area of superintendency aspirations found evidence that contradicts previous data. These researchers found that the primary reasons that non-aspiring women gave for not seeking the superintendency were not related to childrearing or family

responsibilities. The reasons are career focused, either in terms of work conditions and benefits or personal satisfaction with their current circumstances. Although the idea that family obligations impede career advancements for women has flourished over the years, Brunner and Grogan found that both non-aspirants and aspirants to superintendent positions are most often raising or have raised two children. In terms of the percentages of women who have no children in the United States, there is no statistical difference between the women in their study (18.4% of aspirants; 26.5% of non-aspirants; 23.8% of superintendents) and the general public (19%) (Brunner & Grogan, p. 25).

Age Discrimination

According to Brunner and Grogan (2005), there is a relationship between age and aspiration to the superintendency (see overview of research in previous section). Age appeared to make a difference in whether a woman aspires or not, and the younger that aspiring women become assistant/associate/deputy superintendents, the greater their opportunities to become superintendents. Furthermore, “women’s aspirations for the position of superintendent occur early and do not disappear until after 60 years of age” (Brunner & Grogan, 2005, p. 20). This recent study also revealed data that conflicts with previous research because there are now many women

poised on the most common road – positions in central office – to enter the superintendency at relatively early ages. The common perception that women wait too long to enter the administrative pipeline can at least in part be set aside for 40 percent of our sample. (p. 20)

Career Barriers

Research by Kowalsk and Strouder (1999) focused on the discovery of whether female superintendents had encountered career barriers thought to obstruct female applicants. This mixed method of study was based on the 13 female superintendents in the state of Indiana who were employed in the position in the spring of 1997. Data were gathered by telephone interviews and surveys and compared to the national profile of superintendents developed by Glass (1992). The findings showed that three (23%) of the Indiana superintendents reported not having encountered any of the eight barriers noted by Glass (lack of family support; lack of employment opportunities, gender discrimination; lack of collegial support; family responsibilities; lack of self-confidence; racial/ethnic discrimination/personal lack of tenacity). Additionally, all 13 superintendents reported not having encountered three of them (lack of family support, lack of peer/collegial support, and racial/ethnic discrimination). The participants also rated the importance of personal characteristics with respect to reaching the superintendency. The data indicated that the support of influential references and the quantity of teaching experiences were the most important characteristics, and the characteristic of “being woman” received the lowest overall rating. Participants were also asked to rate actions that were perceived as potentially beneficial to career success. The three highest rated actions were: identifying

and maintaining a sponsor, becoming more visible professionally, and obtaining the support of family and friends.

One of the conclusions from this study (Kowalski & Stouder, 1999) indicated that the reason that Indiana female superintendents reported a low encounter of common career barriers was that these women reached their positions in an extraordinary manner (they either were never an official applicant or they were an “advantaged applicant). Furthermore, these women may have had difficulty discerning the barriers because of the covertness of these obstacles. Conclusions from this study also indicated the importance of hard work, the influence of mentors, tenacity, and independence.

Hiring Practices of School Boards

Data suggest the near absence of women in the superintendency may have less to do with their lack of training, availability, or presence in the administrator pipeline than other factors related to search and selection processes (Glass, 2000). Mertz (in press) proposed that the discrepancy in the number of females in superintendent positions may be due to the differences in how individuals come to the position. With the exception of some school districts in Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi, local school boards have the responsibility of appointing and hiring superintendents (Shakeshaft, Irby, Grogan, & Brunner, 2005). Recent research indicates that school boards’ use of search consultants has increased over the past few years (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

Kamler and Shakeshaft (1999) conducted a study that examined the role of the search consultant as the gatekeeper in promoting or preventing women from attaining a superintendency. The researchers focused on the search consultants who conducted searches that resulted in the placement in the period 1992-1993 of superintendents in the 129 school districts on Long Island in New York state. It was determined by a mail survey to superintendents that 19 search consultants conducted 75 superintendent searches during this time frame. Of these searches, 46% were directed by a New York Regional Service Unit, 31% by retired superintendents, 21% by consultants who also were college professors, and 2% by other firms. Fifteen of these search consultants were interviewed for this study.

Findings from this study (Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999) included: an increase in the number of women applicants for the superintendency in comparison to previous searches that the consultants had conducted; a higher ratio of male to female candidates which is reflective of previous research; a significant difference between the number of women applicants applying for elementary superintendencies (K-6) and K-12 superintendnencies (approximately 50% of the candidates for K-6 superintendencies were women verses 10-15% for K-12 supintendnencies); lack of female candidates who had the experience of high school principalship which continues to be a preferred pathway to the superintendency; and a small percentage (40%) of consultants using outreach as an approach to secure candidates. Other findings included that although the

percentage of female applicants ranged from a high of 50% to a low of 10% in a given search, every consultant indicated that in the final field of candidates presented to the board, women candidates were always included (usually at a higher percentage in comparison to the percentage of women who were in the original field of applicants). Women were also reported as finalists in all of the 75 searches, yet only 12% (nine superintendencies) of the vacancies were actually filled by females. Furthermore, consultants perceived that school boards continue to have a bias against women candidates for the superintendency.

Kamler and Shakeshaft (1999) concluded from their study that search consultants play a major role in hiring superintendents. Given the fact that the consultants reported that in most searches the percentage of women that they included in the field of finalists for the board to interview was greater than the percentage of women who applied, the consultants' influence may account for the limited but growing number of women who are interviewed for the superintendency. Also, there appeared to be more advocacy and gender equity in support of women aspiring to the superintendency than had been evident in consultants' behavior a decade ago. Nevertheless, fewer than half of the consultants used outreach, such as recruiting candidates from women's organizations, to encourage women to apply for the superintendency.

Tallerico (2000b) examined superintendent search and selection practices in the state of New York through a qualitative research design over a two year period from 1996-1998. She collected data from 75 semi-structured interviews

with purposefully selected school board members, search consultants, and recent candidates for superintendencies. Tallerico included twelve different participant observations that included open forums, board meetings, conferences and workshops for aspiring superintendents, and task force meetings. Furthermore, she analyzed various documents that included search process chronologies, position vacancy brochures, surveys used to elicit community input, and rating checklists. Tallerico found that:

1. Narrow constructions of ideal prior experience often determine which applicants advance beyond the gates of consultants' initial screenings on behalf of the school boards;
2. The gates are typically open widest for candidates with prior experience as superintendents, assistant superintendents, or high school principals;
3. The gates are more likely to be closed, or opened only partially, to applicants whose experiences consist primarily of elementary principalships and other educational administrative roles;
4. Despite the listings of near-generic competencies that appear in many superintendency vacancy advertisements (e.g. excellent communication skills, instructional leadership ability, knowledge of budgeting and finance), school board members' and consultants' behind-the-scenes definitions of candidate quality rely more on hierarchies of prior job titles than on particular leadership skills. (p. 29)

Additional research by Grogan and Henry (1995) reveals that a “male-centered, warrior, military, or business mentality dominates board members’ conceptions of the superintendency, to the disadvantage of female superintendent candidates” (p. 172). Embedded in this research is the perception that “best qualified” may tend to exclude the most frequent experiences of women administrators. Furthermore, the findings of Tallerico (2000b) illustrate a “complex mix of unwritten selection criteria that shape superintendent search and hiring practices” (p. 37). These criteria are largely invisible because they do not appear in advertisements of desired qualifications, but manifest themselves behind the scenes, in private conversation and interviews critical to applicants’ advancement in recruitment and selection processes.

Dynamics of Place and Gender

McFadden and Smith (2003) conducted research in North Carolina that showed how the dynamics of place intersect with gender and race in the selection of female administrators, both at the building and district levels, and their subsequent effectiveness. Data from their study were gathered over a four year period from 2000-2003 and included interviews and surveys of 12 female and 12 male senior-level school leaders, 30 subordinates who routinely worked with these leaders, and 30 school board members for whom they worked. Data were also collected from a variety of printed sources including board minutes, newspapers, school documents, the state’s Department of Public Instruction, and both primary and secondary historical documents. The researchers focused on

15 school districts in western North Carolina which are a part of the Appalachian Mountain region. Survey data were quantified and some of the data were compiled using descriptive statistics. Interviews were transcribed, coded for themes, and reviewed independently to test for thematic congruence.

The overall finding from this study (McFadden & Smith, 2003) indicated that looking at only one dimension (gender) was inadequate in explaining candidacy issues. Other findings of this research stated that as long as candidates met current standards for inclusion and qualified as an insider, they were considered for senior level administrative positions; the criteria for qualification as an insider often changed in relation to time, place, gender, and race; and candidates who were not considered because of their “insideness” had to develop insider credentials. Additionally, all participants were assimilated and professionally socialized to some degree into the expected cultural norms for the district in which they were hired, and power had the potential to migrate to different people when new administrators were hired.

The conclusions drawn from McFadden and Smith’s (2003) research indicated that the number of women and people of color in superintendencies and senior level positions will increase in southern Appalachia, and the higher number of women in educational leadership positions may “tip’ the profession, to gender it feminine” (p. 28). These researchers believe that:

The status quo will change in form and personnel, but not in substance. In other words, the glass ceiling to the superintendency might be shattered, but in terms of fundamental changes to the

nature and goals of our nation's schools little will happen.
(McFadden & Smith, p. 29)

American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Studies

In 1920 and 1930 the National Education Association's Department of Superintendence sponsored national surveys of the American school superintendency. The purpose of the nationwide superintendent surveys was to compile demographic profiles, opinions on key educational issues, and what constituted "best practices" in the superintendency. In 1952, after World War II, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) continued the surveys. The content and the direction of each of the studies have varied, as well as the sampling techniques, subjects, and issues covered. A new format, consisting of approximately 100 questions, began with the 1971 Study and has been subsequently used for the 1982, 1992, and 2000 studies (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000).

The 2000 AASA Study of the Superintendency was conducted by Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) and represents responses from nearly one in five superintendents. It is considered a landmark study because it reflected data from the largest sample of superintendents of any of the AASA's 10-year studies, containing responses from 2,262 superintendents. The survey instrument used in this study was an adjustment of the instrument used in the 1982 and the 1992 study so that comparative data could be obtained. A stratified random sample was obtained from the Common Core of Data Public Education Agency Universe

maintained by the United States Department of Education, which generates summary information for 12,604 identified school superintendents. A survey with 86 items was mailed to a sample of 5,336 superintendents with a return rate of 42.4%. This study included data in the following categories: personal profiles of superintendents, relationships with board members, characteristics of school districts, selected community characteristics, superintendents' opinions on key issues, involvement and participation of women and minorities, preparation and professional development, and career patterns.

This study, like those released in 1982 and 1992, found that the vast majority of American superintendents are male (86.6%). Additionally, the numbers of female superintendents increased from 6.6% in 1992, to 13.2% in 2000. Although these data indicated progress, they also confirm a dramatic underrepresentation in relation to males (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000).

More recently, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) commissioned Grogan and Brunner (2005) to conduct a nationwide study of women in the superintendency and women in central-office positions. Using the AASA membership database and data from Market Data Retrieval, 2,500 women superintendents were identified and mailed surveys. An additional 3,000 surveys were sent to women holding central-office positions of assistant superintendent or higher. Responses came from 723 superintendents (nearly 30% of the total population of women superintendents) and 472 central-office personnel. When

compared to the results of “The 2000 AASA Study of the Superintendency” (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), these researchers found that:

- (1) Women and men superintendents are about the same age: 70% of both male and female superintendents were 55 years of age or younger.
- (2) The proportion of women and men who serve in large, medium, and small districts is roughly the same. However, contrary to popular belief, a majority of men over women are serving in smaller districts (72% of men serve in districts enrolling fewer than 3,000 students compared to 69% of women).
- (3) The job search for both genders is similar: 73% of women and 72% of men secured jobs within a year of beginning a job search.
- (4) Fifty percent of the women reported their route to the superintendency included the traditional teacher/principal/central-office roles. Yet, 50% of the women indicated alternative pathways to the superintendency that included bypassing the central office or the principalship positions.
- (5) Significantly more women superintendents than men held undergraduate degrees in education (58% of women compared to 24% of men). In addition, women spent more years in the

classroom before moving into administration than men (40% of men have five or fewer years' experience in the classroom).

- (6) Forty percent of women in central-office administration identify themselves as aspiring to the position.
- (7) All superintendents are more likely to be appointed from outside the district than promoted from within, although men are twice as likely as women to be appointed from the outside. The larger the school district, the better the chance of being hired from inside the district.
- (8) Women have a better chance than men of being hired through professional search firms (23% compared to 17%).
- (9) Women's academic preparation for superintendent positions is more current in that 47% of women earned their highest degree within the past 10 years compared to 36% of men.
- (10) Female superintendents generally have more professional development activities in the curriculum and instruction area.
- (11) Thirty-five percent of females have raised children under 20 years of age while serving as superintendent.
- (12) Women in this study have been in superintendency positions an average of six years in comparison to men who have been superintendents for an average of nine years.

This study concluded that attitudes may be changing within school boards, and they are beginning to view women as viable candidates for superintendents.

This study also indicated that raising a family does not disqualify women for the superintendency, and women are aspiring to the role of superintendent and are successful in the position. The study implied that greater networking, mentoring, and support systems are needed for women to be successful in attaining and being effective in this position. This study also has attracted significant media attention, prompting people to take a closer look at why there are so few women in the top position of education when the majority of educators are women and women comprise at least half of the students in educational leadership programs. (Grogan, & Brunner, 2005).

Conclusion

Although it has been difficult to determine exact numbers and percentages of women in educational administrative positions earlier in this century, recent research indicates that there appears to be an upward trend of females moving into positions of educational administration. Yet, despite this optimistic trend, the movement of women into the position of superintendent has shown only modest gains. Research within this review of literature indicates that a variety of factors may contribute to the under representation of women in superintendent positions. Based on these data, more research is needed to determine why the “top spot” in educational administration is still overwhelmingly dominated by males.

Female Advancement in the Business CEO Model

In all facets of education, it is tempting to draw parallels from the business world. When it comes to examining the superintendency, the most obvious

equivalent is the business model Chief Executive Officer (CEO). While public education and multi-billion dollar business industries differ greatly, a brief overview of the issue of gender in the CEO model will offer insight into the attainment of the top leadership position within an organized business system.

Over the past 30 years the proportion of women in lower and mid-level management positions has increased, but the proportion of women reaching top management positions has remained relatively small (Powell, 1999). In 2000, among Fortune 500 companies, women represented only 12.5% of all corporate officers and less than 5% of Chief Executive Officers (Dreher, 2003). Carli and Eagly (2001) stated that global changes in the small increase of women's leadership have occurred only recently. Historically, only "42 women have ever served as presidents or prime ministers, and 25 of those have come to office in the 1990s" (Carli & Eagly, p. 117). According to Maume (2004), women and minorities are close enough to the top executive positions in firms to be considered in the recruitment pool for these positions, but often do not reach them. The "paucity of women and minorities running large corporations is taken as evidence that these groups face discriminatory barriers preventing them from reaching privileged positions" (Maume, p. 252).

Tischler (2004) questions the reasons for the under representation of women in CEO positions. She states:

By 2004, after three decades of the women's movement, when business schools annually graduate thousands of qualified young women, when the

managerial pipeline is stuffed with capable, talented female candidates for senior positions, why are there still so few women at the top? (p. 52)

Tischler proposes that the answer lies in lingering bias in the system which reflects a subtle form of discrimination, corporations not accommodating women's family responsibilities, and the fact that men compete harder than women for the top job. Furthermore, statistical data compiled by Tischler (2004) shows that the same under representation of women is evident in law firms:

. . . women represented only 15.6% of law partners nationwide and 13.7% of the general counsels of Fortune 500 companies in 2000, even though they have accounted for at least 40% of enrollments at top law schools since 1985 and nearly 50% since 2000. (p. 58)

Questions concerning the under representation of women at the top of level of corporations in America prompted the Center for Creative Leadership to sponsor a three-year qualitative study of the top female executives in Fortune 100-sized companies (Morrison, White, Velsor, & The Center for Creative Leadership, 1987). This study was conducted from 1984-1987 and became known as The Executive Women Project, and focused on five research questions: What does it take for women to enter the executive suite? What factors propel women up? What derails women? Are success and derailment factors the same for women and men? Do women need the same opportunities for development as men? Seventy-six female executives and 22 high-level executives (16 men and 6 women who worked with these women) from 25 different companies were interviewed.

The findings from this study (Morrison, White, Velso, & The Center for Creative Leadership, 1987) revealed that the success of women achieving top-level management jobs included: help from individuals in higher management positions; a track record of achievements; a desire to succeed; an ability to manage subordinates; a willingness to take career risks; and the ability to be tough, decisive, and demanding. A perception of credibility within the corporation and an influential mentor were also cited as important factors to women's success of climbing the executive ladder within an corporation.

The conclusions from this study (Morrison, White, Velso, & The Center for Creative Leadership, 1987) indicated that women encounter a "glass ceiling" when reaching for the position of CEO in corporations in America which keeps them from advancing higher because they are females. Once a woman breaks the barrier of a glass ceiling, they unexpectedly encounter another barrier – a "glass wall" of tradition and stereotype that separates them from the top executive level. The prediction from this study is that women will continue to be subjected to the barrier of sex role stereotypes, and this obstacle will continue to prevent females from moving into the top-level executive positions in significant numbers.

Research from Naff and Thomas (1994) also confirmed that a "glass ceiling" may be partially responsible for the under representation of women in federal bureaucracy. Women have moved into upper level management positions during recent years, but they currently comprise only 25% of supervisory

positions and 11% of senior federal executives. This quantitative method of study sought to explain why women do not advance as successfully as men. Data were gathered from 8,408 federal workers in 1991 using a mailed survey. Other sources of data included surveys from a focus group of 144 senior executives, and information from the Merit Systems Protection Board on promotion rates and quality ratings of approximately 2 million federal government employees. Both mailed surveys and focus group questions were analyzed to determine their statistical significance.

The findings from this research (Naff & Thomas, 1994) revealed: women have not been represented at a level equal to men in any category of the work force; no significant difference was found in the average performance rating of women and men; 55% of women compared with only 9% of men agreed that a woman had to perform better than a man to be promoted; 45% of female employees compared with only 5% of the males thought that standards for promotion were higher for women than men; and men with children have advanced further than women with children. The most significant finding, and one that has not been duplicated in other research, is that the effects of gender are greatest for women who have been in the work force for more than 20 years and somewhat lesser for women in the work force for 10 or fewer years. Yet, the effects of gender discrimination are not significant for females who have 10-20 years of experience in the federal bureaucracy.

The conclusions from this study suggest that women in the federal work force have, at times, faced barriers to success that have not been present for men. It is apparent from this study that a multidimensional glass ceiling is currently operational the federal work force for women who have worked 20 or more years and, to a lesser degree, for women who have been in the system less than 10 years. It appears from this study that, all else being equal, gender does not create a barrier to promotion for women who have been in the work force from 10 to 20 years. In contrast, the reemergence of the glass ceiling for women who have been employed during that last 10 years is a phenomenon that requires more research. The analysis also suggests that one's family status has a direct effect on career enhancement defined by gender in that men with children do better in relation to career advancement than women with children. Furthermore, it is evident that more research is needed before an adequate explanation is available for these results due to a large amount of unexplained variables and subtle factors with respect to gender-related career advancement.

Additional research by Adair (1999) examined barriers which hindered career advancement of women in major corporations and government agencies. To determine what conditions were required for women to attain top executive positions, an ethnographic study was conducted at a hospital. This study was limited to four women who held executive positions: one associate administrator, one interim associate administrator, one director, and the CEO. Data gathering techniques included the use of observations, interviews, and review of

documentation to investigate factors such as education and skills, influences, support, barriers, and corporate culture.

The findings of this study (Adair, 1999) revealed: the importance of having opportunities to be participating, valued family members and to compete in activities at an early age that helped girls develop a sense of competence and mastery; education, credential building experiences, and being willing to take risks were crucial factors in female success; the women had career advancement plans that reflected a spiral concept rather than a linear plan; the women understood, accepted, and learned to adapt to the culture of the society in which they live and work; the women were savvy at expressing, affirming, and communicating the substance of their culture to others; and the amount of prejudice a woman encountered depended upon several components.

The conclusions of this study (Adair, 1999) confirmed conclusions from other studies (Naff & Thomas, 1994; Ridgeway, 2001) that a glass ceiling is operational in corporations, and aspiring top managers must learn to develop successful strategies to overcome barriers to rise to the top ranks of leadership. Gender differences in leadership styles is an area that need further study to determine how large of a role it plays in determining who reaches CEO positions. A more appropriate educational leadership preparation programs is also needed to provide the support that women need to move into high levels of leadership within corporations.

In the 1970s, Schein's (2001) quantitative research identified gender stereotyping as a major psychological barrier to progress for women in organizations in the United States. This research was replicated in the 1990s by Schein in the United Kingdom, Germany, China, Japan, and in the United States. This global cross-cultural research indicated that men are perceived to be more qualified as managers than women, especially by males. In the United States, the replication study showed that female managers now perceive women and men as equally likely to possess characteristics necessary for managerial success, compared to the results of female managers in the 1970s. However, male managers in the United States continue to perceive that successful managerial characteristics are more likely to be held by men than by women, despite all the societal, legal, and organizational changes that have occurred in the 20 years between Schein's studies. At the global level, despite the various political, economic, and social conditions in those countries, both male and female participants consistently continue to view women as less competent and less suited for leadership than men.

Ridgeway (2001) concurs with Schein (2001) and proposed that gender is an institutionalized system of social practices that account for a series of obstacles that women face in their efforts to exercise leadership at the same level as men. According to Ridgeway, "the gender system is deeply entwined with social hierarchy and leadership because gender stereotypes contain status beliefs that associate greater status worthiness and competence with men than

women” (p. 1). Gender status beliefs about general competence and specific skills unconsciously shape both men’s and women’s expectations. These beliefs, in turn, affect men and women’s assertive, task-related behavior, their shared evaluations of those behaviors, and consequently, the likelihood that they emerge as influential leaders (Wagner & Berger, 1997). Performance expectations shaped by gender status beliefs bias not only the evaluation of performance quality, but also the inference of ability of certain groups of individuals. Studies of gender (Foschi, 2000) confirm that lower status groups (women), are held to higher standards to prove high ability than are higher status groups (men). The persisting effects of gender status implies that a female manager’s efforts to assert authority over others is subtly undercut by continuing, implicit assumptions that she is not quite as competent in the role as a man would be (Heilman, 2001). It appears that:

The performance expectation and the reactions created by gender status beliefs create multiple, nearly invisible nets of comparative devaluation that catch women as they push forward to achieve positions of leadership and authority and slow them down compared to similar men. . . . This unacknowledged network of constraining expectations and interpersonal reactions is the principal cause of the “glass ceiling.” The cumulative effect of its multiple, often small effects, repeated over many contexts throughout a career, is to substantially reduce the number of women who successfully attain positions of high authority in the work world, especially in occupations and contexts not culturally linked with women. (Ridgeway, p. 8)

Conclusion

Barriers which hinder career advancement of women are complex and varied. Although many women hold management positions, few have made the breakthrough to the position of Chief Executive Officers (CEO) in major corporations in the United States. This phenomenon may be explained by the perception of a “glass ceiling” in corporations (Adair, 1999; Naff & Thomas, 1994; Morrison, White, Velsor, 1987; Schein, 2001) or by gender stereotyping within an organized business system (Ridgeway, 2001; Schein, 2001). This brief overview of CEO positions confirms that, just as in education, females are also under represented at the top-level of leadership in the business world.

Theoretical Framework

The final topic included in this literature is an overview of the theoretical framework I will use to frame this study. My framework centers on “Gatekeeping,” and this section of the literature review will explain this theory to the readers.

Gatekeeping Theory was developed by Lewin (1947, 1951) and broadened by Shoemaker (1991). It was developed as a theory based on a series of channels and gatekeepers as a way of understanding how one could produce widespread social changes in a community. Lewin’s major example involved changing the food habits of a population and he concluded that not all members of the population are equally important in determining what is eaten and that social change could best be accomplished by concentrating on those people with the most control over food selection for the family.

Lewin (1947) stated that food reaches the family table through channels. One channel is the grocery store, where food is purchased, but other channels could include growing fruits and vegetables in the family garden. Each channel may also be subdivided into sections. For example, in the grocery channel, subsections could include the discovery of food at the grocery store, the purchase decision, and transporting the food home. Food traveling along the garden channel begins with the seeds or plants available in a garden store and their purchase and planting. As fruits and vegetables grow in the garden, some will be weeded out, some will be consumed in the garden by insects, and others may die from lack of fertilizer or water. Of the final selection of fruits and vegetables available to the family, only some will be harvested. At this point, food from the grocery channel merges with food from the garden channel, and a storage decision will be made. Some foods will be stored in a pantry and other food stored in a refrigerator, but food could be lost in this channel if stored improperly. The next channel reflects the decision of how the food will be prepared for consumption, and the final section is the placement of the food on the family table where it will be eaten. At each stage, a food may be rejected or accepted, and part of the acceptance process may entail a change in the food.

The entrance to the channel and to each section is a “gate” and movement within the channel is controlled by one or more “gatekeepers” or by a set of impartial rules (Lewin, 1951, p. 186). For instance, some food never gets into the grocery channel because of the buying decision or policies of the store

manager/gatekeeper, and each shopper/gatekeeper may see only part of the good items that the grocery store offers on any given day. Once in the home, the gatekeeper evaluates where the food should be stored, how it should be prepared, and ultimately whether to place it onto the table.

A key to Lewin's analysis is realizing that there are different forces acting on the selection of a unit, such as a food item, in different parts of the overall channel. These forces act to facilitate or constrain the passage of items either within a channel section or on both sides of a gate. Because the forces preceding and following a gate may be different, whether a unit passes through the channel depends on what happens at each gate in the channel (Lewin, 1951).

Although Lewin (1951) developed this theory in the context of how foods are selected for home consumption, he believed that his theory could be applied generally:

This situation holds not only for food channels but also for the traveling of a news item through certain communication channels in a group, for movement of goods, and the social locomotion of individuals in many organizations. (Lewin, p. 187)

Shoemaker (1991) amplified Lewin's theory to tell us that gatekeeping processes involve many more complexities than impartial sets of rules and individual gatekeepers' decision making. She emphasized the importance of also recognizing the influence held by a profession's routines and organizational norms. For example, confining analysis of gatekeeping processes to an individual level means focusing exclusively on particular gatekeepers' characteristics such

as their attitudes, values, biases, and how they think. Shoemaker emphasized that a distinction should be made between gatekeepers acting as individual decision makers and their role in reflecting and reinforcing their profession or institution. She stated that “organizations hire the gatekeepers and make the rules” (p. 53).

Shoemaker’s (1991) gatekeeping model also integrated cultural forces, such as societal interests, that affect which information or individuals advance beyond particular gates in any social system. According to Shoemaker, “Of the many forces that surround the gates, some of the most important operate at the social system level of analysis, forming the basis for other levels of influence” (p. 68). Shoemaker believed that culture influences the kinds of items that are allowed to pass a gate and culture is influenced by those items that ultimately pass through the gate.

Shoemaker (1991) stated that although the terms channel, section, and gate imply physical structures, these words actually represent a process through which some units pass.

Sections correspond to events or states of being that occur within the channel. Gates are decision or action points, Gatekeepers determine both which units get into the channel and which pass from section to section. They may exercise their own preferences or act as representatives to carry out a set of preestablished policies. (Shoemaker, p. 9)

Applying Lewin’s (1947, 1951) and Shoemaker’s (1991) theory of channels and gatekeepers to accessing the superintendency means viewing the

superintendent selection as a flow process involving the passage of applicants through a variety of channels, most of which are composed of multiple sections. Channels may have different starting points, but these channels ultimately converge to an end point where only one candidate emerges successfully through the final section. In the context of the school superintendency, some channels begin with applicant self-nomination and others with recruitment. The impartial rules may be, for example, a set of academic or certification standards used as minimum requirements to screen applicants. Consultants or search committees may control early paper-screening gates, but farther down the flow channel, school board members may exercise control over decisions among the semifinalists for the position. The degree of gatekeeping may shift through the process between consultants, search committee members, and school board members. In the case of a superintendent selection, search consultants would be the persons who best represent the school board's interests in the gatekeeping process. The consultant would advance and discount candidates based on both formal and informal criteria defined by the school district. Homans (1950) further stated that one era's patterns of individual gatekeeping decisions can become the subsequent era's selection norms.

In this research, the applicability of Gatekeeping Theory to accessing the superintendency will be used to examine the influences that promote or prevent women from gaining access to the top level of leadership within a school system in Tennessee. Data will be gathered and analyzed to determine if women are

prevented from accessing the superintendency by “gates” and how wide these “gates” may open for certain candidates. Additionally, I will seek to examine who is considered a gatekeeper, and how women navigated through the gates, or barriers, to access the top spot of leadership in American schools.

Methods Most Commonly Employed

Efforts to learn more about women in educational administration have typically depended on research based on a mixture of surveys, longitudinal studies, and qualitative studies. Recent efforts to learn more about the women who have been able to enter administration have typically depended on qualitative techniques (Brunner, 2000b; Grogan, 1996; Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1999; Kowalski & Stouder, 1999; McFadden & Smith, 2003; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Tallerico, 2000b). Such studies are considered essential to acquiring a deeper understanding of the female experience in the superintendency.

What Is Missing From the Literature

To be able to accurately determine the reasons for the under representation of women in superintendent positions, more research is needed that focuses on women’s decisions to enter educational administration. Young and McLeod (2001) conducted a qualitative research study that included a purposive sample of 20 female administrators and educational administration students in Iowa that focused on the decisions of these women to enter the field of educational administration. This research found that “women’s entrance is

contingent on their experiences with administrative role models, their exposure to transformative leadership styles, and their opportunities to garner support for entering administration” (p. 465). This study concluded that additional research is needed to understand how women decide to become leaders in education and, in doing so, combat the predicted shortage of school administrators during the next 5 to 10 years.

Also missing from the literature is an abundance of research from women superintendents telling their own stories. Female experiences, in the form of cases studies, are conspicuously absent from the literature, prompting Chase (1995) to propose that women superintendents who want to succeed may stay silent about problems of gender inequality.

Additional research is also needed to determine why women exit prematurely from superintendent positions. The small amount of research available indicates that, while focus on issues of access, selection, career paths, and entry is crucial, attention to women’s retention in the superintendency is equally important to improving women’s numerical representation and integration into that role (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996; Tallerico, Burstyn, & Poole, 1993).

Most Frequently Cited Authors

Of all the authors who are frequently cited in the literatures of women in educational leadership, Shakeshaft is the person who consistently surfaced in searches and whom other authors most often cite. Aside from Shakeshaft, other authors are prominent in literatures of women in educational leadership. Names

such as Bell, Bjork, Blount, Brunner, Chase, Glass, Grogan, Mertz, Ortiz, Skrla, and Tallerico are often cited in research studies, books, and journals. It is interesting to note that most of these researchers are women.

Summary

The review of literature covered three main topics. The first section provided the reader with an overview of women in superintendent positions in the United States. Information was shared that explained the difficulty in obtaining accurate data and statistics on women in educational administration, as well as recent research that indicates a trend of more women moving into administrative positions. The perception of a “glass ceiling” and gender stereotyping were also discussed in this section. Possible explanations of the continued male dominance of the position of school superintendent were given that included: patterns of inequality, silence on gender issues, aspiration, age discrimination, hiring practices of school boards, and the dynamics of place and gender. The American Association of School Administrator (AASA) studies were also reviewed in this section.

The second section of the literature review included a brief overview of the chief executive officer (CEO) of major corporations. This parallel to the business world confirmed that, just as in education, females are also under represented at the top-level of leadership.

The third section of the review of literature summarized the “Gatekeeping” Theory (Lewin, 1947, 1951; Shoemaker, 1991), the theoretical framework on

which this research is based. This chapter concluded with a discussion of the methods most commonly employed in this type of study, an overview of what is missing from the literature, and the most frequently cited authors in the area of female leadership in education.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

Chapter Introduction

This chapter describes the assumptions and rationale for the research design and methods that I have chosen to utilize in this study. Furthermore, this chapter gives a brief overview of the theoretical framework used for this study, an explanation of my role as the researcher, and the biases that I bring to the investigation. This chapter also describes the participants and the process used to choose the participants, as well as the data collection procedures, the data analysis procedures, and the methods of verification used to insure the trustworthiness of the collected data. This study sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) What barriers (gates) do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee?
- (2) How were these barriers (gates) overcome?

Assumptions and Rational for Using Qualitative Methods

This study utilizes a qualitative design because, as Merriam (1998) states, researchers want to “explain the meaning of a social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (p. 5). A qualitative design will allow me to gather data that will give careful insight into the respondents’ inner feelings and understanding. The key assumption of this type of research is based on the view that “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social

world . . . and [researchers] are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). This emic, or insider’s perspective, is the driving force behind my study.

In my research, it is important to learn how the participants make sense of their experiences and how this understanding influences their perceptions. This participants’ perspective (Maxwell, 1996; Yin, 1994) is part of the reality I am trying to understand when gathering data from each of the female superintendents in my study.

According to Merriam (1998), other reasons exist for choosing to use a qualitative approach. First, I will be the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Furthermore, this research will involve fieldwork as I visit and interview women who are currently serving as superintendents in the state of Tennessee. Also, a qualitative design is most appropriate because the nature of my research involves questions that can only be answered by gathering first- hand information from participants (Maxwell, 1996; Yin, 1994).

Type of Design: A Qualitative Case Study

While there exist a variety of research designs, the research questions for this study lend themselves most closely to a qualitative case study design. According to Yin (2003), “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena” (p. 2).

The under representation of women in school superintendent positions is a complex social phenomena. The “lack of diversity, the invisible selection criteria,

the unwritten rules, and gender and other biases that can affect access to this important educational leadership position” (Tallerico, 2000a, pp. 1-2) reflect and reinforce the complexity of this phenomena.

Case studies have many definitions. However, for the purpose of this study, I used Yin’s (2003) explanation of case study research. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points. It relies on multiple sources of evidence with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion. As a result, it benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide the data collection and analysis.

More specifically, my research followed a multiple qualitative case study design since I will be “collecting and analyzing data from several cases” (Merriam, 1998, p. 40). I will compare the data gathered from each of the school superintendents for similarities and differences to develop an in-depth understanding (Creswell, 2002) of the barriers that women face when accessing the top-level administrative position within a school system. By comparing several cases, instead of just one case, better insight will be provided into the barriers that exist for female superintendents and how they overcome these obstacles.

The research design is easier to understand when graphically displayed. Figure 1 reflects the design that I used for this qualitative case study. Data from questionnaires, interviews, and field notes were gathered for this research, and the findings were examined for reliability and trustworthiness by use of member checks, peer examination, an audit trail, addressing the researcher's biases, and an external audit. The findings were analyzed to determine the answers to the research questions.

Theoretical Framework

Gatekeeping Theory, as developed by Lewin (1947, 1951) and amplified by Shoemaker (1991), provides the theoretical framework for this research. This theory proposes that there are a series of channels that ultimately converge to an end point where only one item (or person) emerges successfully through the final section. Although Lewin (1951, 1947) developed his theory in the context of how foods are selected for family consumption and his interest in social changes in diet, he emphasized its value for explaining other phenomena as well, including "the social locomotion of individuals in many organizations" (p. 187). Important concepts to Lewin's (1951) gatekeeping theory are that each section of channels reflects "in" or "out" decision points in a process which are called "gates," and these gates are controlled either by "a set of impartial rules" or by persons with differing degrees of power who are variably constrained or facilitated by multiple forces (p. 186). In the context of superintendency, the process of selection can be viewed as a flow process involving the passage of applicants through a

Female School Superintendents in Tennessee: Overcoming Barriers

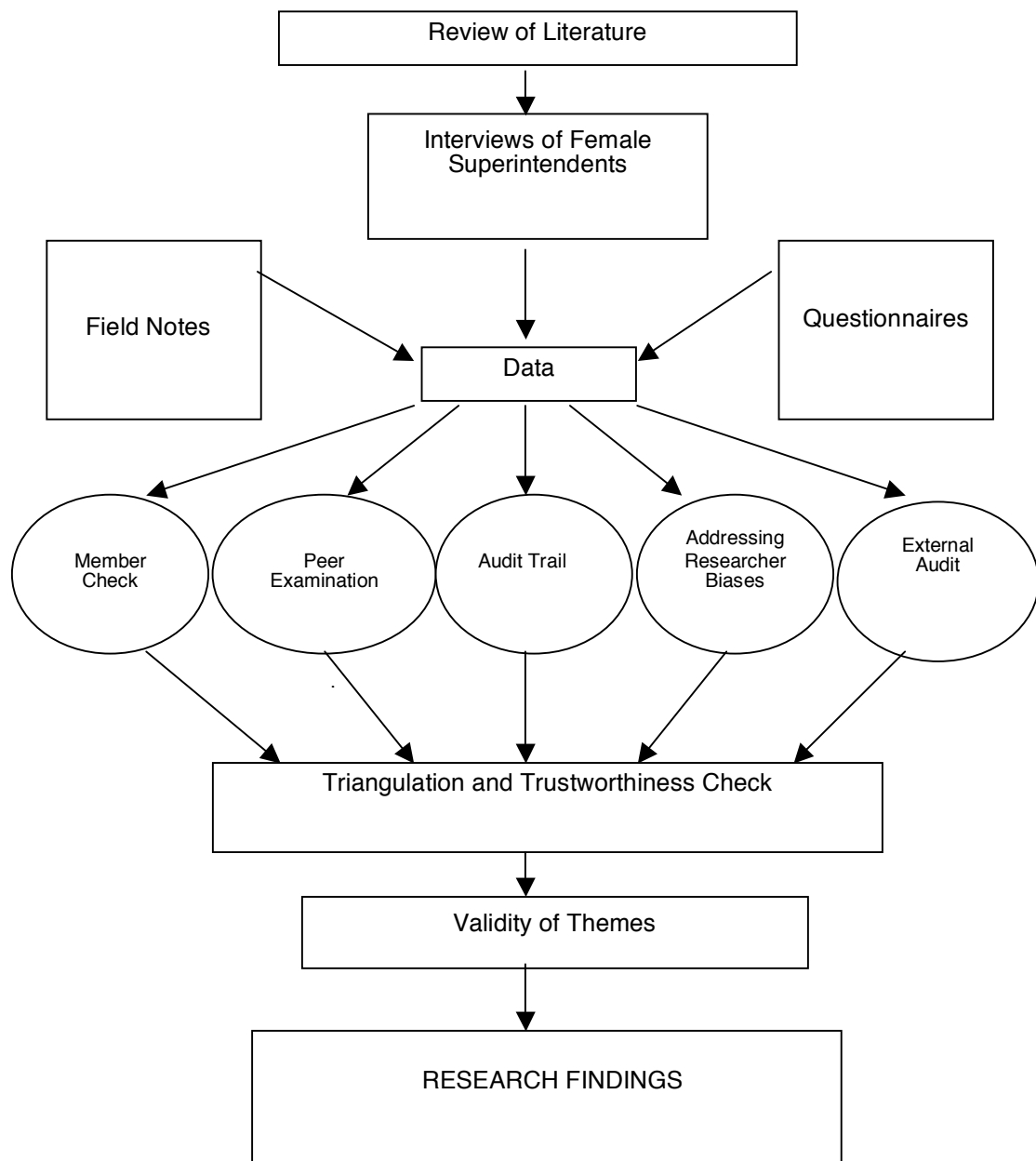


Figure 1. Qualitative Research Design

variety of channels with multiple subsections that are controlled to differing degrees by gatekeepers (See Chapter 2 for a more in-depth discussion of the theoretical framework). As candidates for the superintendency go through the process for appointment, they must pass through a series of channels that are controlled by persons with differing degrees of power. Gatekeepers, in turn, control which applicants move successfully through the process of superintendency appointment.

The Role of the Researcher

My role as researcher included being the major instrument for data collection. Since the research focused on interviewing female superintendents in Tennessee, it was imperative that I excelled in investigator skills. Yin (2003) states that to be a good investigator, one must possess the following skills:

- (1) asking good questions,
- (2) being a good listener,
- (3) being adaptive and flexible,
- (4) having a firm grasp of the issues being studied, and
- (5) being unbiased by preconceived notions. (pp. 59-62)

My goal was to gather and analyze data of female superintendents in Tennessee in hopes of discovering how they overcame the barriers that they faced in attaining this position. It was my hope that the knowledge that came from analyzing and comparing data from their perspectives and personal experiences

could be used to determine how a greater number of females can gain access to the superintendency.

Researcher Biases

One inherent bias that I had to address is the fact that I am considering the possibility of becoming a superintendent someday, and I perceive factors in my own life that may deter me from seeking this position. Such factors as my age and the length of time spent in classroom instruction must not create a bias in my research.

Another bias that I had to consider as I collected data was my perception that some males feel that females are not qualified to lead schools or school systems. I have encountered this bias in my professional role as elementary school principal, and it was important for the success of this research project that I not let my personal feelings interfere with the collection and analysis of the data.

To keep these biases in check, I utilized the procedures of member checking in which I asked each of the participants of this study to check the accuracy of the account (Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I took the study back to these individuals and asked them to confirm the “accuracy of my report . . . whether the description is complete and realistic, if the themes are accurate, and if the interpretations are fair and representative of those that can be made” (Creswell, 2002, p. 280).

I further used the process of external audit (Creswell, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where I asked someone outside my research to conduct a thorough

review of my study and report to me the strengths and weaknesses of my project. This review process took place both during and at the conclusion of my study.

Participants

The participants for this study were purposefully selected from the group of 19 women who are currently holding superintendent positions in the state of Tennessee. The Tennessee State Department of Education website was utilized to gather the names of the current female superintendents. I verified their current employment and got contact information, including phone numbers, electronic mailing addresses, and school system addresses, for each of these women by finding the online school system websites. Female superintendents from large, midsize, and small school districts were purposefully asked to participate in an interview. Furthermore, interview data from participants from urban, suburban, and rural school districts were solicited. Data were also gathered from superintendents representing large, mid-sized, and small districts.

All 19 female superintendents currently serving in Tennessee were sent a questionnaire. Five of these women were asked to participate in a face to face interview. These five individuals were chosen based on three factors: (1) return of the questionnaire, (2) willingness and availability to participate in an interview, and (3) size of school district. A phone interview was also conducted with one additional superintendent so that data could be gathered from wider range of participants. The woman chosen to participate in the phone interview was based on two factors: (1) not returning the questionnaire, and (2) willingness and

availability to participate in an interview. After interviewing these individuals, the data were assessed to determine if a level of saturation had been reached (Creswell, 2002). Saturation did occur after interviewing six superintendents, so no other superintendents were interviewed.

I intentionally did not interview all 19 superintendents so that a level of confidentiality could be added to my study. The risks of discovering the identity of these 19 superintendents could be minimized by not including interview responses from all of these women. I anticipated that the more confidentiality that could be achieved, the more open and truthful the responses would be from the participants.

Data Collection Procedures

According to Adler and Clark (2003) qualitative research relies on several data sources. Yin (1994) wrote that the “First Principle” of data collection is to use multiple sources of evidence (p. 90). In my research, these sources of evidence took the form of questionnaires, interviews, and field notes.

I began the data collection process by sending a letter to each of the female superintendents currently serving in school districts in Tennessee describing the purpose of the study and how data will be collected and used (See Appendix A). A Study Information Sheet was also included (See Appendix B) that explained the risks and benefits from participating in this study. Additionally, a questionnaire was sent to each superintendent to be completed (See Appendix C). A phone call was placed to each superintendent approximately two weeks

after these forms were mailed to determine their willingness to participate in this research project.

All participants were assured of confidentiality in reporting the results of this study. Pseudonyms were used for individuals and identifying details were changed. Participants were asked to sign a Statement of Consent to Participate in the Research form (See Appendix D) on the day that I met with them to conduct the interview.

Questionnaires

I sent each of the 19 female superintendents in Tennessee a questionnaire (See Appendix C) to be completed. Demographic information, as well as participants' opinions, were gathered from this method of data collection. A phone call was made if the questionnaires were not returned within two weeks.

Interviews

For five of the participants who indicated that they were willing to be interviewed, I contacted them by telephone to set up a time for their interviews. The interviews were "a conversation with a purpose" (Dexter, 1970, p. 136). I wanted to find out what is "in and on someone else's mind" (Patton, 1990, p. 278). As Patton explained, "We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe [It] allows us to enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 196).

The person-to-person interviews (Kvale, 1996; Merriam, 1998) consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions and lasted approximately one hour

(See Appendix E). Participants' responses to specific questions were recorded, transcribed, categorized by themes, and analyzed in a narrative form. My findings were relayed in a thick, descriptive narrative.

A phone interview was conducted with one participant. I called this individual and requested a time to ask her questions concerning the attainment of her superintendency. This phone interview was recorded, transcribed, categorized by themes, and analyzed.

Kvale (1996) described the research interview as "an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (pp. 5-6). It is "a conversation that has structure. . . and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge" (p. 6).

In order to create a sense of continuity between the purpose of this study and the collection of data through the interviews and questionnaires, I created interview and questionnaire items that directly corresponded to my research questions (see Table 1). Maxwell (1996) explained the reciprocal process between interview questions and research questions: "Your research questions formulate what you want to understand; your interview questions are what you want to ask people in order to gain that understanding" (p. 74). The matrix in Table 1 shows the relationship between the research questions, the interview protocol, and items on the questionnaire. These questions have been peer

Table 1. Matrix of Research Questions and Data Sources

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Questionnaire Items
1. What barriers do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee?	*I-1, *I-2, *I-4, I-5, *I-6, I-7, I-8, I-9, *I-10, I-11, *I-12, *I-13, *I-14, *I-21	*Q-2, *Q-3, *Q-4, *Q-5, *Q-6, *Q-7, Q-9, *Q-10, *Q-12, *Q-13, Q-14, Q-15, Q-16
2. How were these barriers overcome?	*I-14, *I-15, *I-16, *I-17, *I-18, *I-19, *I-20, *I-21	*Q-2, *Q-9, Q-11, *Q-15, *Q-17
Key: I – Interview Questions * Answers that include elaborated data Q - Questionnaire Items		

reviewed and analyzed by educational doctoral students at the University of Tennessee. Since qualitative interview questions are “open ended,” the interview questions and the questionnaire items served as a beginning point to gather data from the participants. As questions were asked during the interviews, the participants would often elaborate on the initial question, sharing additional data about barriers to the process of becoming a superintendent and how they overcame these barriers. When analyzing the questionnaire items, it was apparent that the participants also answered the initial question, but often gave additional information that explained how they overcame barriers and reached the level of superintendency. Due to this situation, the interview questions and the questionnaire items in Table 1 that reflect “elaborated data” from the participants are noted with an asterisk.

According to Maxwell (1996) and Merriam (1998), the key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions. It is imperative that questions be worded in such a way that the desired type of information can be gathered from the interviewees. Patton (1980) listed six kinds of questions that can be used in an interview to gather different types of information from respondents:

(a) Experience/Behavior Questions, (b) Opinion/Value Questions, (c) Feeling Questions, (d) Knowledge Questions, (e) Sensory Questions, and (f) Background/Demographic Questions.

Table 2 provides an analysis of the interview questions and questionnaire items according to Patton’s (1980) type of questions. Questions from five of the

Table 2. Interview Questions Analysis

Type of Questions	Interview Questions	Questionnaire Items
Experience/Behavior Questions	I-5, I-8, I-12, I-13, I-14, I-18, I-19	Q-3, Q-5, Q-6, Q-15
Opinion/ Value Questions	I-7, I-8, I-9, I-10, I-11, I-12, I-18	Q-2, Q-9, Q-10, Q-11, Q-14
Feeling Questions	I-6, I-7, I-9, I-11, I-17	Q-9, Q-10, Q-11, Q-14
Knowledge Questions	I-15, I-16, I-19, I-20	Q-15, Q-16
Background/Demographic Questions	I-1, I-2, I-3, I-4	Q-1, Q-3, Q-4, Q-7, Q-8, Q-12
Key: I - Interview Questions Q - Questionnaire Items		

six categories listed above are reflected in interview and questionnaire items that were used while collecting data from the superintendents in this study. The one category that did not support questions for this study was the sensory type of questions.

Field Notes

An important part of qualitative research is the use of reflective field notes. This information, according to Creswell (2002), is recorded as “personal thoughts that researchers have that relate to their insights, hunches, or broad ideas or themes that emerge during an observation or interview” (p. 203). Merriam (1998) wrote that “an important component of field notes is observer commentary . . . comments (that) include the researcher’s feelings, reactions, hunches, initial interpretations, and working hypotheses” (p. 106). By recording reflective field notes when interviewing superintendents, I was better able to make sense of the people and the situation I was researching and engaged in some preliminary data analysis. This “joint collection and analysis of data is essential in qualitative research” (Merriam, p. 106).

Procedures to Protect Human Subjects/Participants

Since I was conducting research that involved human participants, I followed the guidelines set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Tennessee. Before contacting any potential participant to gather data, I submitted specific information to the Office of Research Compliance that

addressed the protection of participants' rights, stated potential risks to participants, described recruiting methods of participants, and stated the informed consent procedure. I also presented the research interview protocol, the questionnaire, and a description of who would have access to the collected data and how and where collected data would be stored and secured. The Office of Research Compliance, my dissertation committee, and the IRB reviewed this information.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analyzed using Merriam's (1998) constant comparative method. Throughout the review process of the interviews, questionnaires, field notes, and the review of literature, codes and eventually themes were developed through an iterative process. I continually evaluated new insights in comparison to previous ones, creating a deeper understanding of the data.

Adler and Clark (2003) stated that coding is the process of "associating words or labels with passages in one's fieldnotes or transcripts" (p. 503). Therefore, the transcripts from the interviews, as well as the data from the field notes and questionnaires, were coded for analysis (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1998). Since coding requires a set of rules or criteria for selection, I provided a definition of each initial code.

Once initial coding of the data was completed, the second iteration process of combining codes into categories was conducted. This process combined similar codes into groups to develop a smaller number of categories.

This iteration resulted in themes being assigned to the coded data. The third iteration disclosed how those categories were used answer the research questions.

Figure 2 shows the development of the codes, themes, and answers to the research questions from the analysis of the data. This figure, developed by Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002), is included in order to provide reader clarity of how the data were categorized, consolidated, themes formed, and research questions answered.

Table 3 was adapted from Conastas (1992) to assist the qualitative researcher in documenting the process of category development. It is a two-dimensional model that accounts for components of categorization and the temporal designation in order to make public the process of category development. Making public the methods of category development increases credibility of research. Conastas names three procedural components that were utilized in the course of developing categories: origination, verification, and nomination. This table, according to Conastas, “may be used to make explicit the configuration of actions and temporal qualities associated with category creation in a given study” (pp. 256-257).

Third Iteration: (Answers to Questions)		
1. What barriers (gates) do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee?		
Gate Closers: 1a, 1b, 1c, 1d		
2. How were these barriers (gates) overcome?		
Gate Openers: 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d (Extrinsic)		
3a, 3b, 3c (Intrinsic)		
Second Iteration: (Theme)		
1a. Lack of Aspiration and Motivation	2a. Education and Experience	3a. Leadership Style
1b. Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Self Image	2b. Preparation	3b. Right Fit
1c. Gender Discrimination	2c. Sponsorship and Mentors	3c. Personal Characteristics
1d. Family Responsibilities and Expectations	2d. Family Support	
First Iteration: (Initial Codes)		
1a. Lack of Aspiration	2a. Education	3a. Leadership Style
1a. Lack of Motivation	2a. Experience	3a. Student Focused
1b. Background	2b. Preparation for Process	3b. Right Fit
1b. Personal Limitations	2b. Preparation for Interview	
1b. Fear of Unknown	2b. Application	
1b. Bitterness Over Disappointment		
1b. Negative Attitude		
1c. College Preparation	2c. Supportive Networks	3c. Perseverance
1c. Traditional Roles	2c. School Board Support	3c. Risk Taker
1c. Stereotypes	2c. Search Committee Support	3c. People Skills
1c. Political Barriers	2c. Mentors	3c. Self-confidence
1c. Cultural Expectations	2c. Female Supporters	3c. Hard Worker
1c. Good 'Ole Boy Network		3c. Integrity
1c. Glass Ceiling		3c. Positive Attitude
		3c. High Achiever
1d. Family Expectations	2d. Family Support	
1d. Lack of Mobility		
1d. Family Responsibilities		
Data: Interviews	Data: Questionnaires	Data: Field Notes

Figure 2: Code Mapping: Three Iterations of Analysis (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 32)

Table 3. Components of Categorization/Temporal Designation (Constat, 1992)

Component of Categorization	Temporal Designation	Temporal Designation	Temporal Designation
Origination Where does the authority for Creating categories reside?	A priori	A posteriori	Iterative
-participants			GD, FRE, SM, FS, RF
-programs			
-investigative	LAM, EE, PC	PBASI	LS
-literature	LAM, PBASI, GD, P, LS		
-interpretative			LAM, PBASI, FRE, EE, SM, FS, LS, PC
Verification On what grounds can one justify a given category?			
-rational			
-referential	LAM, GD, SM, LS		
-external		PBASI, FRE, EE, P, PC	LS, RF
-empirical			
-technical			
-participative		LAM, PBSI, GD, FRE	EE, P, SM, FS, LS, RF, PC
Nomination What is the source of the name used to describe a category?			
-participants			FRE, SM, FS
-programs			
-investigative	GD, LS	PBASI, EE, RF, PC	FRE, SM, FS, LAM, P
-literature	GD, SM, LS		
-interpretive			
<u>Category Label Key:</u>			
1a. Lack of Aspiration/ Motivation (LAM)	2a. Education and Experience (EE)	3a. Leadership Style (LS)	
1b. Personal Beliefs/Attitudes/ Self-Image (PBASI)	2b. Preparation (P)	3b. Right Fit (RF)	
1c. Gender Discrimination (GD)	2c. Sponsorship and Mentors (SM)	3c. Personal Characteristics (PC)	
1d. Family Responsibilities/ Expectations (FRE)	2d. Family Support (FS)		

Triangulation of Findings

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, this research was rigorously conducted. Data collection was conducted in an ethical manner and the final analysis of the data will “make sense” (Firestone, 1987) to the reader, thus providing a level of dependability and reliability. Careful attention was also given to the way the data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the way that findings were presented. The researcher’s biases were addressed in the research, and peer examinations of the findings (Merriam, 1998) occurred throughout the research investigation. Member checks were also used to determine if the results of the research were plausible (Creswell, 2002; Maxwell, 1996; Merriam). Additionally, I used the technique of an audit trail (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam) by “explaining my assumptions and theory behind the study . . . as well as describing in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, p. 207). The use of an external audit with two individuals

Another practice that verified the authenticity and trustworthiness of my data was the use of triangulation. Triangulation of the questionnaires, interviews, and fieldnotes (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003) ensured that correct conclusions were drawn (See Figure 3). Creswell (2002) stated:

Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collections . . . This ensures that the study will be accurate because the information is

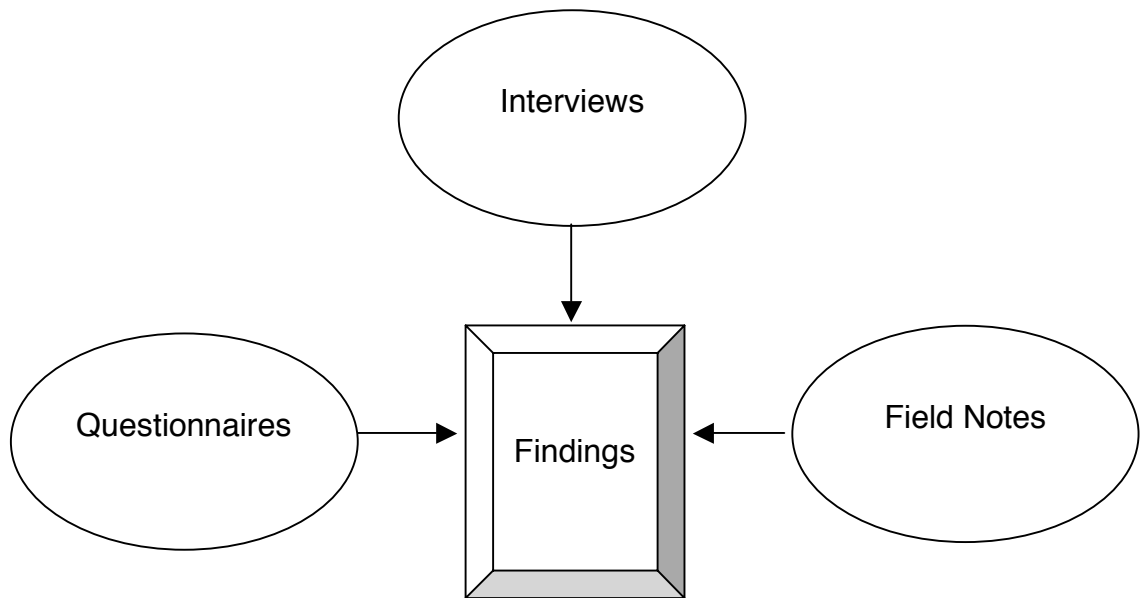


Figure 3. Triangulation of Methods for Data Collection

not drawn from a single source, individual, or process of data collection. In this way, it encourages the researcher to develop a report that is both accurate and credible. (p. 280)

As with any qualitative research, it is important that readers see how data sources are triangulated with the themes that are developed (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Table 4 shows the triangulation of data sources with the major findings from my research.

Summary

This chapter explained how the use of a multiple case study design allowed me to most accurately answer the questions posed by my research. The qualitative data collection procedures were described in detail as well as the process of participant selection for this study. Briefly discussed in this chapter was the theoretical framework used for my research based on the theory of “Gatekeeping” (Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker, 1991). Emphasis in this chapter was given to my role as the researcher and to the procedures used to address researcher biases that I brought to this study. The use of multiple data sources and the triangulation of these data were explained and the transparency of my research methods and data analyses were discussed to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.

Table 4. Matrix of Findings and Sources for Data Triangulation

Sources of Data:	I - Interview	Q - Questionnaires		
	RL - Research Literature	FN - Field Notes		
Major Findings	I	Q	RL	FN
Theme One: Perceived Barriers - Gate Closers				
1. Lack of Aspiration and Motivation	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Self Image	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Gender Discrimination	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. Family Responsibilities and Expectations	✓	✓	✓	✓
Theme Two: Overcoming Barriers - Extrinsic Gate Openers				
5. Education and Experience	✓	✓	✓	✓
6. Preparation	✓	✓		✓
7.Sponsorship and Mentors	✓	✓	✓	
8. Family Support	✓	✓	✓	✓
Theme Three: Overcoming Barriers – Intrinsic Gate Openers				
9. Leadership Style	✓	✓	✓	✓
10. Right Fit	✓	✓		✓
11. Personal Characteristics	✓	✓	✓	✓

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Chapter Introduction

This chapter is organized to answer my research questions: (1) What barriers (gates) do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee; and (2) How were these barriers (gates) overcome? The chapter will begin with a brief overview of this study, describe each of the participants, and explain the participants' perceptions of barriers. A discussion of Gate Openers and Gate Closers (as they relate to the Gatekeeping Theory) will be included in this chapter, as well as a section discussing how females overcome barriers and attain superintendent positions. This chapter will end with a concluding discussion of the findings.

In order to facilitate discussion of the findings, each research question was broken down into components that are more specific. The data collected from interviews, questionnaires, and field notes were analyzed according to codes that further defined each component. For example, the research question on barriers to obtaining the position of superintendent was broken down into two components: "gate closers" and "gate openers." Each component was further defined by key words that comprise their meaning. For example, gender discrimination was defined as: stereotyping, cultural and traditional role expectations, and the perception of a "good ole boy network." As I read through

the transcripts of the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes, I coded any information I came across according to this system.

It is important for the reader to be aware of three things. First, this research is a multiple case study of female superintendents in Tennessee and information concerning specific descriptions of school districts has not been included to provide a level of confidentiality for the participants. Second, all participants have been given a pseudonym to further create a level of confidentiality. Third, only female superintendents from Tennessee have been studied and the ability to generalize the findings is limited due to the small number of participants from only one state.

Participants

The participants of this study included 12 female superintendents from Tennessee. Eleven of these 12 women returned the questionnaire, and of the 11 women who returned the questionnaire, five of these individuals participated in a face-to-face interview. The one superintendent (of the 12 participants) who did not return the questionnaire agreed to participate in a telephone interview. Therefore, data were gathered for this study from a total of 12 out of 19 superintendents indicating that information was obtained from 63% of the female superintendents in Tennessee. Seven out of the 19 female superintendents in Tennessee were not reflected in this research which is indicative of 37% of the women. All participants are Caucasian. Currently 18 female superintendents in Tennessee are Caucasian and one female superintendent is African American.

Although saturation occurred after the fourth interview, repeated attempts were made to gather a higher percentage of the questionnaires and to conduct phone interviews with a larger group of participants for the purpose of having a larger data base of female superintendents in Tennessee. Two phone calls were placed to each of the individuals who did not return the questionnaire to encourage them to do so, but these attempts were unsuccessful in obtaining a greater number of responses.

Table 5 gives the reader a visual representation of the participants. The pseudonyms of each of the superintendents, type of district, and size of the district are indicated, as well as the number of superintendent positions applied for, the number of positions obtained, the attainment of a doctoral degree, and the age of the participants. The type of data collection for each participant is also revealed in this Table. Field notes were collected for all interviewed participants.

Description of Superintendents

Although each interviewed participant has unique personality traits, different physical characteristics, and leads different types of school districts, they share many similar traits (Field Notes, May 5, 2006). Each of these six women is energetic, passionate about their role as leader of the school district, appear confident in their leadership ability, and exhibit strong people skills. Each woman found humor in events that they shared during the interview and all of these individuals repeatedly told stories of support from various individuals, mentors, professional groups, and family members. Descriptors of their

Table 5. Participant Information

Pseudonym	Type of District	District Size	Supt. Positions Applied	Supt. Positions Obtained	Questionnaire	Face-to- Face Interview	Phone Interview	Doctoral Degree	Age
Donna	Rural	Small	1	1	✓				51
Jamie	Rural	Small	1	1	✓				54
Frances	Rural	Small	2	1	✓				56
Cathy	Urban	Small	1	1	✓	✓		✓	47
Nicole	Rural	Small	1	1	✓				45
Jane	Rural	Midsized	2	2	✓	✓		✓	49
Mary	Rural	Small	1	1	✓	✓			63
Teresa	Rural	Midsized	3	2	✓	✓		✓	52
Laura	Suburban	Large	4	1	✓	✓		✓	55
Amy	Suburban	Large	3	2	✓			✓	46
Mollie	Rural	Large	1	1	✓				60
Gail	Suburban	Midsized	1	1			✓		48
Key District Size: Small (400—4,999) Midsized (5,000—11,999) Large (12,000—25,000)									

leadership style and personality were also similar and words such as “hard working, positive attitude, perseverance, and right fit” were used repeatedly in their conversations about themselves. Most interesting is the fact that none of the six interviewed participants wanted to be a superintendent early in their educational career.

The following sections give a brief description of each of the individuals who participated in an interview. Pseudonyms have been given to provide a level of confidentiality for the participants. Names of school districts were intentionally not included in these descriptions (See Table 5 for a description of superintendents who returned a questionnaire, but did not participate in an interview).

Cathy

Cathy is an attractive, energetic, 47-year-old woman who is in her first year as superintendent. She obtained the first superintendency for which she applied and is currently leading a small urban school district. Cathy is single, does not have children, and had to relocate to another school district to begin this job. She expressed that there were barriers that she had to overcome to gain access to this superintendency, but she also indicated there were individuals who supported her through the process and helped her attain her current position. Cathy was enthusiastic about participating in this study and appeared very open and honest in her responses. Her enthusiasm was apparent in that she was the

first person to return the questionnaire and the first person to agree to be interviewed (Field Notes, April 26, 2006).

Cathy grew up in east Tennessee in a traditional family that included a father, mother, and two children. Her father's formal schooling had ended after the completion of seventh grade and her mother's formal education was completed after eighth grade. Due to the fact that neither parent had the opportunity to attend high school, both encouraged higher education for their children. Cathy shared, "My parents told my sister and I that we were going to have the education that they never had. They told both of us that we could go to school as long as we wanted to." Due to this support and encouragement, Cathy was the first person in her family to go to college and the first person in her family to earn a doctoral degree.

Cathy began her educational career as a special education teacher then moved to a regular education classroom. She taught in both elementary and middle schools and then moved to Central Office as a Curriculum Generalist. Cathy then became a principal and discovered that she had found her niche. She indicated, "I went into the principalship and that's what I always wanted to do as far as administration. I was a principal for eight years and really enjoyed that position. To be honest, I did not want to be a superintendent." Nevertheless, when a job opened as assistant superintendent, she was encouraged and persuaded by the current superintendent in her school district to apply for the position and was eventually hired for that job. She stated, "I was hired as an

assistant superintendent in an administrative position that I didn't feel like I had a lot of strength in. But I made the commitment to do the best that I could do."

Cathy's former superintendent and mentor also encouraged her to apply for her current job although she was initially reluctant to do so. She remembered:

I fought it a little bit at first, due to self-imposed barriers – not wanting to move, not wanting to go somewhere by myself, and being away from family and friends. But when I looked at the opportunities this job afforded me I decided to pursue it from the standpoint of the experience – what I could learn from it and to see if there was any way that it would feel like a 'fit.' When I went through the interview process, I realized it was a 'fit,' so I made the move. (Interview, April 26, 2006)

Cathy described herself as a professional with a strong work ethic. She said that she has a sense of humor and is very talkative. Cathy utilizes a team approach to leadership and involves many people in decision-making processes. She joked that sometimes staff members complain that "she's working them to death!" Cathy also exemplified positive people skills and strong communication skills (Field Notes, April 26, 2006). Cathy is experiencing a great deal of excitement and personal satisfaction in her current position and is glad that she made the move to this school district as superintendent.

Jane

Jane is an attractive, quiet spoken 49-year-old woman who is in her second superintendency. She has applied for two superintendencies during the past six years and has obtained both of those positions. Jane obtained her first superintendency in her local school district, but had to relocate to another district

within Tennessee to begin her current job. She is presently leading a mid-size rural school district. She stated there were no barriers that had to be overcome to move into the position of superintendent on either occasion, but she shared experiences that indicated otherwise. She referred often to the large degree of support that she had from her family members, friends, and co-workers during the process of obtaining both superintendencies. Jane enthusiastically participated in the interview and was very open in her responses to the questions. She was the second participant who returned the questionnaire and readily agreed to the interview (Field Notes, April 27, 2006). Jane is single and has two grown children.

Jane's educational goal was to become a reading teacher. She stated, "I've always wanted to teach reading. That's what I love to do, and when I got into that, I thought I'd found exactly where I needed to be, doing what I needed to do." Although she holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education with majors in physical education and secondary English, at the encouragement of a principal, she returned to college and obtained a master's degree in reading. After teaching 15 years in the classroom, she again responded to the encouragement of others and returned to college to obtain a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. At this point in her career, Jane entered the field of educational leadership in the role of assistant principal, a position that she held for four years, and eventually moved to Central Office as a Special Education Director for the

school system, a job that she retained for eight years. She then held the position of assistant superintendent for three years.

Jane did not initially have aspirations to the superintendency. When the superintendent's position became available in her district, the school board approached her about the possibility of applying for that position. Her response was, "I don't want to be superintendent. I'm not interested." Two years later when the district superintendency was again advertised, the school board approached her and asked, "Are you interested this time?" The central office staff also encouraged her to apply saying, "Come on, Jane. We don't know what's going to happen here. Please apply." She eventually applied and received her first position as the director of the school system stating, "I ended up being the superintendent, fighting it every step of the way." During the second year of her superintendency, a family tragedy occurred, and the Tennessee School Board Association called her asking if she would be interested in a superintendent position in another county in Tennessee. Due to the events in her life and the support from her children, she applied for the job and received the superintendent position.

Jane exhibited strong people skills as well as a close relationship with her family that was reflective in the large number of family portraits in her office. Her most impressive characteristic was that of compassion (Field Notes, April 27, 2006). It became obvious after spending time talking with her that she perceives the job of superintendent as one of great responsibility. She stated, "I don't know

if I've been led here or what, but here I am in a place where we've just had significant trials and tribulations. I feel that this is a mission field at times." She shared several stories where she feels the burden of the responsibility of the position of superintendent. She stated:

I really have difficulty in thinking that a superintendent's job is a power job. To me, it's a tremendous burden to be a superintendent when I think that each decision that I make is going to effect thousands of students and hundreds of employees. (Interview, April 27, 2006)

She further recalled:

This is a very tough job, even on good days. Doing the right thing is not always the easiest thing to do and can cause you grief. I do not feel there is any power associated with this job as many people do. This job is an awesome burden of responsibility. Many times I feel like I'm standing on the mountain top alone. (Questionnaire, April 27, 2006)

Jane described herself as a hard worker and a change agent. She stated that she is a person who likes the challenge of different jobs every few years and "basically likes change." She is currently experiencing a high level of satisfaction and personal fulfillment in her present position and is glad that she made the move to her second superintendency.

Mary

Mary is a friendly, soft-spoken 63-year-old woman who exhibits a positive attitude towards life. She is retiring from her first and only superintendency in June of 2006 a position that she has held for six years. She currently leads a small rural school district in which she was a former teacher and administrator.

Mary is married, does not have children, and did not have to relocate to obtain this superintendent position. She expressed that gender barriers were an issue when superintendents in her county were elected, but that these barriers have not been a problem since superintendents have been appointed. Although it was obvious that Mary was extremely busy on the day of the interview, she was very generous in the amount of time that she gave to our discussion (Field Notes, April 28, 2006). She appeared very open and candid in her responses to the questions and it was obvious that she wanted to participate in this study.

Mary did not intend to become a superintendent when she began her educational career. She stated, "It wasn't something that I planned to do at all." She started her educational career as a secondary teacher and later earned a master's degree in English. A supervisor and superintendent encouraged her to begin an administration degree and to move to central office as supervisor of the district's reading curriculum. Mary moved into this new position, but was not sure that this was what she wanted to do. As Mary shared, "I had no intention of going into supervision or administration work." Mary discovered that she did enjoy this type of work, and to continue in this position she returned to college to earn a certification in educational administration. After working as the reading supervisor for two years, Mary had a series of supervisory positions that included Director of Curriculum, Supervisor of Curriculum, Supervisor of Instruction, and Assistant Superintendent. Interesting to note is that Mary never held a principal's position in any school. Yet, when the county went to appointed superintendents, Mary

was asked to serve in this position and became the first female superintendent of this school system.

One of Mary's outstanding qualities is her strong commitment to her job as superintendent. She shared:

I've thrived on the excitement and work of being a superintendent. I've felt guilty in the past if I took a week of vacation. I don't enjoy the vacation because I'm there worrying about what's being done here. So, I started taking vacation a day or two at a time. (Interview, April 28, 2006)

Mary further explained:

Because I was the first female superintendent, I felt like I'd let the whole female population down if I wasn't successful. Therefore, in the last five years, I've pushed everyone to accomplish a lot for our school system like bringing up test scores and coming off the target list of No Child Left Behind. I have worked everybody to death. But I really felt like that if I was not successful, it would look bad on all women. (Questionnaire, April 26, 2006)

Mary described herself as a strong leader, a workaholic, energetic, happy in her work, and having high expectations of herself and others. Mary has thoroughly enjoyed the position of school superintendent and perceives that she has been successful. As Mary wrote, "I have had a wonderful experience as superintendent. We have made tremendous progress in the past five and a half years!" (Questionnaire, April 25, 2006).

Laura

Laura is an attractive, petite, 55-year-old woman who exhibits a passion and enthusiasm for life. Laura's high energy level and confidence level were very apparent during the interview and reflected in many of her comments and

answers to questions (Field Notes, May 4, 2006). She is married and is the mother of five children and three step-children.

Laura's journey into superintendency has evolved in an unusual way – she is serving in her third superintendency in the same school system. Laura was the last elected superintendent in this county serving a total of eight years. She then went into private business for two years, worked at the State Department of Education for one year, and returned as interim superintendent for a period of one year. After this position, she served as principal within this district for three years and is currently serving as the permanent superintendent in this suburban school district. Laura has a doctorate in educational administration, but she has never been a teacher in the state of Tennessee. She did teach overseas for the Department of Defense for two years and taught in another state for two years, but she had not been a teacher in Tennessee when she obtained her first superintendent position.

As Laura was growing up, she never considered being a superintendent of a school system. As she shared, "I never really wanted to go into education." She originally went to college with the aspirations of becoming a medical doctor, but decided to get married and ultimately changed her major to education to finish school in a shorter amount of time. She taught school for two years in another state then returned to Tennessee to open a retail business with her mother and grandmother. During this time, customers would come into her store and complain about the school district. Laura said that she thought:

The school district wouldn't be any worse off with me than it is with the current superintendent, and I have the qualifications that the state law requires except for two courses, which I got in the summer before the election. (Interview, May 4, 2006)

She also realized that people within the school system did not want to run for election because they "were fearful of the ramifications if they lost." Laura decided that it would take someone outside the school system to try to make a difference in the schools within her district by winning the election and becoming the superintendent. Laura ran for the next election and won the position in 1988.

Laura spoke often of the support of her family and friends during the process of obtaining her superintendent position. She said that her immediate family members were "extremely supportive" and her husband "would have moved with me to obtain this position if that were needed" (Questionnaire, May 1, 2006). Laura also stated that she did not have a mentor during the process of applying for or obtaining her superintendent positions. Since her first superintendency was an elective process and she did not come up through the traditional pathway of teacher and principal in Tennessee, Laura questioned, "Who's going to mentor you when you start your career at the top spot as superintendent?"

Laura described herself as a risk taker, persistent, energetic, a good listener, and a collaborator. She also felt that she is "a courageous leader and willing to do what we need to do to move our district forward." Laura believes that

when barriers are encountered, that women need to figure out a way around them. She stated:

Females aspiring to the superintendency should not look at a barrier and bump up against it and say, "Oh well, let me go somewhere else and do something else." If you really want to be a superintendent, look at the barrier and say, "Okay, that's a barrier. What can I do about it?" Be persistent about what you want to do. (Interview, May 4, 2006)

Mary is currently feeling content and successful in her position of superintendent in this mid-sized district and is looking forward to continuing her superintendency. As she stated, "The only things that would cause me to leave this superintendency is if my contract is not extended or if I reach a point of feeling that I have accomplished all I can do in the school district" (Questionnaire, May 1, 2006).

Teresa

Teresa is an attractive 52-year-old woman who is currently serving in her fifth year of her second superintendency. She is married, has two grown children, and two grandchildren. She exhibited an air of self-confidence, reflected a great deal of professional knowledge during our interview, appeared to be enthusiastic in participating, and shared openly in her responses to the questions (Field Notes, May 2, 2006). Teresa holds a doctoral degree from a large southern university.

Teresa spoke often during the interview about the support from her immediate family in her attainment of her superintendency positions. She shared:

My children have always encouraged me to do what I want to do. But, I couldn't have done what I've done so far in my career without a supportive husband. My husband went into semi-retirement for me to get this superintendency. He is a builder and we had to move to another city. In essence, he gave up his career for four years for me to do what I wanted to do. That was a huge commitment from him. Had he said "no" or had shown a lot of hesitancy, I would not have pursued this move to the superintendency. I'm not giving up my family for any job. (Interview, May 2, 2006)

Teresa's extended family were not as supportive of her aspiration to the superintendency mainly because the move would place her further away from aging parents (Questionnaire, May 1, 2006).

Teresa began her educational career as an English teacher at the secondary level and then took some time off from teaching to raise her children and work on their family farm. She went back into the teaching profession when her children were older, and at the encouragement of a friend, went back to college and earned a master's degree in educational administration. During the next few years, she moved to Central Office and held a variety of jobs that included Title One Supervisor, Public Relation Spokesperson for the school system, and Secondary Supervisor. Teresa's pathway to the superintendency was unique in that it by-passed the level of principalship. She applied for principal and assistant principal positions during her career, but did not attain those jobs.

Teresa gave credit to her former supervisor for encouraging her to apply for superintendent positions. She explained:

He was the biggest supporter and encourager. He was a tremendous mentor and helped me prepare for the interview with the school board. He did everything possible to help me through the

process. He had contacts and made some phone calls on my behalf to some regional people, state department individuals, and Tennessee School Board friends. (Questionnaire, May 1, 2006)

Teresa felt that there were barriers that she had to overcome to attain her superintendent positions. The “good ‘ole boy network is alive and well” (Questionnaire, May 1, 2006) according to Teresa. Additionally, she felt that “women may be our own worst enemies” when aspiring to superintendent positions. Teresa described:

When women do not attain superintendencies, they become bitter and have hurt the rest of us that are trying to move into administrative positions. Those that haven’t gotten administrative positions that they have tried for, end up trying to convince us about how biased everyone is against women. I think that the person becomes bitter, making it harder for the rest of us to achieve positions due to their attitudes towards others. (Interview, May 2, 2006)

Teresa described herself as a strong leader, an organized person, a hard worker, a leader with a sense of humor, and a change agent. Additionally, she places a lot of pressure on herself to excel as a successful superintendent. She shared:

I feel like I’m representing all women in this position. I put a lot of pressure on myself to succeed. I feel like I can’t fail for two reasons: One is for me and the other is for all those women who come after me that want this job. I can’t leave a legacy that I was not good in this job, so I try hard to be successful. (Interview, May 2, 2006)

Although Teresa originally did not seek a career in educational administration, she is currently enjoying her position as superintendent in this district. Since her current district is also located close to her original family home

and the residences of many of her extended family members, Teresa is content to stay in this school district as superintendent.

Gail

Gail was the one superintendent with whom I conducted a phone interview. She did not return the questionnaire, but agreed to be interviewed over the phone. This conversation lasted approximately 45 minutes and Gail appeared to be open and honest in her responses to the questions (Field Notes, May 6, 2006).

Gail is a 48-year-old married female who is currently serving as a superintendent in a midsize suburban school district. She has been in her present superintendency for two years and it is the only superintendent position for which she has applied. She has worked in her present school system as a middle school teacher, a supervisor of adult education, director of the English Language Learning Program (ELL), and principal of a high school. She currently holds a master's degree from a local college in Educational Leadership and Administration.

Gail did not go into education with the idea of becoming a superintendent. She wanted to be a teacher and had held that desire from childhood. It was not until she became the principal of a high school and people began encouraging her to become a superintendent that she began to think about moving into this position. She stated:

I never wanted or even thought about becoming a superintendent. Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to be a teacher, but when I became a principal I realized how much I enjoyed a leadership role. At the encouragement of a friend in Central Office, I let it be known that I might be interested in the superintendency if it ever became open. Little did I know then, that the current superintendent was going to retire. The School Board approached me about being the interim superintendent while they were conducting the search. After a year as the interim, they offered me the job permanently. (Interview, May 6, 2006)

Gail and her husband have six children and she did not have to relocate to a different city to begin this position. Although she indicated that not having to move was a positive situation for their family due to the fact that some of their children are still in high school, she was quick to add that her family was very supportive of her move into the superintendency. Gail explained:

No one could ask for a more supportive family. My husband is behind me one hundred percent and my children are very proud of me. If we did have to move to another city for me to be able to attain a superintendent position, my family would have supported me and moved with me. (Interview, May 6, 2006)

Even though Gail stated that she did not experience any barriers to reaching the superintendency, she shared stories that indicated otherwise. For instance, Gail said:

I was lucky in that the school board did their own search. I knew all the board members and they knew me. I didn't experience any barriers to getting this job. . . . I think that the board members really wanted a male. I felt like they thought that a man might be better at building or renovating school buildings or taking care of the student problems that occur in a high school. I really think that this was based more on their background and their personal beliefs. . . . I really didn't have much self-confidence during the first few months of getting my job. I didn't have any Central Office experience, so I was afraid that I might not do things the right way. . . . I felt like I

had to go above and beyond what the job description called for to prove myself qualified when I was the interim superintendent. Other female superintendents feel the same way. (Interview, May 6, 2006)

Gail describes herself as a hard worker and a visionary person. She feels that she is a fair person and is passionate about encouraging high student achievement. She has a team approach to leadership and places a great deal of importance on building relationships with adults, students, and parents within a school setting. It also appears through my interview with her that she has strong communication skills and a sense of humor (Field Notes, May 6, 2006).

Although Gail did not begin her educational career with the idea of becoming a superintendent, she is currently enjoying her position as the leader of this school system. She is planning to continue in this position and is anticipating a contract renewal and extension this year.

Summary of the Interviewed Superintendents' Responses

All of the six participants in the interviews shared many similar responses. All participants (100%) indicated that they did not begin their educational careers with the idea of becoming a superintendent. All of the participants also stated that they had to have some type of support person to encourage them before they decided to try to attain a superintendency. Additionally, all of the interviewed superintendents indicated that they experienced a high level of support from their families during the attainment process, felt that they reflected positive characteristics and leadership styles for the school superintendency position, and stated that they are experiencing a level of satisfaction and contentment in their

present positions. Responses from questionnaires and field notes reflected similar data.

The six interviewed female superintendents were diverse in some comparisons, yet alike in other situations. Four out of six (67%) of the female participants were married or remarried; one was single, and one participant was single due to the recent death of her husband. Four out of six (67%) of the female superintendents had children. The age of the participants ranged from 47 to 63 years old with an average age of 52.5 years old. Four of the six (67%) interviewed participants had earned doctoral degrees and two out of six (33%) held master degrees in educational administration and supervision. When comparing the data from all 12 female participants in this study, the age range of the women was from 47 to 63 years old with an average age of 52 years. Five out of 12 (42%) of the females held doctoral degrees and 7 out of 12 (59%) participants held master degrees in educational administration and supervision.

Four of the six (67%) interviewed participants also shared of the burden of responsibility that they feel to be successful in attainment and in being an effective superintendent for the women who follow them into the position (Field Notes, June 3, 2006). Comments such as, "I can't fail. I need to help the other females into these superintendent position" (Mollie, Questionnaire, May 30, 2006) were reflected in four of the participant responses. In contrast, one participant believes that, "Women may be our own worst enemies" (Teresa, Questionnaire, May 1, 2006). Teresa feels that, "When women do not attain superintendencies,

they become bitter and have hurt the rest of us that are trying to move into administrative positions.” Although this particular statement was not reflective of the majority of the other participants, comments about future female superintendents were documented in the data (Field Notes, June 10, 2006).

Research Question Number 1: What Barriers (Gates) Do Females Identify in

Obtaining the Position of Superintendent in Tennessee?

The data from the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes of the 12 participants documented people, events, and situations that acted as potential barriers as they navigated through the process of attaining a superintendent position. The following section presents the analysis of the data to determine the participants’ perceptions of barriers and “gatekeepers” (See Table 5 for additional information on the 12 participants). I turn first to a review of the conceptual framework utilized to analyze the data.

Gatekeeping Theory (Lewin, 1947, 1951; Shoemaker, 1991), which is the theoretical framework for this research (see pages 63-69 for a more complete explanation of the theoretical framework), proposes that there are a series of channels that ultimately converge to an end point where only one person successfully emerges. This theory also states that there are “in” and “out” decision points in the process which are called “gates” and these gates are controlled either by a set of impartial rules or by persons with differing degrees of power who are variably constrained or facilitated by multiple forces (Lewin, 1951). This theory also reflects a shift in the degree to which the gates are

opened or closed. As explained in this theory and reflected during each of the interviews with the six participants, there were many comments about people, events, or situations acting as possible barriers and prohibiting these females from moving into a superintendent position. Each of the 11 questionnaires from the female superintendents (one participant did not return a questionnaire) also documented these barriers. Field notes gathered during the interviews also reflected some of the same barriers. Responses from participants were categorized into initial codes and then grouped into broader themes of: (1) Lack of Aspiration and Motivation; (2) Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Self-Image; (3) Gender Discrimination; and (4) Family Responsibilities and Expectations. Each of these responses were grouped into a broader category of “Gate Closers” to reflect the Gatekeeping Theory and to answer the question of, “What barriers (gates) do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee?”

“Gate Closers” to Superintendencies

“Gate Closers” are people, events, or situations that tried to prevent some of the women in Tennessee from attaining a superintendent position. These barriers were noted in all six of the interviews, all of the field notes that were documented, and in 10 of the 11 returned questionnaires. This information reflects that 100% of the females participating in this research experienced barriers that had to be overcome to attain the position of superintendent. Due to the use of open-ended questions (Kvale, 1996; Merriam, 1998) posed in the data

collection process, much of the data for the analysis of barriers came from the personal conversations and stories of the participants that simply began with the initial interview questions or questionnaire items. These barriers were initially documented as: (1) lack of aspiration, (2) lack of motivation, (3) background, (4) personal limitations, (5) fear of unknown, (6) bitterness over disappointment, (7) negative attitude, (8) college preparation, (9) traditional roles, (10) stereotypes, (11) political barriers, (12) cultural expectations, (13) perception of a glass ceiling, (14) perception of a “good ‘ole boy network, (15) family expectations, (16) lack of mobility, and (17) family responsibilities.

To better analyze the data and answer the research question of “What barriers (gates) do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee,” I grouped this coded information into broader themes. These themes are: (1) Lack of Aspiration and Motivation; (2) Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Self-Image; (3) Gender Discrimination; and (4) Family Responsibilities and Expectations. I now turn to an explanation of each of these themes developed for this study.

Lack of Aspiration and Motivation

Lack of Aspiration and Motivation can be defined as not starting ones educational career with the goal of attaining a superintendent position. Lack of Aspiration and Motivation was noted by all six (100%) of the female superintendents during the interviews and by all 11 (100%) of the women through the questionnaires. Although cultural beliefs and gender stereotyping conditioning

may have been the foundation of this barrier, 100% of the participants (12 out of 12 of the total respondents) indicated that they had experienced this barrier (Field Notes, June 16, 2006). For example, Mary said. "I had no intention of going into administration. It's a very demanding job and it requires a lot of additional hours" (Interview, April 28, 2006). Jane also reflected these same feelings when she shared:

When the director's positions came open in my school district, the school board came to me and asked me if I would be interested in that position. I told them that I didn't want to be a superintendent. TBSA called and asked if they could give my resume out to other school districts that were looking for a superintendent and I said again that I did not want to be a superintendent. (Interview, April 27, 2006)

Teresa also recalled that early in her educational career when she was a classroom teacher, she was asked if she would like to be a superintendent. Her response was:

I could never do that. I have a family. Who would take care of my children if I spent hours a day doing the job of superintendent? I have commitments to my parents and I need to take care of them. (Interview, May 2, 2006)

The questionnaires also reflected statements from women who did not initially aspire to become a superintendent. For example, Nicole wrote:

When I was asked several years ago about being a superintendent, my response was, "I would never be a superintendent. Why would I want that job?" I remember laughing at the question. (Questionnaire, May 15, 2006)

Laura shared:

Honestly, there are only so many women who want to go through what a superintendent goes through. That's why I never seriously considered trying to become a superintendent. I knew that the job took lots of hours (Questionnaire, April 30, 2006)

Mollie concurred when she said:

I just wanted to be a teacher – nothing else. I loved teaching and could not imagine being in a different position – especially a superintendent. Looking back on it now, I can't recall why I didn't consider being a superintendent. (Questionnaire, May 30, 2006)

It appears that the women in this study needed encouragement to overcome their initial lack of motivation or aspiration to achieve the top spot in educational administration. What I found contrasted with a study (Brunner & Grogan, 2005) about the women who are not aspiring to the superintendency. These researchers found that none of the reasons are related to an initial lack of motivation. Instead the reasons for the females who were choosing to not aspire to the level of superintendent were more career focused in terms of work conditions and benefits or personal satisfaction with their current positions. A possibility reason for the difference in the findings of these studies may indicate that some women may simply be choosing not to apply for the top level of public school leadership for a variety of reasons.

Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Self-Image

Other barriers that participants described as “Gate Closers” are situations that can be categorized as Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Self-Image. Experiences of childhood, personal limitations, fear of the unknown, bitterness over disappointments, and negative attitudes were experiences that appeared to

have influenced the barriers or “gates” in the process of achieving superintendent positions as I initially coded the data of the females in this study.

All six of the participants (100%) who were interviewed indicated that Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Self-Image were barriers that they face. For example, data from the interviews showed that two out of six women (33%) stated that they were encouraged as young girls to be “teachers so that they could stay home with their children someday” (Gail, Interview, May 6, 2006). Five out of six (83%) of the women indicated that they also felt negative attitudes of influential people in their lives as they were growing up encouraging them to develop careers of service and support instead of leadership (Field Notes, June 15, 2006). Mary shared:

I remember my uncles saying to me when I was in elementary school that I would make a good teacher or nurse. I never remember my male family members encouraging me to consider being a CEO or a president or a school superintendent. It was just a perception that women supported and men were the leaders. I learned that concept at an early age and it took me a few years to unlearn it. (Interview, April 28, 2006)

Cathy talked during the interview about personal limitations that she set for herself with statements such as:

As assistant superintendent, I saw my role as trying to keep as many things as possible off of the superintendent’s plate and to support him and make him look good. When he suggested that I apply for a superintendency, I fought it a little bit at first due to the barriers that I had put up for myself. I didn’t want to move out of the town where I grew up. Also, I’m single and I didn’t want to move somewhere by myself. (Interview, April 26, 2006)

Five of the six (83%) women specifically talked during the interview about their fear of the unknown. Mary shared, “I didn’t want to go into administration because I was afraid that I would miss the students . . . I wasn’t sure that I would even like being in administration” (Interview, April 28, 2006). Jane also felt that she was not comfortable with what the future would hold if she became a superintendent. She stated:

When I turned in my application for my first superintendency, I said, “Here’s my resume, but if I get the job, I’m not taking it.” I was actually afraid of what the future would hold. I never considered being a superintendent or leaving my home and family. I’m not sure now in hindsight, why I was fearful of the experience. (Interview, Jane, April 27, 2006)

Seven out of the 11 (64%) questionnaires also reflected Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Self-Image were barriers that held the gate closed to a certain degree for the participants in the process of attaining a superintendency. For example, 6 out of 11 (55%) of the superintendents indicated that during their childhood, their parents (or other adults) discouraged them from becoming leaders and encouraged them to become “supporters” as they looked towards career opportunities (Field Notes, May, 7, 2006). Frances remembered that her parents encouraged her to become a teacher, not a principal. She indicated:

I don’t understand why my parents didn’t want me to be a principal when I grew up. It must have just been the “culture of the times.” They kept talking about being a teacher so that I could be off of work during the summer with my future children. I never remember them telling me about babysitters and day cares and support for children so that I could be the leader of a school or any other organization. (Questionnaire, May 4, 2006)

The questionnaires also indicated that 7 out of 11 (64%) of the participants set limitations on themselves. Donna stated:

I just felt like I couldn't do the job of superintendent. I don't remember a women being a superintendent while I was a student, so I guess I just got used to seeing a man in that role. I never thought about me being the leader of a school system.
(Questionnaire, May 11, 2006)

Laura reflected these same personal limitations when she said:

When people talked about me trying to become a superintendent, I laughed and said, "I can't do that!" Now that I'm a superintendent, I can't remember why I thought that. (Questionnaire, April 30, 2006)

Based on data analysis from the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes, I found that Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Self-Image did create barriers for women moving to superintendency attainment in this study (Field Notes, June 11, 2006). All interviewed participants (100%) and 7 out of 11 (64%) of the women who returned questionnaires, indicated that these barriers had to be addressed when attaining a superintendency position.

It appears that the women in this study had to overcome previously held negative beliefs, attitudes, and self-images to achieve to the level of superintendent. What I found coincides with findings from Ridgeway (2001) that stated that gender stereotypes contain beliefs that associate greater status worthiness and competence with men than women and these beliefs create a network of constraining expectations and the less likelihood that women will emerge as leaders. Ridgeway further stated that these beliefs are embedded

within our culture, taught to children at an early age, and become consensual in society.

One possible explanation for these findings is that females may have to “rethink” and change personal beliefs that have been embedded within society and our culture before beginning the journey towards superintendency. Females who are successful in reaching the top spot in educational administration may have to develop a new belief system which redefines gender status before being able to navigate through the maze of obstacles within the process of reaching a superintendency.

Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination is a category of perceived barriers that all twelve participants had to overcome in some way. This theme includes:

(1) lack of gender issue training in educational administration preparation, (2) expectations to follow traditional roles, (3) stereotypes and cultural expectations, (4) political barriers, (5) perception of a glass ceiling, and (6) perception of a “good ole boy” network. Interestingly, five (42%) of the women initially indicated that this category was not a perceived barrier, yet stories shared during the interviews and responses from the questionnaires confirmed that all women were confronted with gender discrimination at some point in the process of reaching a superintendent position (Field Notes, May 9, 2006).

All six of the participants (100%) who were interviewed indicated that they encountered Gender Discrimination as a barrier in accessing the

superintendency. The following quotes from interviews reflect the responses of some of the participants.

Most of the administrators in my lifetime have been men. I just never thought about going into a superintendent position. The public expects men to be in these positions. . . . Women have less ability to get further education because women still are typically the caregivers of children. So while a male might have had his doctoral and gotten it early in his educational career, a woman might still be working on her degree even though they both have been in education the same amount of time. The woman is the mom and wife, and she stays home to take care of children while the husband goes to school. . . . Women have to make different kinds of sacrifices to get to the same place because of society's expectations. It all has to do with the cultural experiences that women go through. (Laura, Interview, May, 4, 2006)

The "good ole boy network" is alive and well! School boards may step out of the traditional mode and give females a shot at the superintendency, but most likely, they end up going back to a male the next time that the position opens up. If you look back at where the openings have occurred, when a female has left, almost every time the board has gone back to a male for the next hire. (Teresa, Interview, May 2, 2006)

During the formal interview process, the school board members, who were all males, did not ask any gender inappropriate questions. But, when the open interview process was over, they questioned me in private conversations saying, "Why aren't you married?" and "Would you be afraid to move here by yourself?" I don't think they would have asked a man these questions. (Cathy, Interview, April 26, 2006)

I think that lack of experience is an inherent barrier. Experience in educational administration is looked for and often times women have not had the same opportunity to get the experience in educational administration as men. So if two people were coming through the pipeline to interview for superintendent, the man will have 20 years of experience as a principal and the woman might have three, although they both have been in education the same amount of time. She just didn't have the opportunities he did for some reason. (Gail, Interview, May 6, 2006)

Data from the questionnaires also indicated that Gender Discrimination was a barrier facing women in this study in accessing the level of superintendency. The data from the questionnaires reflected that 9 out of 11 (82%) participants experienced Gender Discrimination to a certain degree as they navigated the process of reaching the position of school superintendent. For example, Donna shared:

A man and a woman could say the same thing, but the words may be perceived differently by the public. A woman could have a little harshness in her voice or could be extremely busy and her response may cause her to be perceived as being a bitch. It's just the perception that the superintendent role has always been a male's role. (Questionnaire, April 24, 2006)

Frances said:

When I was in the process of applying for a superintendency, I had a prominent elected official call a member of the search committee to tell him not to feel obligated to place my name in the group of finalists. (Questionnaire, May 2, 2006)

Teresa reflected:

I think there are a lot of barriers to getting and keeping this job. I've heard people say, "You might have known a woman would have done that." It's just harder to get in this position if you are a woman. For the most part, women are fair game – anybody can say anything about them that they want to and it's perceived as okay. You can be maligned in the paper, at the community park, and in faculty meetings. If you are a female, the perception is that it's okay to do this – just pile it on. I don't think it's true for men. It's a gender thing. (Questionnaire, May 1, 2006)

The analysis of the data indicated that only one of the participants could remember or convey any type of gender training or discussion in their

educational administration preparation programs (Field Notes, June 3, 2006).

Most responses to questions on that topic reflected comments such as, “We never talked about gender issues. Our professors never mentioned it” (Laura, Interview, May 4, 2006). Nicole remembered:

Our professors never mentioned gender issues in our classes. I was not even aware that gender would play such a large role in the process of becoming a superintendent until I experienced it first hand. Looking back on it, I wonder why it was never mentioned. (Questionnaire, May 15, 2006)

Teresa concurred:

I don’t remember any discussion of gender issues or bias, but I think it must be because the professors didn’t see it, or recognize it, or experience it. But, no one ever discouraged us in the preparation process. (Questionnaire, May 1, 2006)

Based on data analysis from the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes, I found that gender discrimination was a frequently cited barrier that had to be overcome when going through the process of reaching a superintendent position (Field Notes, June 22, 2006). All interviewed participants (100%) and 9 out of 11 (82%) of the women who returned questionnaires, indicated the existence of this barrier that had the potential to prevent women from gaining a superintendent position.

It appears that the women in this study are facing Gender Discrimination as a potential barrier to achieving the top spot in educational administration within a school district. What I found coincides with The Study of the American School Superintendency 2000 (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000) which indicates that two

of the top three perceived barriers of female superintendents which limit superintendent opportunities for female are: (1) perception of School Board members that women are not strong managers, and (2) perception of School Board members that women are unqualified to handle budgeting and finances. One possible explanation of these findings is that gender discriminatory practices are continuing to prevail for women in spite of the attention and attempts of legislature improvements during the past century.

Family Responsibilities and Expectations

Another barrier that all six (100%) of the interviewed participants indicated that they had to overcome to reach the level of school superintendent is that of Family Responsibilities and Expectations. Each of these six individuals shared stories and examples in their own lives of how family members' responses and opinions caused the gates during the process of superintendent attainment to be somewhat closed to them. For example, Laura stated:

I had to stop my educational career to stay home and raise my children. It was just something that needed to be done in our family. My husband's job didn't afford us the opportunity for him so stay home, so I just did it. (Interview, May 4, 2006)

Jane also responded with a similar story:

I thought about applying for one superintendent job, but it was an hour and a half away from where I was living at the time and my husband would not have been able to quit his job. My daughters had just moved back home to that area, so I decided, "I'm not going anywhere." (Interview, April 27, 2006)

Data analysis of the questionnaires also revealed similar responses from superintendents. Of the 11 questionnaires that were returned, eight (73%) forms indicated that Family Responsibilities and Expectations were barriers that had to be addressed during the process of attaining a superintendency. The following comments indicate some of those responses:

My parents didn't want me to move away from them to get this superintendent position. They worried about if they got sick and I was four hours away from them. (Questionnaire, Nicole, May 15, 2006)

My grandchildren kept asking if I was still going to be able to come to their ball games and school activities if I got this job. I think they were concerned that I wouldn't be as involved in their activities if I became a superintendent. (Questionnaire, Jamie, May 8, 2006)

Based on data analysis from the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes, I found that the barrier of Family Responsibilities and Expectations was experienced by all six (100%) of the women who were interviewed for this study and by 8 out of 11 (73%) of the females who returned questionnaires. My personal field notes also indicated that whereas each of these women found ways to navigate through this gate, a majority of the participants in this study faced this barrier at some time during the process of achieving a superintendent position (Field Notes, May 4, 2006).

Based on my data collection, what I found coincides with literature (Grogan, 1996) that stated:

Tensions caused by being simultaneously subjectified within conflicting discourses can be detrimental to an individual, and many (women) . . . struggled to find a balance between their personal and

professional lives. There also appeared to be a resistance, not only to the discourse of educational administration, but also to other discourses such as those on partnering, mothering, and homemaking.

One possible explanation of these findings is that women continue to struggle with balancing the expectations and responsibilities of family with careers outside the home. Whereas improvements may have occurred during recent years, it appears that women continue to experience conflicts between family expectations and responsibilities in relationship to maintaining a professional leadership role in spite of the attention that this barrier has received during the past century in the United States.

Summary of “Gate Closers”

When answering the research question, “What barriers (gates) do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee,” 100% of the women participating in this research indicated that they experienced barriers. The barriers (gates) that these participants had to overcome to attain a superintendency can be grouped in the following categories: (1) Lack of Aspiration and Motivation; (2) Personal Beliefs, Attitudes and Self-Image; (3) Gender Discrimination; and (4) Family Responsibilities and Expectations. The data from this research indicated that while the current number of women in superintendent positions is larger than over the last 20 years, barriers are still present for females who are trying to access the top administrative leadership position in public school districts in Tennessee.

Research Question Number 2: How Were These Barriers (Gates) Overcome?

Not only is it important in this study to determine what barriers women identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee, but it is also significant to determine how these barriers were overcome. As explained in the Gatekeeping Theory (Lewin, 1947, 1951; Shoemaker, 1991) and reflected in the data, there were people, events, or situations that helped to support and facilitate the women in this study in moving into superintendent positions. The data were grouped into a broad category of “Gate Openers” to reflect the Gatekeeping Theory and to answer the question of, “How were these barriers (gates) overcome?”

“Gate Openers” to Superintendencies

Evident in the interviews, field notes, and questionnaires were statements from the women sharing stories of people, events, and situations that helped or supported them in the process of attaining a superintendent position. The female superintendents actually shared more information about “Gate Openers” (the assistance they received) rather than the “Gate Closers” (barriers that they had to overcome) (Field Notes, June, 7, 2006). Data collected from the participants were reflective of two categories: (1) Extrinsic Variables, and (2) Intrinsic Variables.

Extrinsic, or external, variables were documented and initially coded as: (1) education, (2) experience, (3) preparation for process, (4) preparation for interview, (5) application, (6) family support, (7) school board support, (8) search

committee support, (9) mentors, and (10) female supporters, and (11) supportive networks. These responses were then grouped into broader themes of:

(1) Education and Experience, (2) Preparation, (3) Sponsorship and Mentors, and (4) Family Support.

Intrinsic, or internal, variables were documented and initially coded as:

(1) leadership style, (2) student focused, (3) right fit, (4) perseverance, (5) risk taker, (6) people skills, (7) self-confidence, (8) hard worker, (9) integrity, (10) positive attitude, and (11) high achiever. These responses were consolidated into broader themes that reflect how women in this study intrinsically overcame barriers to achieve the position of school superintendents. These themes are: (1) Leadership Style, (2) Right Fit, and (3) Personal Characteristics. I now turn to an explanation of each of these themes developed for this study to show how female superintendents navigated through the barriers (gates).

Experience and Education

Experience in education was considered to be a “gate opener” in the pathway to superintendency according to the participants of this study. Of the six interviewed participants, five of the women were former teachers in Tennessee, and one woman had taught school in a different state. Only two of the six women interviewed had prior principalship experience, although one had experience as an assistant principal. Five of the six superintendents had Central Office experience as a supervisor or assistant superintendent. One woman bypassed

both the principalship and Central Office positions and went straight from the level of teacher (outside of Tennessee) to the position of superintendent. The data gathered in this research also indicated that two of the interviewed participants had to move outside of their school district to attain their first superintendency, and four of the women moved into their first superintendency within their local school district. As one participant stated, “The more experience you can get, the more interest a search committee will show you during the process” (Gail, Interview, May 6, 2006). Laura agreed when she shared:

I would advise anyone who thinks that they might want to be a superintendent to serve in a principal’s capacity at some level. A superintendent will better understand how to work on things from this side of the organization if they have principal experience. The principal is the key link in the whole chain of the organization. It’s important to have central office experience, but it’s not as important as the principalship experience. (Questionnaire, April 30, 2006)

Nicole agreed when she stated:

Experience is very important in the process. The more experience you have, the better you look to the school board. Also, the more experience you have, the better job you can do as a superintendent. Educational experience and success go hand-in-hand. (Questionnaire, May 15, 2006)

Level of education is also considered a “gate opener” in the process of attaining a superintendent position. Of the 12 participants in this study, five of the women held doctoral degrees and seven of the superintendents held master’s degrees. This number reflects that 42% of the participants held a doctoral degree and 58% held a master’s degree. Each of the women who held the title of Doctor

felt that the higher degree helped them gain their superintendent position. For example, Jane shared:

I think search committees and school boards are impressed with a doctoral degree when looking at candidates. They want the highest qualified superintendent. (Interview, April 27, 2006)

Amy concurred when she said:

Although search committees may state that a doctoral degree is not required, I think that they are more supportive to those candidates who have earned one. I think it particularly helps women during the process of trying to get a superintendent position to have a doctoral degree over a man who hasn't earned one. (Questionnaire, June 1, 2006)

Based on data analysis from the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes, I found that Education and Experience was perceived to be a major "gate opener" in the process of attaining a superintendent position by each of the participants in this study (Field Notes, June 18, 2006). Six out of six (100%) of the interviewed participants and 9 out of 11 (82%) of the female superintendents who returned the questionnaires indicated that education and experience were "gate openers" that helped them successfully navigate the barriers to reach the level of superintendency.

What I found coincided with data from The Study of the American School Superintendency 2000 (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000) that indicated that 57% of females hold doctoral degrees and that "school boards favor hiring superintendents with doctoral degrees" (p. 80).

Additionally, a career pattern prior to the superintendency reflected some

combination of teacher, principal, and Central Office positions, a pattern that was also reflected in my own study. A possible explanation of these findings is that the higher degree of education and experience may be perceived by gate openers to make for a more effective superintendent and those who are in the position to help females through the gates in the pathway of barriers, tend to open the gates wider for those with more education and experience.

Preparation

Adequate preparation for the process was a critical part of attaining a superintendency according to the majority of the participants of this study. Of the women who shared information, five out of six (83%) of the interviewed superintendents and 8 of the 11 (73%) of the participants who returned questionnaires shared the importance of this step in superintendent attainment. They responded with comments about learning all that they could about the district and the city or county in which they were applying for a superintendency and sharing this information at some point during the process with the school board. They also told stories about how specific people mentored them for the interview and other aspects of the search process. For instance, Teresa shared:

I went to my mentor to help me get ready for the interview. He helped me with the answers to some of the possible questions. His help was invaluable. (Interview, Teresa, May 2, 2006)

Jamie said:

Be prepared for the interview. Do your homework so that you can interview well. You only get one shot at getting the interview right. Be sure you are ready. (Questionnaire, May 8, 2006)

Mary agreed:

Be sure that you are extremely prepared. What ever you do, make sure that you know all about the school system that you are trying to become superintendent of. (Questionnaire, April 26, 2006)

Gail explained:

You need to show the school board how interested you are in their community and how much you want the job by learning all you can about the community. Then work this information into your conversations with them. (Interview, May 6, 2006)

Mollie shared:

Find out what questions have been asked to other superintendents during an interview. Ask other women what their experiences were during the process. Make sure you have all the bases covered and there's not a question that they can ask you that you don't know the answer to. (Questionnaire, May 30, 2006)

Based on data analysis from the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes, I found that the importance of being prepared for the process of attaining a superintendency was considered to be a "gate opener" for the majority of women in this study. These women shared experiences of knowing the community in which they were applying and sharing this information with the school board at some point during the process, as well as being prepared for the interview (Field Notes, June 21, 2006). According to one participant in this research who indicated the importance of this "gate opener," the "success of reaching the

superintendent level can be correlated to the level of preparedness of the candidate” (Amy, Questionnaire, June 1, 2006).

What I found was not reflected to a large degree in current literature. The idea that a candidate must be well prepared, as well as strategies for success, was missing from the literature. One possible explanation of these findings might be that this “gate” is simply a foregone conclusion of expectation and a great deal of research has not been completed for this “gate opener.” On the other hand, since the majority of women in this study felt that this was a “gate opener” in their experience of obtaining a superintendent position, I would encourage future research in this area.

Sponsorship and Mentors

All of the participants in this study indicated that the support of a sponsor or mentor was very important to their success in attaining a superintendent position. Sponsorship and mentors fell into the categories of individual mentors, supportive networks, school board support, and search committee support. The importance of sponsorship and mentors was a theme that ran throughout the data collection process of this study (Field Notes, May 24, 2006).

Of the 11 out of 12 participants who had individual mentors, seven women said that their sponsors were males. Four of the participants stated that they had both male and female mentors. All of the mentors in this study were superintendents or supervisors within the same school district as the aspiring superintendent. Some of the comments from the participants were:

I've had mentors that encouraged me to do more than what I thought I could do. In fact, my former superintendent was the one who encouraged me to apply for my present job. I wasn't looking for a superintendent position and would never have known about this job if he hadn't told me about it and encouraged me to apply for it. He was my main mentor during the process of getting my first superintendent position. (Cathy, Interview, April 26, 2006)

My former boss – my mentor – did everything he could possibly do to help me through the process. He had contacts and he made some phone calls on my behalf to some regional, state, department, and TBSA people. He was a gatekeeper because he helped to open the gate wider for me. (Teresa, Interview, May 2, 2006)

Only one person indicated that she did not have a professional mentor although she indicated that she did have the support of other mentors such as friends and support groups. Her response was:

Who's going to mentor you when you start your career at the top spot as superintendent? (Laura, Interview, May 4, 2006)

Supportive networks were also considered “gate openers” for individuals within this study. Eight of the 12 participants indicated that they received support through some type of group who assisted them through the process of attaining a superintendent position. Women educator groups, existing superintendent groups, and the Tennessee School Board Association (TSBA) were some of the networks mentioned by the participants. Laura explained:

I formed strong relationships with other superintendents when I first became a superintendent. I get some good support from them in terms of networking and asking questions. As I have moved to different superintendencies, these people continue to be my supporters and mentors. (Interview, May 4, 2006)

Jane also shared:

I was always getting calls from TSBA asking if I would go interview or if I would be one of their candidates. They kept calling me and talking about positions. (Questionnaire, April 24, 2006)

Additionally, 6 of the 12 women had stories and comments to share indicating the significance of search committee and school board support in reaching a superintendent position. For instance, Teresa shared:

There will always be something in your application that will cause the search committee to want to talk with you. There will always be something that you say or something in your manner that will resonate with one or two individuals on the search committee or the school board who will really try to help you in the process. You may not necessarily know it at the time, but there are people who become your advocates within those groups who will try to help you. I had those people in both of my processes of applying for superintendent positions. (Questionnaire, May, 1, 2006)

Jane explained:

The school board that hired me really took a major turn toward progress when they decided to go with a TSBA search. They said that they wanted to really do a search and to do it in the correct way. This concept was completely new to this community because in the past, they had just appointed the person that the community wanted and it had always been a male. So, the community was probably as shocked as I was about a woman getting the job – especially since I was not from this area. I wouldn't have gotten this position if it weren't for the support of the school board. (Interview, April 27, 2006)

Mary recalled:

My search committee didn't weed out the females. The comments I heard them say were that they were impressed with the females who applied. (Questionnaire, April 28, 2006)

Mollie concurred when she said:

The search committee that I went through recommended the same number of males as females to the school board. The list of finalists also reflected an equal number of males and females.
(Questionnaire, May 30, 2006)

Sponsorship and mentors were a significant “gate opener” for all 12 participants in this study for their success in attaining a superintendent position. The categories of individual mentors, supportive networks, and school board and search committee support reflected the theme of Sponsorship and Mentors. Support by individuals was noted by 92% of the females in this study, supportive networks were recognized by 67% of the participants, and support of school board members was documented by 50% of the female superintendents in this research. Overall, data analysis from the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes indicated that 100% of the participants of this study perceived that the support of mentors helped them to overcoming the barriers to attain a superintendent position.

My findings concur with data from The Study of the American School Superintendency 2000 (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000) that indicated that 71% of women who attained superintendent positions had a mentor. One possible explanation of these findings is that it takes the support of other individuals for women to navigate through the barriers and “gates” in the process of moving into a superintendent position. The rate of success for females reaching

superintendencies may be closely related to mentors who are helping hold the gates open for some of the women.

Family Support

Another “gate opener” for females going through the process of attaining a superintendency is the degree of support that they received from their families. All 12 participants in this study indicated that at some point in the process they had received support from their immediate family members. Data from six out of six (100%) of the interviewed participants and 11 out of 11 (100%) of the questionnaires, supported the findings of Family Support as a “gate opener” for the women in this study (Field Notes, June 22, 2006). Jane shared:

My husband had just passed away, and my daughters came to me and said, “You should go for this superintendent position. It might be good for you to move to another city and do something different.” (Interview, April 27, 2006)

Laura wrote:

My husband would have moved with me to obtain this position if that were needed. As it was, we didn’t have to relocate. But, the fact is, he would have moved with me, gotten another job, and would have done it gladly if that was what we needed to do for me to get this job. (Questionnaire, May 1, 2006)

Nicole explained:

My husband was the one who always had an encouraging answer to all my worries during the process of trying to get my first superintendency. If I said, “We can’t move that far away,” he would say, “Why not? We can do that.” Then he would explain how we could do it. He was my encourager. (Questionnaire, May 15, 2006)

Teresa concurred by saying:

My children have always encouraged me to do what I want to do. But, I couldn't have done what I've done so far in my career without a supportive husband. My husband went into semi-retirement for me to get this superintendency. He is a builder and we had to move to another city. In essence, he gave up his career for four years for me to do what I wanted to do. That was a huge commitment from him. (Interview, May, 2, 2006)

Based on data analysis from the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes, I found that Family Support was a major "gate opener" for women in this study. All 12 (100%) participants indicated that Family Support played a major role in their success of attaining a superintendency.

What I found conflicted with Grogan (1999) who indicated that there is still a tension created for those women who try to meet the demands of family and administration equally well. One possible explanation for these findings is that the traditional male role of husband and father is shifting to encompass a role that is more supportive of a women working outside the home. It may be that this feeling of support from spouses and family members is becoming a significant variable contributing to women successfully gaining superintendent positions.

Leadership Style

Leadership Style was another perceived "gate opener" by the women in this research and was documented by 9 out of 12 (75%) of the participants in this study. Most of the references to leadership styles reflected the perceived

differences between the styles of men and women. While there appeared not to be a “wrong way” to lead a district according to these women, there was a perception of a “better way” to lead a school system (Field Notes, June 2, 2006). The major perception of the best leadership styles was those of instructional leader, shared leadership, a humanistic approach, and a hard worker.

When analyzing the data, responses from four of the six (67%) interviewed participants indicated that Leadership Style was a major “gate opener” in successful attainment of a superintendency. Data from 8 out of 11 questionnaires (73%) indicated similar responses. The following examples were found in the data:

I am very persistent, energetic, a good listener, and a collaborator. I also think that I’m a courageous leader and I’m willing to do what we need to do to move this district forward. I’m willing to face whatever I need to face to do that. (Laura, Interview, May 4, 2006)

I am a hard worker, a change agent, and I have a good sense of humor. I go by the rules and I’m very organized. (Teresa, Interview, May 2, 2006)

I am all about being an instructional leader, not just a manager of an organization. My style is not to be a bulldozer and come in and make a lot of changes quickly. I think change should come slowly. I’m all about shared leadership. I use a lot of people in the decision making process. (Cathy, Interview, April 26, 2006)

A person needs to become involved in the total community and possess self-confidence, not arrogance I’m a strong leader, energetic, and have a mean streak at times. I have high expectations of myself and others. . . . I try to let my personal side show I’m a workaholic and put in lots of hours. (Mary, Interview, April 28, 2006)

I'm persistent, energetic, a good listener, a collaborator, and a courageous leader. I am willing to do what ever it takes to move our district forward. (Mollie, Questionnaire, May 30, 2006)

My leadership style is strictly student focused. The position isn't a power thing with me. I tend to be very organized and am a good decision-maker. I'm very sensitive in handling staff and student situations. (Jane, Questionnaire, April 24, 2006)

Based on data analysis from the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes, I found that 75% of the women in this study indicated that an effective leadership style was needed to attain the level of superintendent in Tennessee. An instructional leader, emphasis on shared leadership, a humanistic approach, and being a hard worker were the characteristics that these women felt needed to be conveyed to school boards to be able to successfully reach the level of school superintendent.

What I found coincided with findings by Grogan (1996, 2000) and Shakeshaft (1999) that stated that women approach school leadership differently than men do and that their characteristics tend to reflect expertise about student achievement and curriculum and they tend to use democratic leadership styles and power. One possible explanation for these findings is that school boards and search committees may be beginning to choose school district leaders that reflect these qualities of leadership that may provide women a more open "gate" when applying for superintendent positions.

Right Fit

Another characteristic of successfully navigating through the gates and gatekeepers in the process of attaining a school superintendency in Tennessee is the ability to find a “right fit” between a candidate and a school system. When analyzing the data, five of the six (83%) interviewed women and 10 of the 11 (91%) women who returned questionnaires shared information that conveyed the importance of this step in the process of reaching the top spot of educational administration. The following examples were found in the data:

I feel like the superintendency is a calling. I don't know if I've been led to this district or what, but here I am, in a place where we have just had significant trials and tribulations and experiences where I feel that it's more like a mission field than a school district . . . I love this county! I was born here and I've lived here my whole life. My husband has roots here just as deep as mine. I think me being local played a part in my being chosen as the first female superintendent for this county. The school board knew me and knew that the parents in the county trusted me. It made it a little easier for them to hire the first female in this position (Jane, Interview, April 27, 2006).

I believe that it's all about “fit” and whether your philosophy meshes with the school system. (Jamie, Questionnaire, May 8, 2006)

I went into this superintendency process to see what I could learn from the experience and to see if this community felt like a “right fit.” When I went through the interview I realized it was a good fit, so that made me want to move and take this position. (Cathy, Interview, April 26, 2006)

If you can't find the right fit with a school system, then you don't want the job and the school board doesn't want you. You will be able to tell during the process if the “fit” feels right for you. (Frances, Questionnaire, May 2, 2006)

Based on data analysis from the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes, it appears that finding the “right fit” was a significant part of the process in navigating the gates and gatekeepers in reaching the level of superintendent in Tennessee (Field Notes, May 4, 2006). The significance of finding the “right fit” in the process of attaining school superintendency was documented by five out of six (83%) of the interviewed women and by 10 out of 11 (91%) of the women who returned questionnaires.

My findings concur with Tallerico (2000a) who illustrated a complex mix of unwritten selection criteria that shape superintendent search and hiring practices. These criteria are largely invisible because they do not appear in either advertisements or public forums, but manifest themselves behind the scenes in private conversations and interviews critical to applicants’ advancement in recruitment and selection processes. Tallerico indicated that women could be disadvantaged by these unwritten rules, yet she emphasized the importance of women finding the right fit.

One possible explanation for the importance of finding the right fit may be that people often tend to bond with people most like themselves. Women who have successfully attained superintendent positions may have strategically relied on interpersonal feelings of connection to find the school district that reflected the greatest personal comfort level. School Boards and search committees may have also subconsciously worked to find a strong comfort and interpersonal chemistry with a candidate.

Personal Characteristics

Of all the ways that the women in this study indicated that they overcame the barriers and reached superintendencies, their own personal characteristics appeared to be the most significant in the process (Field Notes, May 15, 2006). Each of the 12 participants provided data confirming the importance of this step in navigating through the gates and the gatekeepers to achieve a school superintendent position. Specific personal characteristics that were reflected are: (1) perseverance, (2) risk taking, (3) self-confidence, (4) hard worker, (5) integrity, (6) positive attitude, (7) high achieving, and (8) good people skills.

Data from the interviews indicated that six out of six (100%) of the participants perceived that Personal Characteristics were a “gate opener” for them in the process of superintendent attainment. Whereas each woman in this study indicated varying degrees of this theme, all female superintendents indicated that this was a major variable in successfully reaching a superintendent position. The following examples from the interviews indicate these characteristics:

Successful women today just find ways around barriers. For instance, women may choose to raise their children before getting the education needed to attain a superintendency. But, that’s only a barrier to the point that it can delay getting the education experience that a board might expect you to have when you apply to be a superintendent. Women today just go ahead and figure out a way to achieve – they don’t let barriers stop them. I have a daughter who has two small children at home and she just goes to school at night and her husband takes care of the children. . . . Although I had never been a principal or worked in central office, I thought the school system wouldn’t be any worse off with me than it

is with the current superintendent. I had the qualification that the state law required except for two classes, so I just jumped into the election and won it! (Laura, Interview, May 4, 2006)

I feel like I'm representing all women in this position. I put a lot of pressure on myself to succeed. I feel like I can't fail for two reasons: one is for me, and the other is for all those women who come after me that want this job. I can't leave a legacy that I was not good in this job, so I try hard to be successful. (Teresa, Interview, May 2, 2006)

Women have come a long way and we continue to grow in numbers in educational administration. There will continue to be more female superintendents. I've always believed that if we want to do better as females, we can't get angry and bitter about issues. All we will do is to destroy ourselves. I think we have to look at how far we've come, not how long it took us to get there. I really believe in looking at a glass half full, not half empty. . . . Because I was the first female superintendent, I felt like I would let the whole female population down if I was not successful. So, I've worked hard to make a difference during my tenure in this district. I have worked everybody to death, but I really felt like if I wasn't successful, it would look bad on all women. This feeling put even more pressure on me to be successful. (Mary, Interview, April 28, 2006)

Data from the questionnaires also indicated that these women have personal characteristics of perseverance, strong interpersonal skills, strong work ethic, and high achievement expectations that helped them navigate through the gates and the gatekeepers in reaching a superintendent position. Data from 10 out of 11 (91%) of the questionnaires stated that Personal Characteristics were considered to be "gate openers" for the women of this study. The following examples reflect these characteristics:

Women today just figure out a way around barriers. They don't let barriers stop them. (Jamie, Questionnaire, May 8, 2006)

I've been so blessed and so grateful to have the jobs that I've had. I love working with people and I've never had a job that I didn't like (Donna, Questionnaire, May 11, 2006).

I am professional, have a strong work ethic, have a sense of humor, am very talkative, and very fair. (Nicole, Questionnaire, May 15, 2006)

Superintendency requires a 12-hour day at the minimum. I'm a hard worker and always have been. So when I started the process of trying to become a superintendent, I knew the expectation and knew I could give it the time this job requires. (Frances, Questionnaire, May 2, 2006)

You almost don't have any time that is your own when you are a superintendent. I've kind of thrived on that and have enjoyed it. I feel guilty if I take a week's vacation, so I usually only take one or two days off at a time. I don't enjoy a week's vacation because I'm worrying about what's going on in the school system while I'm away. (Mary, Questionnaire, April 28, 2006)

I'm a hard worker, a high achiever, and a change agent. I tend to go by the rules and am very organized. I think people need to feel that they can do a job and then go after it. (Mollie, Questionnaire, May 30, 2006)

Based on data analysis from the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes, I found that one significant way that women navigate the gates and gatekeepers and overcome the barriers in the process of attaining a superintendent position is the utilization of their personal skills and characteristics. Each of the 12 (100%) participants in this study indicated that they used one or more of their personal characteristics to help them achieve a superintendent position (Field Notes, May 15, 2006).

My findings concur with data from The Study of the American School Superintendency 2000 (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000) that indicated that the top

perceived factor that advances career opportunities for women is interpersonal skills. Of the females who participated in this 2000 study, 98% indicated that women's interpersonal skills are the most influential factor for advancing career opportunities for women. One possible explanation of these findings may be that search committees, school boards, and other "gate keepers" are looking for women who reflect particular personal characteristics. When women who exhibit those characteristics enter the process of obtaining a superintendency, then the "gates" may be opened wider for those individuals.

Summary of "Gate Openers"

When answering my research question, "How were these barriers (gates) overcome?" the women in this study indicated that there were "gate openers" who helped them navigate through the perceived barriers to attain a superintendent position. These "gate openers" can be grouped in the categories of extrinsic and intrinsic variables. Extrinsic, or external, variables were reflective of the following categories: (1) Education and Experience, (2) Preparation, (3) Sponsorship and Mentors, and (4) Family Support. Intrinsic, or internal, variables were reflective of: (1) Leadership Style, (2) Right Fit, and (3) Personal Characteristics. The fact that 100% of the participants indicated that they received support of "gate openers" at some point during the process of attaining a superintendency, reflects that "gate openers" play a significant part for women in overcoming barriers and reaching the top spot in educational administration in Tennessee.

Summary of Findings

The data collected for this study were analyzed based on a theoretical framework of Gatekeeping (see Chapter 2). The goal of this study was to look at women in Tennessee who had attained a school superintendent position in order to understand what barriers they identified and to determine how they overcame those barriers. This chapter sought to answer the research questions posed in chapter one: (1) What barriers (gates) do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee? and (2) How were these barriers (gates) overcome? Data analysis of the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes indicated that there were people, situations, and events that acted as barriers or “gate closers” to women who were trying to attain superintendent positions. The data analysis also indicated that there were people, situations, and events that acted as “gate openers” to women in accessing superintendent positions. The women in this study emphasized a greater importance on the role of “gate openers” in contrast to the role of “gate closers.” Table 6 summarizes the responses of the participants to the two research questions and shows how the data was analyzed to determine the answers to the research questions.

Table 6. Summary of Participant Responses to Research Questions

Research Questions	Data Analysis Summary		
	Interviews	Questionnaires	Field Notes
What barriers (gates) do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee? (Gate Closers)			
Lack of Aspiration and Motivation	100%	100%	✓
Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Self Image	100%	64%	✓
Gender Discrimination	100%	82%	✓
Family Responsibilities and Expectations	100%	73%	✓
How were these barriers (gates) overcome? (Gate Openers)			
Education and Experience	100%	82%	✓
Preparation	83%	73%	✓
Sponsorship and Mentors	100%	100%	✓
Family Support	100%	100%	✓
Leadership Style	67%	73%	✓
Right Fit	83%	91%	✓
Personal Characteristics	100%	91%	✓

In Closing

Examining the barriers that women in Tennessee identify in attaining superintendent positions and learning how these women overcame these barriers illuminated many strategies and understandings surrounding the successful efforts of these women. Although the success of these women cannot be generalized because of the small number of participants from only one state, these findings can lead us to some important conclusions about how women achieve superintendent positions in the state of Tennessee. These conclusions, as well as a comparison of this study with research (Mertz & McNeely, 1990) that was conducted 15 years ago on the same topic, will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Chapter Introduction

I began my research to support Bjork's (2000) assertion that it is important to seek additional qualitative studies that focus on "investigating causes for the appalling level of under representation of women in the superintendency" (p. 14). Since men have historically dominated the position of school superintendent in Tennessee with women currently leading only 14% of the school districts, I decided to investigate the causes for this under representation. I gathered data from 12 of the 19 current female superintendents, which represents 63% of the women leading the school systems in Tennessee.

When I ask myself why there is such an under representation of women in this position in the state of Tennessee, the first answer that I come up with is that the uphill climb to the top level of educational administration is much steeper and more slippery for women than men. Data from this study indicated that there are still barriers, or gates, that women in Tennessee must overcome in reaching the level of superintendency, and these women experienced many of the same barriers that other researchers have documented (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1999; Glass, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Grogan & Henry, 1995; Kamler & Shakeshaft, 1998; McFadden & Smith, 2003; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tallerico, 1999). Furthermore, the data from this research indicated ways in which women overcame these barriers.

Conclusions

There are two major conclusions that we can take away from this study of perceived barriers and how women overcome these barriers associated with seeking a superintendent position in Tennessee. First, it appears that women continue to face barriers in reaching the level of superintendency. Second, mentors and supporters appear to make a difference for women in successfully reaching the level of superintendent. These conclusions are explained in the next sections.

Women Continue to Face Barriers

The first conclusion that can be made from this study is that it appears that women continue to face barriers in reaching the level of school superintendent. What I found coincided with research which states that females must overcome discriminatory practices and barriers more often than men (Beekley, 1999; Bell & Chase, 1993; Brunner, 2000b, 2000c; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1999; Grogan & Henry, 1995; Haller, 1995; Tallerico, 2000b). For example, data from “The 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency” (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), stated that two of the major barriers perceived by female superintendents limiting administrative opportunities for women were: (1) the perception of school board members that women are unqualified to handle budgeting and finances, and (2) the perception of school board members that women are not strong managers. Kamler and Shakeshaft (1999) concluded from their study that consultants perceived that school boards continue to have a bias

against women candidates for the superintendency. Brunner (2000b) found that female narratives were filled with stories of their experiences of inequality, but they either “did not believe that they experienced gender bias or were unwilling to discuss it” (p. 79). My research reflected similar barriers and discriminatory practices associated with women in Tennessee aspiring to school superintendent positions.

The Importance of Mentors and Supporters

The second conclusion that can be made from this study is that mentors or supporters appear to make a difference for women in successfully reaching the level of superintendent. What I found coincided with literature which supports the influence of mentors for females during the process of attaining a superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2005; Grogan, 1996; Kowalski & Strouder, 1999; Mertz & McNeely, 1990). For example, data from “The 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency” (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), stated that female superintendents in their sample more often had mentors than did male superintendents. Grogan (1996) stated that the absence or presence of support groups and mentors were critical to a woman’s decision to aspire to the superintendency. Kowalski and Strouder (1999) indicated that females in their study received a large degree of family support in their attainment of a superintendent position. My research reflected similar conclusions about the importance of mentors or support groups for females in reaching the top level of school system administration.

Comparison of Tennessee Studies

To get a more indepth understanding of females in Tennessee and their success in attaining superintendent positions, I compared the findings from my study to the findings of research that was conducted in 1990 (Mertz & McNeely, 1990). By comparing data from a 15-year interval, I felt that it could be determined if females were experiencing the same barriers or different barriers in the process of attaining a superintendency over this 15-year period.

The purpose of the 1990 qualitative study was to examine how females in Tennessee who had been successful in attaining positions as high school principals and superintendents accomplished that task. The study focused on learning how these women went about the process, what happened as they did, and how they perceived they had accomplished it (Mertz & McNeely, 1990). Eight superintendents were included in this study which represented 6% of the superintendents in the state. Data were collected by interviews and surveys.

Whereas two different patterns developed from the research data about how the women attained their positions (“Work hard, be loyal and you will be rewarded,” and “Work hard, work smart, and make it happen”), there were significant similarities and differences when comparing the findings of the Mertz and McNeely (1990) study to this research. Listed below are the comparison of findings. Women in both studies:

- (1) Identified people who had assisted them in attaining their positions,

- (2) Tended not to actively pursue superintendent positions,
- (3) Indicated that they did not begin their educational careers with a goal to become superintendents,
- (4) Exhibited personal characteristics of hard workers and persistency, and
- (5) Identified barriers in the process of attaining a superintendency.

The major difference in the findings of the two studies was that some of the female superintendents in 1990 indicated that women did not support other women in the process of attaining a superintendency. Some of the participants in the Mertz and McNeely (1990) study indicated that women were critical and jealous of other women who were striving to reach administrative positions and did not have strong female support groups. My research overwhelmingly indicated that women who aspire to superintendent positions have a strong supportive network that includes other women.

By comparing these two studies it appears that women in Tennessee are still experiencing barriers in the process of reaching the top spot in educational administration. Females are continuing to need encouragement from someone before starting the process of moving towards a superintendent position, and women are still not beginning their educational careers with the idea of becoming a superintendent. Also, women are continuing to exhibit positive personal characteristics that help them move through the process to reach the level of superintendency.

Questions Left Unanswered: Areas for Future Research

Throughout the analysis of this study, I continued to run into several unanswered questions regarding females who are trying to overcome barriers and attain a superintendent position in Tennessee. These 5 questions were never resolved, so I offer them as unanswered questions that require further examination and research.

Unsuccessful Candidates

First, do the women who are unsuccessful in attaining a superintendent position have a different view of the barriers that females face or the ability of women to overcome barriers? In other words, why do some women attain superintendent positions and others do not? The data gathered from this research included only information from women who had attained superintendencies. I would be curious to see if women who unsuccessfully tried to navigate the “gates” and “gatekeepers” would have additional information to share about the barriers and their ability to overcome them. Do these women exhibit the personal characteristics and traits of current female superintendents? Do they have good people skills? Did they have a supportive network or a mentor? Did they look for a “right fit” with a school district? Did they prepare appropriately for the interview and other aspects of the process? Further study is required of these questions to more adequately answer my second research question: How were these barriers (gates) overcome?

Recruitment Practices

The second question that I continue to grapple with is: Why are women not better recruited by search committees? Only one woman in this study indicated that the Tennessee School Board Association (TSBA) asked for her resume to distribute to search committees. None of the participants were sought out by professional organizations or by professional search committees. The participants were either encouraged to apply for a vacant superintendent position by a mentor or by the local school board of the district in which they were currently employed. Further study is needed to more adequately answer my first research question: What barriers (gates) do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee?

Encouragement and Support

The third most nagging question remains: Why do women need someone to encourage them before they aspire to a superintendent position? This research is filled with examples of women who are competent, professional, and proven educational leaders, yet each of the participants had to have someone to encourage them to seek a superintendency before they actually became involved in the process. Further research is needed to determine why women need encouragement before they will begin the journey towards a superintendency.

Men Versus Women

The fourth unanswered question remains: Do men experience some of the same barriers as women? This study gathered data on the barriers that women

face, but one must ask if men need encouragers and mentors at the same rate as women? Do men enter education careers with the goal of superintendency or do they, like women, develop this desire later in their careers? Further research is needed to determine what barriers are specific to women in comparison to men in the process of attaining a superintendent position.

Women of Color

The fifth unanswered question from this study centers on the issue of race: Do women of color experience the same barriers or different barriers? Due to the lack of representation in this study, research is needed to explore the barriers that women of color experience in the process of attaining the top spot in educational administration.

Advice for Aspiring Female Superintendents

The purpose of this study was to determine what barriers exist that prevent women from moving into superintendent positions and to determine how these barriers were overcome so that we may be able to change this gender phenomenon. It seemed appropriate as I gathered data for this research that women who have overcome barriers be given the opportunity to offer advice to other females who are aspiring, or who may aspire, to the top level of administration within a school district. The following quotes are offered as advice from some of the females in Tennessee who have successfully navigated the gates and gatekeepers in the process of reaching the level of superintendent:

Look at the barriers and try to figure out a way around them. Don't bump up against a barrier and say, "Oh well, let me do some other job." If you really want to be a superintendent, look at the barrier and say, "What can I do about it?" Be persistent about what you want to do. (Laura, Interview, May 4, 2006)

Be sure that you want a superintendent position for the right reasons. When I think that the decisions that I make on a daily basis affects 6000 students and 800 employees, I feel a tremendous burden of responsibility on my shoulders. . . . You need to always show exactly who you are to your potential board. Be very honest and up front. This will make your relationship with your board more successful if you are the person chosen for the job. (Jane, Interview, April 27, 2006)

Have a sense of humor! Be able to laugh at yourself and your circumstances. For instance, I tell people that I went into this job with a lot of self-confidence. It was about the fourth day of the job that I thought that I couldn't do it. (Teresa, Interview, May 2, 2006)

Be positive. Look for the positive aspects of the job, not the negative. Remember that one of the best things about becoming a superintendent is that you no longer have to wait in line at the bathroom during breaks at state meetings. It's the men that are waiting in long lines at the bathrooms! (Cathy, Interview, April 26, 2006)

Keep on striving to obtain your goal. Never, never let your gender stop you. (Donna, Questionnaire, May 11, 2006)

Be strong. This is a very tough job, even on the good days. Doing the right thing is not always the easiest thing to do and can cause you grief. Being a superintendent is an awesome burden of responsibility. Many times you will feel like you are standing all alone on the top of the mountain. (Jane, Questionnaire, April 24, 2006)

Be sure to utilize your interpersonal skills. Be patient and look for the right fit, (Mollie, Questionnaire, May 30, 2006)

Gatekeeping Theory Revisited

During this research, I analyzed the data using the theoretical framework of “Gatekeeping” (Lewin, 1947, 1951; Shoemaker, 1991) that implies that there are people, events, or situations that control the gates that women must pass through during the process of attaining a superintendency. These gates may be opened wider or slightly closed to certain candidates in the process. The research questions that I sought to answer looking through the lens of the “Gatekeeping Theory” were: (1) What barriers (gates) do females identify in obtaining the position of superintendent in Tennessee? and (2) How were these barriers (gates) overcome? The data were gathered using the techniques of questionnaires, interviews, and field notes, and I compiled data pertinent to my two research questions. Using a system of coding derived from my framework, I analyzed the data for the presentation and discussion of the findings.

The findings related to the first research question on what barriers or “gates” females identify in obtaining the position of superintendents in Tennessee were examined as “gate closers” which are people, situations, or events that act as barriers to prohibit women from moving into superintendent positions. Each of the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes documented barriers that were then grouped into categories of: (1) Lack of Aspiration and Motivation; (2) Personal Beliefs, Attitudes, and Self-Image; (3) Gender Discrimination; and (4) Family Responsibilities and Expectations. Data from this research indicated

that all of the participants encountered some type of barrier or “gate” in their journey towards the superintendency.

Findings related to the second research question on how the barriers or gates were overcome were examined as “gate openers” which were reflective of people, situations, or events that supported women in the process of attaining a superintendent position. The data were categorized as extrinsic and intrinsic variables. The extrinsic variables were grouped into themes of: (1) Experience and Education, (2) Sponsorship and Mentors, (3) Preparation, and (4) Family Support. The intrinsic variables were grouped into themes of: (1) Leadership Style, (2) Right Fit, and (3) Personal Characteristics. Data gathered in this research through the interviews, questionnaires, and field notes showed that 100% of the participants who successfully navigated through the barriers, or gates, in the journey of superintendent attainment experienced some type of “gate openers” during the process.

When viewing these research findings through the lens of the Gatekeeping Theory (Lewin, 1947, 1951; Shoemaker, 1991), the influence of the “gates” and “gatekeepers” appear to control the success level of the females who are involved in the process of reaching the level of superintendent. The gates seem to be opened wider for some women rather than for other candidates, thus supporting the Gatekeeping Theory. For example, the women who navigated most successfully through the “gates” have support of their families and mentors, seek the right fit of a school system, have relevant experience, and have

personality/leadership characteristics of determination, good communication skills, and a team emphasis on leadership. Conversely, the “gates” appear to be closed to a greater extent for some women rather than other candidates due to lack of aspiration and motivation, low self-image and attitudes, gender discrimination, and family responsibilities and expectations. This research study shows the influences of the “gates” and “gatekeepers” in promoting or preventing women from moving through the channels of the process of superintendency attainment. Whether the “gate” or “gatekeeper” are the educational or experience requirements, the beliefs and expectations of families, school board members, lack of aspiration, etc., there are some people who navigate the “gates” more successfully than others. The data from this study reflect that the degree of “gatekeeping” may shift through the process between candidate aspiration, search committee criteria, school boards expectations, and the like, but women’s access to the level of superintendency in Tennessee is affected by the “gatekeepers” who control the “gates.”

When analyzing the data from this study on how women successfully overcame barriers and reached the level of superintendency in Tennessee, it became apparent that the participants emphasized the support of the “gate openers” over the difficulties associated with the “gate closers.” The women would consistently answer the interview questions about barriers, but they would quickly turn the conversation to people or situations that helped them through the barriers or “gates.” The participants also provided brief answers to questionnaires

about barriers, and then lengthy reflections of how these barriers were overcome with the help of “gate openers” such as mentors, family members, emphasis on finding the right fit with a school system, emphasis on personal characteristics and leadership styles. The emphasis placed by these participants on the help of “gate openers” during the process of attaining a superintendency appeared to be a key strategy of their successful navigation of the “gates.”

The Gatekeeping Theory (Lewin 1947, 1951; Shoemaker, 1991) emphasizes the idea that the gates through which candidates must pass before one person emerges successfully through the channels, are graduated in levels of difficulty. What I found in my study was that the gates were not ranked in order of difficulty, but the level of difficulty in passing through the gates changed with each candidate who went through the process. For instance, if a school board was seeking a superintendent with a doctoral degree, then the gate of Education and Experience would be closed to all candidates except for those holding this degree. Moreover, if a female experienced a bias from a search committee who felt that a man would be better suited for a superintendency, then the gate of Gender Discrimination would be more difficult for women to navigate through. Although my research was viewed through the theory of gatekeeping in reference to female attainment of a superintendency, this study indicated that the degree of “gatekeeping” for each gate could differ for each candidate seeking a superintendent position.

Closing Thoughts

I began my work on the under representation of women in school superintendent positions in Tennessee more than four years ago. My interest for what I perceived to be an unexplained gender phenomenon was ignited after reading a study by Skrla (1999) that explained that the school superintendency is the most gender-stratified executive position in the United States. Skrla's research indicated that men are 20 times more likely than women to advance from the level of teacher to the top educational administrative position in a school district. My desire was to contribute to the existing knowledge of the barriers that women face and to document how women overcome these barriers by sharing some of the first-hand experiences of female superintendents in Tennessee.

During this study, 12 of the 19 female superintendents in the state of Tennessee shared the process and events that they encountered as they attained a superintendent position. I discovered that women who were successful in reaching the level of superintendency, experienced many of the same barriers and most of them utilized mentors and supporters to help them navigate through the "gate closers" and the "gate openers." Comments such as those made by Teresa and Mary reflect the feelings and responses of many of the participants of this research who continue to pave the way for future female superintendents in Tennessee:

I feel like I'm representing all women in this position. I put a lot of pressure on myself to succeed. I feel like I can't fail for two reasons: one is for me, and the other is for all those women who come after me that want this job. I can't leave a legacy that I was not good in this job, so I try hard to be successful. (Teresa, Interview, May, 2006)

Women have come a long way and we continue to grow in numbers in educational administration. There will continue to be more female superintendents. I've always believed that if we want to do better as females, we can't get angry and bitter about issues. All we will do is to destroy ourselves. I think we have to look at how far we've come, not how long it took us to get there. (Mary, Interview, April 28, 2006)

In closing, I would like to pose a question: Will gender continue to be a major issue in the process of reaching a superintendent position? Plato once argued that women could be governors because gender was the difference that made no difference. After listening, gathering, and analyzing data from 63% of the women superintendents in Tennessee about the barriers that they had to overcome to reach the top level of educational administration, I find that Plato may have been wrong. Gender continues to matter in the eyes of some people and as long as gender issues prevail in educational leadership, women may continue to have more difficulty than men in overcoming barriers to reach the position of school superintendent in Tennessee.

Will this research study make a difference in the lives of future female candidates seeking positions of superintendent of schools? According to Brunner (2000c), "Aspiring women facing inequities and inequalities need role models like themselves. Therefore, when women are handed information about other women in the role of superintendent of schools, there is an increased chance that they

will pursue the role” (p. 77). If my research can encourage more women to pursue the position of school superintendent, and their journey towards this goal be more successful due to this study, then I have succeeded in accomplishing an important professional and research goal.

Epilogue

In December of 2005, the opportunity became available for me to apply for a superintendent position. Even though I could not become part of my own research, it seemed appropriate to use what I had learned through this study to apply for the position and begin the process of reaching the level of superintendency. Over the next four months I became aware of “gate closers” (lack of initial aspiration, gender discrimination, and personal attitudes) and “gate openers” (mentors, finding the right fit, leadership style, and personal characteristics) that I had to navigate through to reach my goal. Just like the participants in this study, I placed more emphasis on the “gate openers” rather than the “gate closers” during the process, and I can also testify to the gender barriers that were present in my journey towards superintendent attainment.

In April of 2006 I was offered and accepted the position of Superintendent of Clinton City Schools in Clinton, Tennessee. The excitement of reaching this level of educational leadership within one of the 136 school districts in Tennessee is a very rewarding and humbling experience. I am very excited to have become the twentieth female superintendent in the state of Tennessee in 2006!

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APPENDICES

Appendix A
Letter to Superintendents

March 15, 2006

Dr. Sharon Roberts
Director of Lebanon School District
701 Coles Ferry Pike
Lebanon, Tennessee 37097

Dear Dr. Roberts,

I am currently conducting research for a doctoral degree in Educational Administration and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. This research is being conducted under the guidance of my committee chairperson, Dr. Vincent Anfara. The first purpose of my research is to determine what barriers women must overcome to attain the position of superintendent of a school system in Tennessee. The second purpose is to understand how women overcome these barriers. The third purpose is to explore the position of “gatekeepers” in the process of superintendent selection.

I would like to ask you, along with the other female superintendents in Tennessee, to complete a short questionnaire to help me better understand the barriers you may have faced in your journey to the superintendancy. The enclosed questionnaire can be returned in the self-addressed stamped envelope.

In order to further research possible barriers, my goal is to interview some of the women currently serving as superintendents in the state of Tennessee. I may contact you during the next few weeks to request an opportunity to interview you as a part of this dissertation research. I realize that your schedule is a very busy one, so I will keep the interview process to approximately one hour.

A Study Information Sheet is also included to give you additional knowledge about this research, including the procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and

contact information. Please contact me at the numbers listed below if you have additional questions concerning this research.

Sincerely,

Vicki Violette
Graduate Student
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee
865-687-2890 (home)
865-659-7849 (cell)

Appendix B

Study Information Sheet

Female School Superintendents in Tennessee: Overcoming Barriers

The purpose of my dissertation study is to learn what barriers women face and to determine how women overcome these barriers to advance to the level of school superintendent in the state of Tennessee. Additionally, I want to examine the role of “gatekeepers” in the process of superintendent selection. I am inviting you to be a part of this qualitative research to give you an opportunity to describe the experiences that you have had in your journey to your present superintendency. My objective is to obtain a detailed description of possible causes of the under representation of females in the top-level administrative position of public schools in Tennessee. The anticipated benefits will be that additional knowledge will be gained to further understand the gender phenomenon that is occurring in the superintendency, both in the nation and in Tennessee.

If you agree to participate, I will ask you to complete the enclosed survey and return it to me in the self-addressed stamped envelope. Depending upon your availability and location, I may want to interview you either in person or over the phone. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes. I would ask you questions concerning your perceptions of barriers, encouragement/support systems, family/relationships, former superintendent positions you may have held, and your opinion of why there is an under representation of women in Tennessee school superintendent positions. I will conclude the interview by asking if you perceived gender barriers to your attainment of your superintendency and give you the opportunity to offer advice to aspiring female superintendents. I may follow up this interview with a phone call or e-mail for the purpose of clarifying some of your answers.

During the interview, I will ask you to share only the experiences you feel comfortable discussing. The interview will be audiotaped so that I may review and transcribe it for my research. However, the information I obtain and your personal identity will be held in confidence. Tapes and transcripts will be coded, and any comments that identify you will be deleted or altered (changing your name, the name of your school district, etc.).

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may end the interview or withdraw from the study at any time. If you withdraw from the study before data

collection is completed, your data will be destroyed. Return of the completed questionnaire constitutes your consent to participate.

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact me at (865) 687-2890 or at vviolet@bellsouth.net. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

Appendix C

Superintendent Questionnaire

Female School Superintendents in Tennessee:
Overcoming Barriers

Name: _____

1. How many years have you been in your present superintendency position?

2. How supportive are your immediate family members of your present superintendency position?

3. Have you held other administrative or teaching positions in the district where you are now superintendent? If so, what positions did you hold?

4. How many superintendencies have you applied for?

5. How many superintendencies have you obtained? _____

6. What is the length of your terms in other superintendency positions?

7. How would you describe your present school district?

Urban _____
Rural _____

Suburban _____

8. What is the student enrollment in your present school district?

9. Did you receive any encouragement from any of the following groups when you became a candidate for the superintendency? Circle all that apply.

Husband Children Extended Family Friends Peers
Other _____

10. Did you receive any discouragement from any of the following groups when you became a candidate for the superintendency? Circle all that apply.

Husband Children Extended Family Friends Peers
Other _____

11. Did you receive any encouragement from a mentor when you decided to become a candidate for the superintendency?

Yes _____ No _____

If yes, was this mentor a male or female?

Male _____ Female _____

12. Marital Status:

Married	_____	Divorced	_____
Single	_____	Widowed	_____

13. Do you have children? If so, how many and what are their ages?

14. Check all of the barriers that you encountered when you decided to become a candidate for the superintendency:

- _____ geographical mobility
- _____ lack of self-confidence
- _____ perception of a "glass ceiling"
- _____ lack of central office experience
- _____ lack of preparation
- _____ fear of the unknown
- _____ lack of a mentor
- _____ resistance or lack of support from family members
- _____ resistance or lack of support from co-workers/peers
- _____ resistance or lack of support from administrators
- _____ resistance or lack of support from school board

_____ other: _____
_____ other: _____

15. Did you feel that there were any individuals who tried to prevent your access to the superintendency? Explain.

16. Did you feel that there were barriers that you had to overcome to access the superintendency that were directly related to issues of gender? Explain.

17. What advice would you give women aspiring to the superintendency?

Additional comments:

Appendix D
Informed Consent Form

Female School Superintendents in Tennessee: Overcoming Barriers

The interview that you will be taking part in today will serve as data for my doctoral dissertation, *Female School Superintendents in Tennessee: Overcoming Barriers*. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the under representation of women in the public school superintendency in Tennessee. Information about your journey to your present superintendent position from your perspective and from your experience will increase the knowledge base for studying this gender phenomenon.

If you agree to participate in this research study, our interview should take about one hour. Questions will be asked to you to describe your experiences in as much detail as you are willing to share. Additionally, you may be contacted by phone or e-mail for clarification of a response.

Since your participation in this research is voluntary and involves only the questionnaires and these confidential interviews between you and me, there should be no risk or discomfort on your part. The benefits you may receive are the chance to talk about your experience and my sharing of the research outcome with you. You may disclose as much or as little information as you so choose. You may end the interview and/or withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty and without loss of the rights and benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

The information you share and your personal identity will be held in the strictest confidence at all times. The interview will be audiotaped so that it can be

Participant's initials: _____

reviewed and transcribed for the interpretation part of the research. The tapes and the transcripts will be coded with a letter/number known only to the researcher, which will protect your identity. Names of any people, schools, cities, or districts mentioned will also be changed or removed. The transcription will not include names or any other information that might compromise confidentiality. You may review the transcripts to clarify or make deletions if you so desire. The data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in Claxton Addition on the campus of the University of Tennessee.

The only people who will be allowed to see the transcripts of the interview are members of my dissertation committee and two peer reviewers. The identifying information will not be included when these people view the interview data, and no reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to this study.

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Vicki Violette, or the doctoral committee chairperson, Dr. Vincent Anfara, at the addresses or phone numbers given below. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

Vicki C. Violette
5008 Justin Drive
Knoxville, Tennessee 37918
(865) 687-2890
vviolett@bellsouth.net

Dr. Vincent A. Anfara, Jr.
A321 Claxton Complex
Knoxville, TN 37996-3400
(865) 974-4985
vanfara@utk.edu

Participant's Initials: _____

Statement of Consent to Participate in the Research

I understand that this research is being conducted by Vicki C. Violette and Vincent A. Anfara, Jr., of the Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education, at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I have read (or have had read to me) the above information and have received a copy of this form. The investigator has explained the study to me and has answered all questions that I have at this time. I understand the purpose of the project and that I am being asked to participate in an interview which will be audiotaped and transcribed. The potential risks and benefits were discussed.

I freely volunteer to participate in this study. I understand that I do not have to take part in this study and that my refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of the rights to which I am entitled. I further understand that my consent may be withdrawn at any time with no penalty and that I may discontinue my participation in this research at any time.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Signature of Conducting Interview

Date

Appendix E

Research Interview Protocol

Demographic Questions

1. How long have you been a superintendent?
2. What is the highest degree you have earned?
3. Where did you receive administration certification?
4. What is your age?

Semistructured Interview Questions

5. Tell me about your background and what educational pathway you traveled to arrive at the position of superintendent in your administrative career.
6. How many superintendent positions did you apply for before attaining your present position? Why do you feel that you did not obtain the position of superintendent during previous efforts?
7. Thinking back on the process of becoming a superintendent, did you perceive that there were gender barriers? If so, what were they?
8. Would you say that being in a relationship or having children could be a challenge in attaining a superintendency position? If so, how did you meet these challenges?
9. Did you have to move to a different city, county, or state to obtain this superintendency position? If so, what was the reaction of your family to this move or to previous opportunities to move?
10. Why do you think there are so few women superintendents in Tennessee?

11. Do you feel that there were gender barriers that you had to overcome to reach the position of superintendent? If so, what were these barriers?
12. Some people may feel that there are not gender barriers to overcome to attain a superintendency position. What would you say to them?
13. Suppose that I was being interviewed by a school board for the position of a school superintendent. What questions might I be asked that could represent gender barriers or biases?
14. Do you feel that there were any individuals that tried to block your access into the superintendency? If so, who were they, and how did you deal with this challenge?
15. Do you have a support group? If so, who makes up this group?
16. How would your employees describe you in your role as superintendent?
17. How do you describe yourself in your role as superintendent?
18. Do you feel that you were well informed of gender barriers in your administrative preparation program?
19. What would cause you to leave this superintendency?
20. Based on your experience, what advice would you give to encourage women in overcoming barriers and seeking the position of school superintendent?
21. Are there any other issues did we not discuss about your attainment of the superintendent position?

Concluding Questions

22. Do you have any questions for me?
23. May I call or e-mail you if I need to clarify information or ask additional questions?
24. Do you want a copy of the results of this study when it is completed

VITA

Vicki Cameron Violette was born in Knoxville, Tennessee on March 26, 1957. She attended elementary, middle, and high schools in Knoxville and graduated from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Elementary Education in 1978 and a Masters of Science Degree in Educational Administration and Supervision in 2000. She received her doctorate in Educational Administration and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee in 2006. Vicki has worked for 28 years as a teacher and principal in the Knox County School System in Knoxville, Tennessee. She currently holds the position of Director of Schools for the Clinton City School District in Tennessee.

In keeping with her philosophy of the importance of peer teaching and life-long learning, Vicki has presented educational research at several professional conferences. Her topic for presentation at the Mid-South Educational Research Association's (MSERA) annual meeting in October 2004, was entitled "Graphic Organizers to Support Qualitative Research Design." The title of her presentation at the University Council for Education Administration's (UCEA) annual convention in 2005 was "The Student-Sized Hole in the Dialogue."

One of Vicki's articles, written with her university cohort, has been published. It is entitled "The Earth Is Not Flat Anymore: Reflections on the Impact of a Rural/Urban Educational Leadership Exchange on Place-Based Instruction/Graduate Studies Cohort " and can be found in *Educational Consideration* (Fall, 2005).