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# The Intersection of Gender, Role and Identity: Rural Women Superintendents Redefine Work-life Balance

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Pamela A. Angelle, Major Professor

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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**The Intersection of Gender, Role and Identity:  
Rural Women Superintendents Redefine Work-life Balance**

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

Cedelle Angela Niles

May 2018

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to God and my loving family who have been a core source of love, support and guidance. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13) has been the scripture that has helped to sustain me throughout this rigorous academic pursuit. While unforeseeable challenges of life over the course of my studies have tested my faith, I stand with my family on God’s promises.

To my loving and supportive parents, Navarro and Laraine Niles, I dedicate this dissertation especially to you. Thank you for your sacrifice, prayers, love, support and encouragement. Your unconditional love has sustained me throughout my entire life and has meant more to me than you may ever know. You have taught me the true meaning and value of sacrifice, compassion, love, hard work, perseverance and determination. Mom and Dad, words cannot sufficiently express the appreciation, love, and admiration I have for you. Thank you for reading my dissertation, providing guidance and encouragement, and unceasingly supporting me throughout my life and this academic endeavor. I thank God for blessing me with you, for I could not have asked for better parents.

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To my sweet nieces, Brooke and Brielle, although you are only eight and six years old respectively, you have so much wisdom and love. While working on my dissertation, you

have been patient and understanding. Your gentle and loving inquiries about my dissertation have served as a source of encouragement for me to complete my research so that we could spend more time together. You may not now realize how much you have helped me to stay focused, but some day I hope that you will understand the magnitude of your role and prayers. Mommy, Daddy, Lynelle, Denelle, Brooke, and Brielle, you always believed in me even when I had doubts and wanted to give up. Thank you for constantly believing in me! You have all very much played a significant role in my success and the completion of my dissertation. Therefore, I humbly share this achievement and honor with you as you have shared with me unequivocal support. I love you.

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## Abstract

Research suggests that women in leadership have struggled with juggling multiple roles while serving in key leadership positions; however, there are limited studies that women superintendents are achieving satisfactory work-life balance (Olesniewicz, 2012; Reecks-Rodgers, 2013). Although, both men and women experience work-life issues (Korabik, Lero & Whitehead, 2008; Sallee, 2012), women experience those challenges differently due to societal expectations (Burke, Page & Cooper, 2015). Do such societal influences promote or challenge rural women superintendents' ability to experience a sense of achievement or satisfaction in both realms? Do traditional societal norms and expectations influence women superintendents' identities?

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study was to gain a greater understanding of work-life issues and strategies of women superintendents in rural public school districts in the southeastern US. As a result of examining this phenomenon through the lens of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we gain a greater understanding of how social identity salience influenced participants' behavior to achieve a sense of achievement and satisfaction in both their personal and professional lives.

Data were collected through open-ended interviews with the eight women superintendents of rural public school districts in three southeastern states. Findings revealed that participants' social identity salience was to their role as superintendent. Salience to the profession therefore revealed several key findings. While non-membership in the *good ole boys network* and lack of other women superintendents with whom to network permeated the professional realm, such situations did not stifle nor negatively influence women superintendent's self-concept. Rather participants sought ways to positively assert themselves to maintain positive

self-esteem through open and effective communication, deliberate ethical decision-making, and professional and personal support systems.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In 1909, Ella Flagg Young, the first female superintendent of a large school district (Chicago) declared: “Women are destined to rule the schools of every city...she is no longer satisfied to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership” (Blount, 1998, p. 1). Young expressed women’s rightful place at the helm of educational systems as well as women’s desire to lead districts. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women made up 70% of the teaching force and 9% of superintendents across the nation (Blount, 1998). In 2010, women made up 25% of superintendents (Kowalski, McCord, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). Today, women make up 27% of the superintendents nationwide, yet continue to dominate the teaching force (Finnan, McCord, Stream, Mattocks, Petersen, & Ellerson, 2015). These most recent findings reflect a 2% increase from *The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study* (Kowalski et al., 2011) and a mere 18% increase in women superintendents over a 106-year period. Despite these gains, Young’s vision has not yet been fully realized. While there has been a slight increase in the percentage of women occupying this key leadership position in education, the disproportionate representation of women is inequitable. Although women are more prepared to serve as superintendents (Blount, 1998; Grogan & Brunner, 2007) based on several factors such as their experience working with diverse populations of parents, teachers and community groups; participating in professional development opportunities to remain abreast of current educational developments; and having spent typically more time in the classroom than men, women tend to be perceived as poor managers (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000) and are still significantly outnumbered by men in the single highest key decision-making position of the school district. The gender inequities that have persisted in the public school superintendency cannot be overlooked or ignored

(Sanchez & Thorton, 2010) as “the absence of women at senior levels of administration particularly the superintendency in K-12 education, means that women’s influence on policy changes, decisions, and practice in the field is limited” (Mahitivanichcha & Rorrer, 2006, p. 486).

The relative paucity of women public school superintendents has led researchers to investigate what factors might contribute to this outcome (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Several factors appear to influence women’s decision to assume leadership roles in public education. Some factors specific to women include, but are not limited to the following: *stereotypes* that promote the idea that women are poor managers (Glass et al., 2000); the *glass ceiling effect* which refers to the unofficial acknowledgement of an invisible barrier that prevents women from advancing in a profession or to leadership positions (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Glass, et al., 2000; Shakeshaft, 1987); *gender bias* (Dobie & Hummel, 2001; KochanowskiGordon & Galloway, 2008; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999; Ortiz & Marshall, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1987; Tallerico & Blount, 2004) which, according to Banuelos (2008), refers to behaviors that “tend to be exhibited by men to exert male dominance in the workplace” (p. 28); *work-life balance issues* which refer to the challenge of juggling both personal and superintendent responsibilities causing some women to feel that they must choose between family and career (Bell & Chase, 1993; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Lawson, 2013; Litmanovitz, 2010; Shakeshaft, 1987); and *societal expectations* which tend to influence women’s identities and define their roles within society – more specifically, their personal and professional lives (Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Gordon & Galloway, 2008; Loder, 2005; Olesniewicz, 2012).

One factor that is pivotal and continues to emerge in the literature is work-life balance. Although, both men and women experience work-life issues (Korabik, Lero & Whitehead, 2008; Sallee, 2012), women experience those challenges differently due to societal expectations (Burke, Page & Cooper, 2015). “Since women entered the work force, they have been trying to figure out how to keep all the balls in the air and not let any hit the ground” (Gavin, Quick & Gavin, 2013, p. 127). Few studies on women in educational leadership have found that some women superintendents achieve work-life balance (Olesniewicz, 2012; Reecks-Rodgers, 2013), while others studies have revealed that work-life balance remains a challenge (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Bell & Chase, 1993; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1987). According to Gavin et al. (2013), “One of the main challenges to this [balancing] act is that many women have let society dictate how they should be handling this balance” (p. 127). In other words, according to Gavin et. al. (2013), societal norms and expectations influence behavior and decision-making. This idea of cultural norms and expectations dictating women’s roles and ultimately behavior and decision-making may play a significant role in women superintendents achieving work-life balance. Balancing multiple roles such as mother, wife, and career woman has been studied in various fields, including education. However, do women superintendents, individuals who have overcome many barriers to achieve the highest-level position in a school district, succumb to such norms and expectations? Do norms and expectations influence the decision-making and behavior of these women in positions of power and authority in education? To better understand how societal norms and expectations may influence the work-life experiences of women superintendents, one might be best served to examine it through the lens of the social identity theory, a theory that purports that one gives meaning to her self-

concept based on interactions with others within her social structures and then through a process of reflexivity.

Work-life balance, generally referred to as the ability to manage multiple roles within the personal and professional spheres, may yield positive benefits for both the organization and the individual. The success of an organization depends in part on higher productivity of its employees (Pitt-Catsouphes, Kossek, & Sweet, 2006). Effective work-life balance often leads to higher levels of satisfaction in family, life, and the job while producing lower levels of individual stress (Hill, 2005). Consequently, employees with improved work-life balance will contribute more meaningfully towards organizational growth and success (Naithani, 2010). Therefore, overall health and well-being benefits not just the individual, but also the organization.

Its converse, work-life conflict, has health implications for individuals and productivity for the organization. Regardless of gender, superintendents experience high levels of stress partially due to work-life conflicts (Glass & Franceschini, 2007, p. xvi). In Japan, the term *karoshi* refers to death from overwork as a result of excessive stress from work or working long hours (Reiss, 2002). According to Japanese labor standards, “100 hours of overtime a month” is the established guideline used for determining *karoshi* (Reiss, 2002). In 2013, Miwa Sadoa, a 31-year-old NHK (a Japanese public broadcast network) employee, died of “congestive heart failure” as a result of working more than 340 overtime hours within a two month period preceding her death (Chuck, 2017, p. 2). A recent study that opens the door for further research to explore the correlation between superintendent stress and mortality, was a national study conducted by Robinson and Shakeshaft (2016) that addressed the impact of stress on the overall health and well-being of superintendents.

Robinson and Shakeshaft (2016) noted that stress affected major areas of superintendents' life: work, family, [personal] life and [overall] health. The findings of this study revealed that stress-related ailments experienced by superintendents ranged from hypertension, high cholesterol, obesity, heart disease, anxiety, and heart attack (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2016). The implications of a lack of work-life balance can yield negative effects for both the organization and individual.

Coupled with the high demands of the job, societal norms and expectations, which have historically dictated both men and women's roles and responsibilities (Dufur et al., 2010; Marcinkus et al., 2007), seem to further compound a difficult task of balancing multiple roles. Extant literature has noted that women have been socialized to be the wife/homemaker and to assume a supportive role, while men the husband and the head of a household assume a role of provider/leader. This hierarchy is reflected in educational leadership as "women haven't been socialized to aspire to administrative positions or prepare for them" (Skrobareck and Stark, 2002, p. 8). There seemingly may exist a difference between men and women, as well as among women based on district type, specifically, urban/suburban districts versus rural districts. At the foundation of this study is the impact societal norms may have on rural women superintendents' identity and work-life experiences as they navigate their multiple roles. To better understand how or to what extent these norms and expectations influence work-life experiences of rural women superintendents, one might be best served to examine this phenomenon through the social identity lens.

Rural schools and districts comprise a large portion of the US educational system, however, "proportionately more than men, women tend to occupy the smallest and least cosmopolitan districts" (Tallerico and Burstyn, 1996, p. 657). According to NCES (2015), of

the 98,328 public schools in the US, the highest percent of schools were located in rural areas. Additionally, approximately 35% of the schools rested within the southern US. Within the southeastern region of the US, three states with the highest percentage of rural women superintendents and thus from which this study's sample was drawn included: Tennessee, Georgia, and South Carolina. According to Tallerico and Burstyn (1996), sociocultural influences may have guided women superintendents' perception and decision to begin their career as a superintendent at a small, rural district otherwise referred to as "starter districts" (p. 659) because the prevailing notion is that small rural districts may not carry the enormous workload or stress of larger more urban districts. The appeal to assume one's first superintendency in a small, rural district may have overshadowed the reality of managing a small rural district. Unlike larger, more urban/suburban districts, small, rural districts present unique issues such as limited personnel and resources as well as geographic and professional isolation (Lamkin, 2006). Such unique issues further compound conflicts which often results in a more stressful environment than larger, more urban districts (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2016; Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). Consequently, women superintendents of small, rural districts experience job dissatisfaction not only from inadequate and inappropriate training for their rural settings, but also from fatigue and stress as a result of "coping with multiple roles as school superintendent, homemaker, wife, and mother" (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996, p. 651). As a result, research shows that the nature of the rural district is perceived as more stressful due to the myriad responsibilities the superintendent assumes due to the lack of resources and personnel to address various tasks (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996).

Generally, women superintendents have and continue to grapple with navigating both personal and professional obligations. As Allred, Maxwell, and Skrla's (2017) recent

study noted “the most common challenge” for rural women participants was “balancing their lives” (p. 7). Allred et al.’s (2017) study echoes Ramsey’s (1997) earlier study which noted that the challenge as a female superintendent comes with a “price of family time, privacy, and role change within marriage” (Ramsey, 1997, p. 34). While societal norms and expectations have been noted as influencing school leadership, there appears to be a gap in the literature that examines how or to what extent societal expectations may influence the work-life experiences of women superintendents. With particular attention to feminist standpoint, the experiences of participants of this study may help to promote how women wish to be perceived based on “women’s needs, interests and experiences” in a male dominated position, rather than perpetuating an androcentric viewpoint (Klein, 1983, p. 90). Neither race nor family composition were the focus of this study, although important factors to consider for future studies as both race and family structure may influence how women are perceived and how women may internalize social norms. When examining work-life issues, some studies consider both male and female superintendents’ experiences; others examine the work-life issues regardless of community type; limited studies examine race as a construct; and some studies consider participants’ family structures – those who have families and others who do not. We have yet to understand how social norms and expectations influence the work-life experiences of rural women superintendents as examined through the social identity theory. At the intersection of gender, role, and identity, do rural women superintendents encounter unique challenges with regard to navigating their multiple roles to achieve a balance? Is balance even a concept to which rural women superintendents subscribe or aspire? And, if they do not, how do they speak of satisfaction and achievement in both their personal and professional realms? Do social norms and expectations which have had a profound historical

presence, affect the social identity of rural women superintendents of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Are the perceived challenges of aspirants to the superintendency valid?

As previously noted, the perceived challenge of trying to balance both work and family often deters some women from advancing to high-level executive positions in the educational system (Bell & Chase, 1993; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1987). Work-life balance, the effective management of multiple responsibilities at work, at home, and in other aspects of life (Frone, 2003), speaks to this study's focus on women in the highest-level district position in the US educational system – the superintendency. While studies have noted that both men and women experience work-life issues (Korabik, Lero & Whitehead, 2008; Sallee, 2012), women experience those challenges differently due to societal expectations (Burke et. al, 2015). Work-life conflict is a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). For the purposes of this study and for ease of use, references to work-life conflict encompass the reciprocal relationship between work-family conflict and family-work conflict (Carlson & Perrewé, 1999; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Throughout this study, I heed the caution of Mahitivanichcha and Rorrer (2006) regarding the perception that “the conversation around attaining a balance between work and family should not suggest that individuals (both men and women) are less qualified, less committed, and/or less able to perform the range of duties and responsibilities associated with the superintendency” (p. 501). Research suggests that even though women assume leadership roles, some women continue to maintain the home responsibilities regardless of their workload (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dufur, Howell, Downey, Ainsworth & Lapray, 2010; Hobson, Delunas, & Kesic, 2001; Loder, 2005; Mahitivanichcha, 2006) thus contributing to

additional responsibilities and stress. Several studies have shown that many female administrators indicate that balancing work and their personal life is a difficult task, requiring them to make a choice between the two (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Bell & Chase, 1993; Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1987). This perceived need to choose seems to be reflected in the number of women applying for, assuming, and subsisting in superintendent positions in public school systems throughout the nation. Work-life issues have not only served as an impediment to the advancement of women in educational leadership positions, but have also disadvantage some women, as well as create considerable stress (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2016). As Brunner and Grogan (2007) note, “women superintendents experience more stress than male superintendents because of the challenges presented by managing time between work and family” (p. 99).

While research has described factors that influence women relatively scant presence in educational leadership, and in particular the superintendency, it is not well-understood how societal norms and expectations in today’s society influence women superintendents’ work-life balance. In this study, from a feminist perspective, I examine the perceptions of a single group of participants (women superintendents) located within a particular community locale (the rural school district), within a specific geographic region (southeastern region of the US) through the social identity lens. The overarching question involving with study is how or to what extent do societal norms or expectations that have historically shaped women’s roles as wife and homemaker, influence rural women superintendents’ work experiences?

### **Statement of the Problem**

When compared to men, women proportionately fill more superintendent vacancies in “the smallest and least cosmopolitan districts with the fewest central office administrators,

declining student enrollments, more reported stress in the job, less satisfaction, and the greatest vulnerability to lethal school board conflict” (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996, p. 658). Such unpromising contexts contribute to the premature exit of qualified women superintendents, reflect an ingrained system of gender stratification, and reinforce the disproportionate formal power of White men in public school educational leadership” (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996, p. 658).

While societal expectations and norms influence both men and women differently (Burke et al., 2015), what remains unclear is if or to what extent rural women superintendents are affected by the norms that have traditionally guided men and women’s roles and expectations. Some studies have examined work-life balance of superintendents based on various constructs such as gender, district size and community locale (rural, urban, suburban) while examining implications on access, retention, health, sustainability, and bias. What remains unclear is if societal expectations and norms are at play when considering gender, role and identity of superintendents within rural districts.

While most studies have focused on the work-life challenges female executives encounter in fields such as medicine, law, business and education (Burke, 1999; Stock, Bauer & Bieling, 2014), limited studies have examined the experiences of rural women superintendents and how societal norms and expectations might influence their identity as they strive to achieve a satisfactory balance among their multiple roles. Moreover, although some existing literature discuss the characteristics of successful superintendents and archetypes of the position, Robinson & Shakeshaft (2016) note that their “findings regarding health conditions due to intense and prolonged stress highlights the need for introducing coping mechanisms as well as health and wellness programs for people currently operating in

the position of superintendent” (130). Occupational stressors can affect the well-being of the CEO of the school district responsible for managing millions of dollars, many employees, and a multitude of job related tasks. As rural districts make up a significant portion of the districts throughout the nation, and women proportionately manage rural districts, the need to examine the work-life strategies or coping mechanisms (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2016) for women of rural public school districts is great. Districts differ drastically, and therefore the job of the superintendent varies when considering the geographic location of the school districts within the communities they serve. Lamkin (2006) established that the rural setting presents challenges for the rural superintendent and that such challenges were “distinct enough to warrant some specialized preparation for such service” (p.17). Lamkin (2006) examined the experience of 58 rural superintendents in three states (New York, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee) and found that “isolation, limited resources, and community resistance to change” (p. 17) remained issues unique to the rural school superintendent. These unique work-life balance issues may call for a specific means to manage rural challenges.

Researchers have recommended further investigation on the lived experiences of women superintendents coping mechanisms (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2016). Considering the historical influence of societal norms on behavior and decision-making, this study will examine, through the lens of the social identity theory, the work-life experiences of women superintendents of rural public school districts in southeastern states with the highest percentage of female superintendents.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of work-life experiences of women superintendents in rural public school districts in the southeastern US. Therefore,

this descriptive qualitative investigation seeks to identify the perceived work-life issues women currently serving as superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States encounter in order to examine strategies women superintendents of the 21<sup>st</sup> century adopt to help resolve the historically held social expectations and norms that may influence women's work-life experience. As a result, I use the social identity theory as the framework for this study to help explain how societal pressures and norms may influence the decision-making of women superintendents and how they managed their personal responsibilities and professional obligations within the rural setting.

### **Research Questions**

The first step in revealing ways to address challenging issues rural women superintendents encounter is to identify the perceived obstacles of the districts themselves. The next step is to examine the support systems or strategies that aid in promoting balance between and among the multiple roles of superintendents. To support this purpose, this research study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived work-life balance issues of women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States?
2. What strategies do women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States employ to manage both professional and personal responsibilities?

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of facilitating clarity in this study, the following definitions of terms are provided:

*Administrators* – individuals who serve in an administrative role in the educational system

including assistant/superintendents, assistant/vice/principals, central administration staff; educational personnel responsible for providing instructional leadership and developing, implementing, and evaluating district and school systems as well as policies.

*External barriers* – the obstacles presented by society that are not controlled by the individual (Tallerico, 2000).

*Gender bias* – “behavior that shows favoritism toward one gender over another” (Rothchild, 2007).

*Internal barriers* – personal barriers whereby the individual needs to make changes related to issues such as values and self-efficacy (Shakeshaft, 1987).

*Negative ingroup distinctiveness* – inferiority of salient ingroups to relevant outgroups or dimensions valued by ingroup members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

*Positive ingroup distinctiveness* – superiority of salient ingroups to relevant outgroups or dimensions valued by ingroup members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

*Rural school district* – a school district located at least 5 miles outside an urbanized area or not located within an urban cluster with a metro-centric code of 7 or 8 or an urban centric code of 41 less than five miles), 42 (between five and twenty-five miles), or 43 (more than 25 miles) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

*Sex role socialization* – the behavioral and social norms that are considered typically male or female in a social or interpersonal situation (Glass et al., 2000).

*Superintendent of schools* – one who has executive oversight and charge of a school district; Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a school district; also referred to as Director of Schools

*Support system* – beliefs, processes or people who serve as a foundation of care and support (Reed & Patterson, 2007).

*Work-family issues* – interrole conflicts in which work and family domains both receive demands and that meeting the demands in one domain makes it difficult to meet the demands in the other (Perrewé & Hochwarter, 2001).

*Work-life balance* – the effective management of multiple responsibilities at work, at home, and in other aspects of life (Frone, 2003); “a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in the home and workplace” (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007, p. 428). For the purposes of this study, any reference to an aspect of work-family balance will be referred to as work-life balance.

For further explication of work-life balance see Chapter 2.

*Work-life conflict* – a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

*Work-family facilitation* – a process at the work-family interface whereby experience or participation in one role increases the quality or performance in the other role; the extent to which an individual's engagement in one life domain (i.e., work/family) provides gains (i.e., developmental, affective, capital, or efficiency) which contribute to enhanced functioning of another life domain (i.e., family/work) (Wayne, Grzywacz, Carlson, & Kacmar, 2007).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study may contribute to the existing bodies of literature on educational leadership and work-life balance by examining within the small, rural setting, how societal norms and expectations shape women superintendents' identity and ability to manage the demands of their professional and personal roles. This research study may also offer an understanding to the larger field of gender studies by providing “gender-specific” insight of perceived work-life issues and strategies based on the lived experiences of women superintendents. Although work-life issues are not gender-specific, this study will attempt to answer the calls of Brunner

(1997) for studies with “gender-specific insight” and Olesniewicz (2012) for further research to “understand how women in leadership positions balance work and life and/or what must be in place to maintain that balance” (p. 112). This study examines, through the lens of the social identity theory, the issues and strategies that might be unique to women superintendents of rural public school districts and offer a contextual understanding that may extend the literature while presenting less of an androcentric viewpoint. Additionally, this study may add insight to the interaction of societal influences on gender of the superintendent. Through the lens of the social identity theory, we may gain a fuller understanding of how social expectations and norms possibly influences the decisions of women superintendents of rural school districts in navigating multiple roles to achieve work-life balance. Decision-making is a vital process that helps to determine long-term success of the individual and organizations (Drucker, 1967; Harrison, 1996). This information may be a valuable tool in studying the behavior associated with social identity based on a self-ascribed salient identity. Such an examination may be of particular importance because of the need for a reconceptualization of the roles of men and women in today’s contemporary society. Furthermore, this study may help to fill the gap by offering an explanation of how gender, role, and identity converge to possibly determine how female superintendents navigate their professional and personal obligations within a rural context. Societal norms play a vital role in how women superintendents are viewed and how their leadership is accepted or rejected. It is likely to assume that within the social categories to which one belongs, one’s identity is shaped. Therefore, while the literature notes difference between and among community types (urban, rural, suburban), a greater understanding of how these differences affect the experiences of

women superintendents may help to offer coping mechanisms for aspiring female superintendents.

In addition, having women in such key positions of power is central to creating a more equitable society that reflects a postmodern paradigm whereby other women who aspire to become educational leaders may have role models in which to emulate. Overdue in today's society is an overhaul of the historically present societal norms and expectations of women in leadership positions and in particular, the superintendency. Women are prepared, capable, competent, and committed to leading educational systems; they are also effective leaders who use their power and influence for altruistic purposes. Yet, they are perceived differently. Furthermore, studies have suggested that some central administrators' perceptions of the work-life issues of the position (superintendency) often deter some women from advancing to the superintendency (Bell & Chase, 1993; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1987). While growing research exists examining the increased complexity and demands of the position, often times resulting in these educational leaders experiencing moderate to considerable stress, much less is known about the impact of identity on the lived experiences of women superintendents of rural public school districts regarding decision-making that may influence work-life balance.

This study may have implications for decision-making and practice. Decision-makers in human resources and boards of education as well as researchers, faculty in superintendent preparation programs, universities, practitioners, and other entities, can better recommend and develop policies, support systems, and programs to support women superintendents (aspirants) of rural public school systems through an expanded understanding of the particular challenges and strategies of women superintendents in rural districts. Specifically, faculty in

superintendent preparation programs may be able to utilize the findings from this study to ensure that they develop curriculum and related activities such that these not only inform students about work-life balance concerns but also enable them to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to successfully navigate possible challenges aspirants may confront. Finally, boards of education may consider revisiting policies that affect the work-life balance of one of the single most key positions in education—the superintendency.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The delimitations established provided the parameters of this study. First, this qualitative research study was limited to a small, purposeful sample of eight female administrators of rural public school districts who were actively serving as superintendents in the southeastern region of the United States at the time of data collection. Due to the small sample size, the research findings should not be generalized to a larger population or deemed transferable to women superintendents in general. Secondly, women in other leadership positions were not included in this investigation. Likewise, female leaders in non-public school districts were not a part of this research sample. Data were collected and analyzed from participants who met the criteria established by the researcher.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations to this study. First, researcher bias, as in most qualitative research, may have presented inaccuracies. To offset researcher bias, I conducted member checks for accuracy. A second limitation of the study rested in the participants' reluctance to share information or provide full disclosure. Although it was assumed that participants would speak openly and truthfully in response to my questions, there was no way to guarantee candor. The final limitation of the study was time constraints. This study was

conducted over a period of six weeks and did not allow for longitudinal data to be collected and analyzed. The six-week period provided me with a snapshot of one point in the year and life of participants.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced challenges of work-life balance for females in educational leadership positions. Next, the statement of the problem and the purpose of the study were discussed followed by the research questions that helped to guide this study. Chapter 1 then concluded with the definition of terms, significance of the study, and delimitations and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2 presents an explanation of the search process followed by a review of literature. Topics that will be addressed in the literature review include the concept of work-life balance, the public school superintendent, characteristics of rural public school districts, women superintendents, and work-life balance experiences of women in leadership and the public school superintendency. Following the discussion of the relevant literature, social identity theory (Burke, 1980; Stryker, 1980; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) the theoretical framework for which the study was examined, will be discussed. This chapter will then conclude with an overview of the areas of research regarding women superintendents' work-life balance.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology of the study and discusses the assumptions and rationale for the research method selected. Additionally, the research method and design of the study, the selection of participants, and the data collection and analysis procedures will be presented. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the role of the researcher, ethical considerations and the methods of verification.

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the data collected. Results from interviews and documents such as job descriptions and work-life policies are shared and the findings of the study are presented.

Chapter 5 offers conclusions of the study. Results from the study are placed within the context of prior research, and implications for theory and practice are discussed. Finally, recommendations for future research are provided.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

Chapter 1 provided an overview of this research study, beginning with a discussion of the problem under study. Chapter 1 also presented the statement of the problem, purpose, research questions, definition of terms, significance of the study, and the delimitations and limitations of the study. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to gain a greater understanding of work-life experiences of women superintendents in rural public school districts in the southeastern US. The first step in doing so is to identify the challenges women superintendents in rural school districts encountered. Then, through the lens of the social identity theory, explore strategies women superintendents of rural public school districts employed to manage multiple roles to achieve a sense of work-life balance. To understand the conversations surrounding this phenomenon, it was necessary to examine the existing literature that addressed work-life balance issues among female superintendents. This review was ongoing and continued to evolve through data collection, analysis and synthesis phases of this study. This chapter, therefore, focuses on an overview of existing literature. The areas for consideration included: the concept of work-life balance, the public school superintendent, characteristics of rural public school districts, work-life balance challenges experienced by women in leadership and the public school superintendency, work-life balance strategies, and the theoretical framework for the study, the social identity theory. An overview of the social identity theory was presented as the theoretical lens through which this phenomenon was examined. Finally, the review of literature will then conclude with a summary outlining the gap found in the literature that was addressed in this study.

## **Search Process**

This literature review explored the work-life challenges of women in leadership positions with particular focus on women in the superintendency. This chapter presents results from searches of related literature pertaining to the areas that contribute to the understanding of the phenomena being examined. Multiple sources of information included: peer-reviewed articles, books, professional journals, periodicals, dissertations, and internet sources. The resources employed in this study were used to examine scholarship related to: work-life balance, the public school superintendency, women in administration and work-life balance, women in educational administration and work-life balance, women public school superintendents and work-life balance, rural public school districts, and social identity theory. The literature search encompassed sources from 1900 to 2017. Title searches included: women superintendents, women administrators, women school administrators, women in leadership, women leaders, women in the workforce, work-life balance, work-life integration, work-life facilitation, work-family balance, rural school districts, and social identity theory. Research related documents were found through The University of Tennessee Electronic Library, ERIC, ProQuest, Google Scholar and EBSCOHost.

The key words of women superintendents and work-life balance in a search of more than a million peer-reviewed articles on the ERIC via ProQuest revealed 12,168 peer-reviewed articles that addressed work-life balance and 480 that addressed women superintendents. A search combining both key terms revealed two peer-reviewed articles. While there is little literature specifically on this central topic of study, there are studies that ultimately informed this study. It is to this scholarship that I now turn.

## **The Concept of Work-life Balance**

What is work-life balance and how is it achieved? While understanding how people manage the various facets of work and personal demands is widely studied, the concept of balance is still difficult to define in specific terms (Greenhaus & Allen, 2006). As a result, scholars continue to theorize and conceptualize work-life balance and the meanings of its various constructs (social and psychological) (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007). For the purposes of this study, I have adopted the definition of work-life balance as the “sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in the home and workplace” (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007, p. 458). This definition assumes a more flexible concept of balance and offers a “sense of satisfaction” more so than other definitions that present a rigid conceptualization of balance requiring equal engagement or equal time spent in both domains.

To gain a better understanding of how the term work-life balance has come into present day use, I first offer a history delineating the origin of the term. The concept of work-life balance was initially viewed in relation to work-family conflict (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Role conflict, essential to understanding work-family conflict, refers to the “simultaneous occurrence of two (or more) sets of pressures such that compliance with one would make more difficult compliance with the other” (Kahn, et al., 1964, p. 19). For example, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), based on the work of Kahn, et al. (1964), defined work-family conflict as

a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role. (p.19)

The research on work-life conflict has yielded mixed results. Specifically, some studies reveal that the interactions between work and family is bi-directional (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1993; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and not necessarily constantly diametrically opposing (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Thus in some cases, both domains (work/family) can positively influence each other. As a result, new conceptualizations of the interactions between the work and life domains developed. For example, Grzywacz and Marks (2001) formulated the work-family enhancement. From the work-family enhancement approach, a number of terms have been used to describe the positive benefits of work and family role participation including, work-family positive spillover (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000), work family enrichment (Carlson, Kacmar, Wayne, & Grzywacz, 2006; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), and work-family facilitation (Wayne, et al., 2007). Wayne, et al. (2007) explained work-family facilitation as “the extent to which an individual's engagement in one life domain (i.e., work/family) provides gains (i.e., developmental, affective, capital, or efficiency) which contribute to enhanced functioning of another life domain (i.e., family/work)” (p. 64). Work-family balance was then formulated (Hill, 2005). Scholars offered myriad ways of approaching the work and family domains. For example, Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) proffered work-family balance in terms of “the extent to which individuals are equally engaged in and equally satisfied with work and family roles” (p. 513). This largely broad concept of work-family balance has received criticism in the field as it refers to the degree to which an individual is able to simultaneously balance the temporal demands of both paid work and non-paid responsibilities; whereas work-family conflict represented incompatibilities between work and family responsibilities because of limited resources like time and energy. Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) offered a

conceptual understanding of work-family facilitation and defined it as the extent to which an individual's engagement in one social system, such as work or family, contributes to growth in another social system.

Higgins, Duxbury and Lee (1994) considered work-life balance through three components: role overload, work-to-family interference, and family-to-work interference. According to Higgins et al., (1994) role overload is having too much to do in the amount of time by which one has to complete the work, leading to the feeling of stress, fatigue and time crunch. Work-to-family interference occurs when work demands and responsibilities make it more difficult for an employee to fulfill family role responsibilities (Higgins, Duxbury, & Lyons, 2010). Work-to-family (WTF) interference may present as an individual working late into the evening hours, and, as a result, cannot attend her child's recital. Family-to-work interference (FTW) involves home influencing work. An example of this might be missing a meeting to care for aging parent who has fallen ill. The occurrence of such conflict, in essence, involves demands of the personal or home life that influence work responsibilities. Regardless of the directionality of the conflict, the individual experiences conflict in one realm (work/life) that makes it difficult to fulfill responsibilities in the other realm (life/work).

Poor work-life balance can lead to negative outcomes. The opposite of work-life balance, work-life conflict, has a negative impact on organizational performance and employees (Hobson et al., 2001; Pichler, 2009). Therefore, to prevent work-life conflict, individuals seek a balance within an ever-changing society and the seemingly insurmountable demands of work (Duxbury & Higgins, 2001). While balance can be expressed in many different ways such as mobility, flexibility, resilience, fulfillment, yearning, awareness, peace, energy, and relaxation (Pitt-Catsouphes, Kossek, & Sweet, 2006), the lack of work-life

balance is further considered a cause of other things, such as low fertility, population aging and associated consequences (Dey, 2006; MacInnes, 2017). Unfavorable outcomes of work-life conflict may explain why policymakers nationally and abroad (Higgins, et al., 2010) are interested in work-life balance and its effects on the economy, the labor market (supply and demand), fiscal revenue, population growth and stability, and social security (welfare) both in the short and long term. A focus of this study is an examination of the work-life strategies of rural women public school superintendents. Therefore, an understanding of this position is foundational.

### **The Public School Superintendent**

The constant evolution of public PreK-12 education in the United States prompts changes in the role of the public school superintendent. Over time, this highly political, multifaceted, and complex position, has and continues to develop. An examination of the history of the superintendent indicates that the origins began in the mid-seventeenth century with the appointment of “selectmen” in the New England states (Sharp & Walter, 2004). These men were charged by the government with managing schools by addressing truancy, “deciding on local taxes, hiring teachers, setting wages, and determining the length of the school year” (p. 2).

In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, as the burden of fulfilling both the “educational and non-educational functions” increased, Boston established the “school committee” (the first school board in the U.S.) to oversee the management of the schools (Sharp & Walter, 2004). Other states followed this concept of managing schools by establishing school boards, but soon found that the school committees were unable to adequately carry out the responsibilities of managing the daily aspects of schools (Sharp & Walter, 2004). Consequently, the boards

determined the need to secure an individual outside of the board to handle the administrative responsibilities; thus, the profession of superintendent was created (Sharp & Walter, 2004). Despite the preponderance of women in the nation's educational system who serve as teachers, men have historically dominated educational leadership positions such as principal and superintendent. The pervasive belief that men are leaders and women followers influenced the hierarchy of the educational system and these deep-rooted social beliefs seem to continue to be reflected in today's society. Even though there has been a slight increase of women in leadership in education and other professional fields, many members of society hold the belief that men make better managers/leaders (Glass et al., 2000; Handy-Collins, 2008).

The initial responsibility of the superintendent in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was to be the instructional leader of schools while the board of education was responsible for handling other operations of the school such as construction, maintenance, budget and finances (Sharp & Walter, 2004). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the expansion of course offerings at colleges enabled candidates to be well-versed in various aspects of educational administration and granted them oversight over areas that were under the school board's purview. Hence, fiscal management and school construction became a part of the superintendent's normal tasks (Sharp & Walter, 2004).

Today, the role and responsibilities of the public school superintendent have expanded and evolved significantly. Although the superintendency has been considered a gendered role with men at the helm, more women are managing school districts across the nation now than at the onset of the origin of the position. Nevertheless, the superintendency still remains mostly dominated by men. Regardless of gender, superintendents' oversight spans

instructional leadership, fiscal management, community relations, board relations, personnel management, operations management, facilities, public relations, curriculum and instruction, collective bargaining, and other areas (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Sharp & Walter, 2004). A recent study indicated that superintendents also feel responsible for student achievement, diversification of student and staff populations, the upsurge of technology, expanded expectations from the government, the school board and the community, and the globalization of society (Kowalski, et al., 2011). The weight of the position is further compounded by the careful scrutiny of high stakes testing, graduation rates, and high-pressure evaluations that are also under the purview of the superintendent of schools and often contribute to the pressures of leading a school district. Ultimately, superintendents are responsible for enhancing the educational system within the district they oversee as the “chief education officer and chief executive officer of the district implementing policy and overseeing the daily operations of the district” (Sharp & Walter, 2004, p. 16).

Along with this expansion in responsibilities has come increased stress. According to Glass and Franceschini (2007), approximately 60% of superintendents nationwide indicated high stress levels. Robinson and Shakeshaft’s (2016) study, which expanded our understanding of occupational stressors for superintendents nationwide, indicated the desire to “draw attention to the need to bring attention to common stressors that affect people in the position of superintendent” (p. 130).

While both men and women share common challenges of the position, such as politics, fiscal management, community relations, curriculum and instruction, facilities, operations management and school board relationships, men and women experience challenges differently particularly in part due to the influence of societal norms and expectations (Burke

et al., 2015). I now turn to the literature that speaks to the societal influences that serve to challenge women in educational leadership.

### **Societal Influences on Women Superintendents**

Gender remains the premise for much of the societal norms and expectations that have historically dictated men and women's roles. According to Scott (1999)

women enter the superintendency not merely as women but as subjects in an institutional world that is ordered, shaped, and regulated by a set of practices, or discursive fields, that define notions of what is expected and normal. These discursive fields are revealed in a number of ways, including through language that superintendents use when talking about their identity as professionals and as women. (p. 85)

Skrla (1998) noted stereotypical constructions of the male gender are used to describe a successful superintendent. Discourse typically characterized a successful superintendent as decisive, competent, powerful, authoritarian, and task-oriented (Skrla, 1998). Chase (1995) also noted the discursive discourse women superintendents used when speaking of their experiences in ascension to the position of superintendent and while in the position. In her study, Chase (1995) analyzed the language used and how participants spoke of their experiences and noted participants discursive discourse surrounding gender, racial, ethnic tensions regarding power and subjection.

How do societal norms and expectations impact women superintendents' behavior and decision-making regarding work-life? Do those decisions in turn affect their work-life experiences? As Robinson, Shakeshaft, Newcomb, and Grogan (2017) revealed, "Women superintendents, more than men, are limited by family circumstance" (p. 1). Today, "men are

four times more likely than women to serve in the most powerful position in education” (Robinson et al., 2017) even though women are credentialed and prepared to serve in the post. Do women superintendents of the 21<sup>st</sup> century adhere to the socially constructed norms and expectations?

Some may suggest that the role of the superintendent might be more challenging for women due to additional responsibilities women have traditionally held (childcare, housekeeping, etc.). Typically, society has dictated women’s roles at home and work, and in many instances, such societal influences pressure women to relinquish their own aspirations to focus on the roles they are expected to fulfill (Loder, 2005). As a result, some women have maintained the traditional roles of wife, mother, homemaker, and caregiver. Assuming these multiple roles has challenged some women as they pursue careers and *assume* leadership positions in organizations. Thus, the superintendency, a role traditionally held by men, often times eludes qualified women. As previously noted, societal norms and expectations have historically played a major role in women’s ability to *achieve* work-life balance (Dufur et al., 2010; Marcinkus et al., 2007).

Research has shown that women generally take the primary responsibility for childcare, and in situations of conflict, adjust their working lives to accommodate family pressures (Falkenberg & Monachello, 1990; Ramu, 1989). According to Derrington and Sharratt (2009), balancing the work demands of a superintendent and the home expectations of a spouse and family is difficult, if not impossible, for many women. Additionally, while marriage is perceived as a barrier for women, it is not for aspiring men (Pigford & Tonnesen, 1993).

Loder (2005) found that career women are expected to maintain all domestic

responsibilities including childcare and housekeeping in addition to their work as leaders. Consequently, women leaders have more stress (Brunner & Grogan, 2007) and less spousal support than men (Young & McCleod, 2001). In an earlier seminal study, Brunner (1998) posited that female administrators must contend with both role and gender-related expectations that often times result in significant emotional costs. Loder (2005) asserted that “women unsuccessful in offsetting increasing responsibilities in the workplace with decreased obligations on the home front” (p. 743) often faced work-life conflict and may be a contributing factor for not pursuing the role or for those in the role to exit the position.

Skrobareck and Stark (2002) noted, women haven’t been socialized to aspire to administrative positions or prepare for them. School systems are structured in ways that tend to exclude women from high level jobs; and male dominance in society overall results in covert and overt forms of sex discrimination that limits women to subordinate positions both publicly and privately (p. 8).

Many women see balancing work and life as an impossible task and end up choosing between the two. Consequently leaving a disproportionately low number of women represented in educational leadership roles such as the superintendency (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Gordon & Galloway, 2008; Young & McCleod, 2001).

The underlying assumption that women and men differ in dealing with the responsibilities of the job speaks to not only how women perceive themselves and their work, but also on how they are perceived. Such societal influences and expectations have affected many women in educational leadership, but understanding how women who occupy a position of power may interpret the societal norms and expectations may help to reveal how they

create a sense of balance. I now turn to the existing literature on the work-life experiences of women superintendents.

### **Women Superintendents' Work-life Experiences**

According to Brunner (1998), women in the superintendency must balance two sets of expectations: role-related and gender-related expectations. Furthermore, Patricia Smuck noted in Brunner's *Sacred Dreams* (1999),

Schools are gender-bound institutions. Women do not experience the same reality as men superintendents. Even if a female and a male behaved identically, those behaviors would not be received in the same way. Gender is the mediate force in superintendents' selection, effectiveness and retention. Thus we need to understand women's experience; what has been written about men superintendents does not necessarily apply to women. (p. xi)

According to Tallerico and Burstyn (1996), “the dilemma of balancing career and family can be viewed as part of a much broader sociopolitical framework for understanding culturally defined roles” (p. 645). In other words, factors such as multilayered responsibilities of rural women superintendents that consumes enormous amount of time essentially leaves no time for anything else. Findings are mixed when it comes to the work-life experiences of women in educational leadership. For example, several researchers have found that some women in educational leadership struggle to balance both career and family (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Burns, 2009; Loder, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1989), while other researchers have indicated that in spite of the challenges associated with balancing work and personal responsibilities, some female superintendents successfully manage both professional and personal realms (Olesniewicz, 2012; Reecks-Rodgers, 2013). These inconsistencies in results require

additional inquiry into the topic. I now turn to the existing literature on the challenges women in educational leadership experience.

### **Challenges Experienced by Women in Educational Leadership**

Do men and women experience similar challenges in educational leadership? And, if so, do they experience those challenges similarly? Research suggests while the challenges might be similar, gender does make a difference in not only ascending to the position of superintendent, but also in maintaining the position (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008; Sperandio & Devdas, 2015). Skrobarech & Stark (2002) assert that women have not been socialized to aspire to administrative positions of power and to prepare for those positions. Consequently, the superintendency has been viewed as a White-male position of power and has been historically dominated by White men despite the large number of women who have served and continue to serve as teachers and school administrators (Skrla, 1999; Grogan, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1989). Although women are more prepared for the position, men continue to occupy the position at alarming rates (Blount, 1998; Burke et al., 2015; Grogan & Brunner, 2007). Contrary to Skrobarech and Stark's (2002) assertion, Brunner and Kim's (2010) study found that women's agency and self-efficacy challenged such socialization and noted that women pursued preparation programs that aligned with the pursuit of the superintendency. According to Brunner and Kim (2010),

women who aspire to and who are seated in the superintendency meet and even exceed preparation requirements and expectations. Further, while experiential preparedness for women may look different from that gained by men, the variation and concentration on curriculum and instruction during career path development may render women better prepared than men. (p. 276)

Despite their more than adequate preparation and efficacious abilities, women in educational leadership must contend with internal and external barriers. For example, stereotypes regarding gender roles and women's ability to lead shape the perceptions that women make poor managers (Glass et al., 2000), lack the experience of fiscal, personnel, and facilities management (Handy-Collins, 2008), and promote negative stereotypes, discrimination and gender bias that men are better equipped and more skilled for the position (Banuelos, 2008). Such gender stereotypes view men in leadership as being more competent, independent, and objective than women, while women are viewed as competent in instructional leadership, dependent, and less logical than men (Skrla, 2000; Tallerico, 2000).

Another challenge experienced by women in the educational leadership has been found in studies that have suggested that gender makes a difference in the career paths of men and women with regard to the superintendency. Historically, men typically assumed the position earlier than women (Blount, 1998; Grogan & Brunner, 2007); and at a younger age (Glass et al., 2000). As Brunner and Kim (2010) refutes Glass' (2000) claim which suggested that women are not gaining the "normal" experiential knowledge that leads to the superintendency. The detailed assumptions of this statement include the notions that (a) there is normal experiential knowledge/preparedness that lead(s) to the superintendency, (b) that the "normal" path creates higher quality superintendents because they have accumulated higher quality experiential knowledge, and (c) the phrase normal positions should be connected to positions filled by men since, when compared historically to other groups, they have moved most easily into the superintendency—an underlying assumption. (p. 285)

While women tend to be spent more time in the classroom and navigate their way up the educational leadership ladder by gaining more experience in curriculum and instruction, men advance to principal and ultimately superintendent with fewer years in the classroom. This trend continues and is confirmed in the American Association of School Superintendents' (AASA) Mid-Decade Update (2016) which stated when referring to the role as superintendent, "The mean and median age is higher for female superintendents than for their male counterparts. Female superintendents began their position at a later age than their male counterparts" (p. 2). At an alarming rate, men significantly outnumber women in the superintendency and assume the superintendency at a younger age.

A factor noted in the research points to the gendered role of women – that some women tend to shoulder domestic responsibilities and take care of others while neglecting themselves (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Litmanovitz, 2010). It is noted that positions of leadership have required women to make difficult choices to balance family and personal obligations (Gordon & Galloway, 2008). Nonetheless, some women struggle to ensure that their families do not suffer as a result of their own career advancement (Shakeshaft, 1989).

While the literature identifies the concern about work-family balance, it does not offer contextualized understandings of how women perceived their identity within particular locales. Studies that have addressed work-family balance/conflict in the superintendency offer generalities (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Gilmour & Kinsella, 2008) while others note that work-life balance affects women in the superintendency. The number of women who forgo family to meet professional job needs or limit their career opportunities to satisfy personal and family needs indicate that many women still face tough choices when it comes to career, marriage, and motherhood.

Empirical studies have identified work-life balance issues as one of the primary reasons why many promising administrators do not aspire to the superintendency (O'Connell, Brown, Guptil, Stosberg & O'Connell, 2001; Volp & Rogers, 2004). For some women, when the expectations of the role of superintendent conflict with gender-specific expectations, the strategy is to remove barriers— even at great emotional cost (Brunner, 1998).

Positions of leadership have an enormous workload obligation, which tends to be more demanding for many women, who still carry the responsibilities at home—such as housework and childrearing (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Women administrators perceived personal anxieties about being both a wife/mother and career woman as the number one obstacle commonly encountered by them (McGee, 2010). Assuming these multiple roles of wife, mother, homemaker, and caregiver, while navigating professional obstacles has challenged and continues to challenge some women as they pursue careers and assume leadership roles in organizations (Loder, 2005). Society has dictated women's roles at home and work, and in many instances, societal influences pressure women to relinquish their own aspirations to focus on the roles they are expected to fulfill (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Burns, 2009; Grogan, 1996; Loder, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1987). Research has shown that women generally take the primary responsibility for childcare, and in situations of conflict, adjust their working lives to accommodate family pressures (Falkenberg & Monachello, 1990; Ramu, 1989). While marriage is perceived as a barrier for some women, it is typically not for aspiring men (Pigford & Tonnesen, 1993). Many women see balancing work and life as an impossible task and end up choosing between the two. Consequently, women leaders have more stress and less spousal support than men (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Young & McCleod, 2001). Such deterrents contribute to the disproportionately low number of women represented in

educational leadership roles such as the superintendency (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Gordon & Galloway, 2008; Young & McCleod, 2001). Additionally, the challenges of the position often overextend many superintendents and have caused tremendous stress which has resulted in superintendents' decision to retire (Goldstein, 1992). While the tenets of the position share commonalities with different types and size districts, rural districts possess unique issues not typically experienced in urban and suburban districts. The superintendency, a role that has gradually become marginally occupied by women, remains new territory to explore, navigate, and master. While women generally serve as superintendents in rural or urban districts (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Tillman & Cochran, 2000), unique challenges are found in rural districts. A discussion of these unique issues follows.

### **Characteristics and Challenges of Rural Public School Districts**

NCES defines rural districts more according to proximity to an urbanized area and less with regard to population size and density. Typically, rural school districts are those districts located in a rural territory outside an urbanized area with a metro-centric code of 7 or 8 or an urban-centric code of 41, 42, 43 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Districts assigned an urban-centric code of 41 were categorized as rural *fringe* districts. Rural *fringe* districts are those districts, which according to NCES are located “less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.” Rural districts, assigned an urban-centric code of 42, were classified as *distant*. *Distant* rural districts are “5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.” Rural *remote* districts are assigned an urban-centric code of 43 and are located “more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an

urban cluster.” For the purposes of this study, no distinction was made based on the sub classification of rural districts. Rural districts themselves tend to be small in comparison to urban education systems; however, together rural schools and the districts that administer them comprise a large part of the American educational system (Johnson, Mitchel & Rotherham, 2014). As such, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015) of the U.S. Department of Education, in 2011-2012 of the 98,328 public schools in the United States, “one-third of traditional public schools” (34 percent) were in rural areas (p. 1). Additionally, rural districts represented more than half of the public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States during this period; however, women managed only 130 of the 658 rural public school districts, equating to approximately 20% (NCES, 2015).

Rural public school districts have a number of unique characteristics and challenges that shape the experiences of their superintendents. Besides geographic location, size, and low numbers in terms of population and student enrollment, many rural school districts lack adequate resources. Thus, several receive assistance from the National Education Association (NEA). According to the National Education Association (NEA), the organization “actively supports the development of programs that recognize and deal with the particular needs of students, educators, school employees and communities in the nation’s vast rural areas” (National Education Association, Rural Schools, para. 1). Additionally, many rural school districts are the “largest single employer in the area” and provide the communities with “social, recreational, and cultural foundations” (NEA, Rural Schools Do More With Less section, para. 1). In such small communities, employees within these microsystems assume multiple roles. Educational leaders in rural districts often serve dual roles as superintendents and principals (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008). Additionally, rural school districts

are typically underfunded, provide lower salary and benefits, lack professional development opportunities, and require multiple work roles (National Education Association, 2015).

Lamkin (2006) found that isolation and community resistance to change also contributed to the unique issues of the rural setting. As a result of these issues, rural superintendents face challenges not typically associated with larger urban and suburban districts.

According to Lamkin (2006), “the simple reality for rural school districts at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that it is difficult to attract, reward, and retain school leaders” (p. 17).

Furthermore “rural school districts and their superintendents face specific obstacles that render service in such districts and roles less attractive than elsewhere” (Lamkin, 2006, p. 17).

Prior studies have documented several challenges such as state and federal mandates imposed on districts, high stakes testing and accountability, school law, political obstacles, and district or board policies and relations as issues with which superintendents have to contend (Hawk & Martin, 2011; Hoff & Mitchell, 2008).

Lamkin’s (2006) recent study which examined the experiences of novice and seasoned superintendents from three states (New York,

Pennsylvania, and Tennessee) highlighted unique obstacles rural superintendents contend with that compound the situation and add to the common issues also typical in urban and

suburban districts. Lamkin (2006) categorized the challenges specific to rural school districts as 1) challenges related “the lack of adequate training for specific tasks and skills, and 2)

challenges related specifically to the rural environment, lack of acculturation to the setting, and expectations of the rural superintendent” (p. 17).

Rural school superintendents encounter a myriad of challenges daily ranging from assuming multiple responsibilities, isolation, long work hours, and lack of resources — all of which contribute to fatigue and stress (Tallerico & Burstyn, 1996). “Now, as in the past, the challenges facing superintendents differ in various

kinds of communities” (Tyack & Hansot, 1982, p. 256). Rural public school districts are unique and therefore, not surprisingly, so are the challenges that arise as a result of the uniqueness of the rural district.

Howley and Pendarvis’ (2002) article, “Recruiting and Retaining Rural School Administrators” provided reasons for the nationwide problem of recruiting and retaining school administrators in the face of potential exodus due to many administrators approaching retirement age. The challenges of rural districts identified in this article included: the pressures of the job that affect both time and energy of administrators as well as the overwhelming stress that accompanies the increased demands for special programs, collaborative decision-making, and accountability also contribute to this national issue. Conflicts with school boards and constituencies, increased diversity within the community, and the demands of a more complex position that offers a low salary further compounds the professional pressures and accompanying stress rural superintendents experience. The authors noted that aspirants often times found these factors unappealing thus, resulting in a lack of aspiration to administrative roles such as the superintendency within rural communities (p. 2). While Howley and Pendarvis (2002) offered recommendations to address the need for recruitment and retention of rural school administrators, the recommendations offered may help to curtail the symptoms of the problem; however, the core issues (demands of the job and inadequate resources to effectively manage the school system) remain unanswered.

Particularly unique to the rural superintendents is professional isolation. Professional isolation adds another layer of stress to an already complex and demanding job. Lamkin’s

(2006) recent study echoed an earlier study by Tallerico and Burstyn (1996) which noted that professional isolation could contribute to rural superintendents' decision to leave the post.

Societal influences and expectations have affected many women in educational leadership. These concerns about work and family conflicts may not be, but possibly have been, overshadowed by the more frequently cited pervasive discrimination barriers (Loder, 2005). As many women have carried and continue to carry a greater share of the home and child responsibilities and receive less family or spousal support than their male colleagues, work-life balance strategies are of even more importance.

“Limited opportunities for networking for women superintendents due to positions in education leadership being primarily dominated by men.” Both internal and external barriers have a significant effect on some women's ability to advance in their careers while maintaining the balance they seek. Such factors contribute to the level of stress and conflict between work and life for these educational leaders. External barriers refer to obstacles presented by society that are not controlled by the individual (Tallerico, 2000) that also present challenges. For example, societal norms and expectations have played a significant role in women's ability to achieve work-life balance (Dufur et al., 2010; Marcinkus, Whelan-Berry & Gordon, 2007). Women increasingly serve as leaders of school districts throughout the United States in spite of the challenge of balancing both work and family (Bell & Chase, 1993; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Shakeshaft, 1987). Such work-life issues create stress, and according to the American Association of School Superintendents' mid-decade report, almost 60% of superintendents reported high stress levels (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). As societal expectations and norms influence women's roles at work and at home, organizational structures and culture also play a critical role in how women navigate multiple roles.

Baumgartner and Schneider (2010) purport that the glass ceiling is “as an artificial barrier that prevents qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into high-ranking positions” (p. 560). The glass ceiling has caused some women to experience discrimination and differential treatment simply because of their gender, and acts as an invisible barrier that hampers the advancement of qualified women to leadership positions (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010).

External barriers such as societal stereotypes and organizational structures (Shakeshaft, 1989) coupled with internal barriers present challenges for some women. Internal barriers are personal barriers whereby the individual needs to make changes related to issues such as values and self-efficacy (Shakeshaft, 1987). Gender stereotyping adds to the difficulties women face in the position. Northouse (2010) states,

Gender biases have a detrimental impact on the perception and evaluation of women and they limit the range of leadership behavior deemed appropriate for women. In addition, awareness of these biases can threaten women in the leadership role. The changes needed to overcome these problems within organizations and society can occur only when we are aware of these often subtle and disguised prejudices. (p. 317)

McGee’s (2010) study on self-imposed barriers perceived by women administrators cited several obstacles including: anxiety/family, politics (*good ole boys network*), lack of network, lack of confidence, job relocation, child care issues, employers’ negative gender attitudes, lack of assertiveness, spouse’s career conflict, reluctance to take risks, desire to start a family, lack of peer support, lack of family support, and lack of motivation” (p. 9). McGee (2010) spoke of the importance of women recognizing external barriers that can become self-imposed barriers that may ultimately stifle the career advancement of some women.

According to Chase (1995) women superintendents face gender issues with colleagues and school boards.

While “organizational structures and culture prevent men from being involved in the home” (Sallee, 2012, p. 782), these external barriers present challenges for women in maintaining the responsibilities of the home (Gerstel & Gallagher, 2001; Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). This tension is in part the result of a gender norm, which values men at work (the breadwinner) and women at home (the caregiver). The result is that women, much more than men, must figure out how to balance family responsibilities and make choices about what will be “given up” in order to pursue leadership positions. In addition, studies on women in leadership suggest that women find themselves torn between enormous demands of administration and societal expectations for women in terms of family responsibilities (Grogan, 1999; Hoff, Menard & Tuell, 2006; Johnson, 1997; Tallerico, 2000; Valian, 1999; Young & McLeod 2001).

Noted as having an effect on many female administrators’ decision not to apply for the highest-level position in district leadership, work-life balance has been recognized as one of the primary challenges for many women superintendents (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Litmanovitz, 2011). Conflicting obligations and demands on time cause many women to experience “role overload” (Myers & Ginsberg, 1994). In addition, women struggle to ensure that their career aspirations and advancements do not negatively impact their families (Shakeshaft, 1989). As women continue to have an increased presence in the workforce and in leadership positions, work-life balance has become an area in need of particular attention as women bring valuable skills through transformational leadership to organizations. While women have been traditionally considered inferior to men as leaders (Carroll, 2006; Eagly,

Makhijani & Klonsky, 1992), recent studies have shown a change in this belief (Paustian-Underdahl, Walker & Woehr, 2014; Williams, 2012). Northouse (2015), in particular not only noted a shift in how society looks at gender and leadership but also indicated women's leadership style has become associated with highly effective qualities considered necessary for effective leadership. According to Northouse (2015), the biggest difference between male and female leaders is that women lead in a much more democratic style and are more transformational leaders than men in that female leaders like to reward effectiveness. The shift in the perceptions of women as leaders and their roles both professionally and personally give credence to work-life issues as they relate to women.

A similar shift appears to be taking place in the perceptions of acceptable demands of one's time. While (Sonier, 2012) asserts that Baby Boomers are often considered die-hard workaholics who have long sneered at the idea of work-life balance, there is a noticeable shift in the perceptions of acceptable demands of one's time. As such, it is not surprising that a tension surfaces in the workplace with the addition of Gen X and Y workers who seek improved accommodations to better balance work and life (Favero & Heath, 2012). Nevertheless, Sonier (2012) reports a clear consensus among generations that the data strongly suggests that all generations are now working longer hours and are making significant work-life sacrifices. While several issues, as noted in the literature affect superintendents in general, I now turn to the challenges female superintendents of rural public school districts encounter.

### **Challenges Experienced by Rural Female Superintendents**

According to Lane-Washington and Wilson-Jones (2010), "women must learn how to function in a male-dominated leadership culture" (p. 2). The relative paucity of women

superintendents in rural districts potentially disadvantages women in various ways. For some women, “serving as superintendent comes with a price of family time, privacy, and role change within marriage” (Ramsey, 1998).

Women serving in rural districts are less likely to form professional networks that might aid in thriving in the position (Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Superville, 2017). Allred, Maxwell and Skrla (2017) conducted a qualitative naturalistic case study on seven women superintendents of South Texas rural school districts to reveal the aspirations, motivations, needs, and constraints of female superintendents. The authors also inquired about the challenges and successes of participants in their roles as superintendents of rural districts. Allred et al. (2017) presented how and when participants realized that they had an interest in pursuing the superintendency as well as what motivated them to aspire to the position. The authors also noted “5 out of 7 women in this study did not acknowledge their aspiration to certify for superintendency, and 3 out of 7 did not acknowledge their aspiration to be a superintendent, even though all had obtained the credential, and all were superintendents” (p. 9). While the authors stated that the study would also reveal the challenges and successes of participants, limited information was presented in this regard. The two challenges identified in the study were: lack of personnel needed to manage the district and work-life balance (Allred et al., 2017). According to the authors, the most common challenge for participants was “balancing their lives” (p. 7). “Even though participants all stated they had excellent support from their husbands and families, most mentioned an effort to balance the job and family” (p. 7). The findings revealed that five of the seven participants of the study indicated that maintaining work-life balance was a struggle and something they worked toward. One of the two participants who indicated that she was able to achieve work-life balance expressed

that the superintendency helped to *improve* her “family and support system” (p. 7). The other claimed that balance is very important and that she “purposefully maintains it even though it’s a challenge” (p 7). Although these two challenges were identified as key concerns for rural superintendents, the authors did not provide strategies for addressing these strategies.

### **Social Identity and Women Superintendents**

Palladino, Haar, and Perry (2007) noted that “the landscape of the rural superintendency is in the midst of a leadership turnover as a significant number of its current administrators reach retirement age” (p. 40). In this narrative case study of five novice rural female superintendents which sought to help determine how efficacy influences sustainability, Palladino et al. (2007) found that rural female superintendents relied on previous successful relationships and their people skills to develop self-efficacy as they aspired to and sustained success within the position (p. 47). While identity, and in particular social identity, was not examined in this study participant “Superintendent Angie” revealed an interesting perspective of how others perceived her and the meaning of that social identity when she stated,

In order for me to relate with them, they need to know what I am all about, what I stand for and believe in. I let ‘em know who I am, and I take advantage of the nurturing role they think I, a woman, should have. I do nurture them and build upon that relationship to address their concerns and move the district along.

The intersection of gender, leadership, and identity may help to inform how women superintendents of rural districts manage their multiple roles as they strive to achieve work-life balance. A recent survey by the Society of Human Resource Management found that “among all generations, 89% of American workers say work-life balance is now a problem” (p. 20). An examination of this literature based on the research questions and the purpose of

this study leads me to further examine work-life balance strategies.

### **Work-Life Balance Strategies**

Although some may be dismayed to learn that women must navigate gender bias and discrimination, maneuvering the challenges is a harsh reality for many women in the leadership, and in particular the superintendency (Brunner, 2000). With the noted increase of women in the workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014) and in leadership roles, work-life balance has become even more critical to the key objectives of organizational and executive teams (Bird, 2006). Devising ways of addressing the multitude of obligations and responsibilities that many women have in their multiple roles, strategies to counter conflict between professional and personal roles are needed. Northouse (2010) notes that:

The culture of many organizations is changing; gendered work assumptions such as the male model of work, the notion of uninterrupted full-time careers, and the separation of work and family are being challenged. In addition, many organizations are valuing flexible workers and diversity in their top echelons. These organizations can augment women's career development by involving them in career development programs and formal networks, and offering work-life support. In addition, assigning more women to high-visibility positions and developing effective and supportive mentoring relationships for women are key strategies for reducing the leadership gap. (p. 314)

Women who have support systems in place at work and at home have found success in balancing work and family life (Reilly & Bauer, 2015). While personal and professional responsibilities present challenges for many female educational leaders, family and spousal support is essential to managing family care responsibilities (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010;

Myers & Ginsberg, 1994). Research, however, has shown that many women lack such support systems at home (Young & McLeod, 2001) even though family and spousal support has proven essential to managing family care responsibilities. At work, support can be a factor in a woman's decision to aspire toward educational leadership positions and can be critical to maintaining balance in work and life (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Young & McLeod, 2001). Other noted work-life balance strategies include aligning with role models, securing mentors, and creating networks which may all provide the needed support. Baumgartner and Schneider (2010) recommended that women superintendents "who struggle with how to be both a devoted employee and family member should consider nontraditional forms of managing their family life by using some of the economic benefits their job provides" (p. 570).

For women, the opportunity to serve as superintendent of school generally presents some risk or conflict. Eckman (2004) reported that females delayed their careers due to family responsibilities which confirmed McCreight's (1999) earlier study that women entered the superintendency later in life, compared to men, due to marriage and family responsibilities. McGee (2010) noted "the more responsibility of the position, the less likelihood of children being in the home" (p. 11). Approximately 36% of women enter the superintendency after the age of forty-six compared to 14% of men (McCreight, 1999). The majority of administrators who had achieved a given rank never had children, had grown children who were not living at home, or have entered the administrative ranks after they had raised their children. A historical review of the literature has revealed that work-life balance is an overarching issue that presents significant challenges for some women assuming and subsisting in leadership positions.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for which this study will be examined is based on a social psychological concept of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), a successor of identity theory (Stryker, 1980), which lies within the larger paradigm of sociology called *structural symbolic interactionism*. *Structural symbolic interactionism*, initially conceptualized by Mead (1934) and the term later coined by Blumer (1969) aimed to explicate how social structures affect an individual's self (identity) and how that identity in turn affects social behaviors (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identity theory focuses on two key ways in which identity is influenced: 1) external social structure and 2) internal structure of self. Tajfel (1972) defined social identity as “the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (p. 292). Tajfel and Turner (1979), expanded this concept of identity and viewed identity through the lens of group membership referred to as self-categorization. While identity theory regards identity primarily in terms of the meaning an individual gives to his or her own concept of self based on social structures, social identity theory promotes the concept of how an individual gives meaning to his or her own self-concept based upon interactions with others within social structures (groups/categories) and then through a process of reflexivity, internalizes those interactions for salience (activating an identity in a situation to the roles and expectations of the group) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social identity theory makes key assumptions. First, individuals have multiple identities that are based on social categories/structures. Those identities according to Stryker and Burke (2000) are “parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (p. 284).

Within social contexts, individuals exact the requisite behavior based on their cognitive assessment of their role within the social structure. Second, social identity theory is concerned with the meanings of membership in relation to *who an individual is* as opposed to *what an individual does* as is the focus of identity theory. Therefore, the cognitive outcome rather than the behavior is emphasized. Multiple cognitive outcomes such as ethnocentrism (Grant & Brown, 1995) and group cohesiveness (Hogg, 1987) underscore this concept of group. Ethnocentrism (Grant & Brown, 1995) occurs when an individual views himself or herself as similar to others in the ingroup and different from those in the outgroup. Group cohesion occurs when the members of the group (in-group) are positively valued, which increases depersonalization (seeing self as similar to others in the group) and mutual attraction between members (intragroup), and ultimately enhances self-esteem of the members as group members (efficacy) (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1987).

Fundamental to the social identity theory is how one categorizes one's own identity based on reciprocal relationships and interactions between the individual and society. For example, if an individual is perceived as creative, then that person will demonstrate efficacy and call upon the inner creative skills to meet the needs of the role within that social context.

Superintendents are typically engaged in various social groups including the school board, PTSO, professional organizations, personnel, family, friends, and community. The current research does not take a full account of the effects of social group membership and the salience of women superintendents as this study attempted to do through the lens of the social identity theory. The theoretical lens for this study was selected on the assumption that women superintendents of rural public school districts have different experiences that derive from social norms and expectations that have historically influenced gender roles. The social

identity theory may help to ascertain women superintendents' social identities and the meaning of their identities within multiple roles as a means of negotiating both the personal and professional responsibilities.

## **Conclusion**

While most research suggests that many women in leadership have struggled with juggling their multiple roles while serving in key leadership positions, there are limited studies that indicate that some women superintendents are achieving a satisfactory work-life balance (Olesniewicz, 2012; Reecks-Rodgers, 2013). In a changing society with time-consuming and demanding responsibilities both at home and work, the effective management of multiple responsibilities at work, at home, and in other aspects of life presents a challenge for career-driven women but can be countered with strategies such as family and work support systems. According to McGee (2010), the more women are aware of the societal expectations that could become self-imposed barriers, the better able they are in addressing such issues. Both internal and external barriers which seem to persist continuously, lead to higher stress levels and work-life conflict (Loder, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1987; Young & McLeod, 2001) causing many women to perceive balancing work and life outside of work as an impossible task (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). Consequently, many relinquish professional aspirations to maintain home life (Heath, 2012). The decision to maintain home responsibilities and abandon leadership roles in education thus contributes to a disproportionately low number of women in educational leadership positions (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010). Contrastingly, some women sacrifice having a family for professional aspirations. Work-life balance is therefore an issue that is important to both organizations and individuals. The success of an organization depends in part on higher productivity of its

employees (Pitt-Catsouphes, et al., 2006). Employees with improved work-life balance will contribute more meaningfully towards organizational growth and success (Naithani, 2010). Work-life balance is a critical piece of the puzzle for women in educational leadership in not only accessing the superintendency but also maintaining the position while attending to personal responsibilities outside work.

Currently, there is limited research related to the female superintendent governing rural public school districts and how she navigates the demands of her multiple roles. While existing research present findings of the shared issues of work-life balance for female superintendents hailing from various locales and size districts, a closer examination of the barriers encountered in rural public school districts will help to broaden the existing scholarship. This research study served to refine our understanding of the work-life issues unique to women superintendents in rural public school districts and the strategies these women utilized to navigate their multiple roles within various social categories. Chapter 3 presents the research design with a discussion on the rationale for the method and design for achieving the purpose of this study.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Chapter 1 presented an overview of this research study, the purpose of the study, the research questions that guided the study, the significance of the study, and the delimitations and limitations of the study. The review of the literature, presented in Chapter 2, discussed the work-life issues women in educational leadership positions experienced in general and the strategies these leaders employed to address such challenges. Considering the purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of work-life experiences of women superintendents in rural public school districts in the southeastern US through the lens of the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Chapter 3 describes the methodology to achieve this purpose. This chapter begins with a description of the assumptions and rationale for the research design and methods for this study. This chapter then gives an overview of the participant selection process, explains the procedures for data collection and analysis, and discusses my role as the researcher in this study. In addition, Chapter 3 presents a description of the methods of verification used to ensure trustworthiness of the data collected. Chapter 3 then concludes with a summary of the methods used for this study.

Although a limited number of studies have focused on women superintendents and work-life balance strategies, the prevailing themes of these studies have reflected the experiences of women hailing from districts of varying types and sizes (Loder, 2005; McGee, 2010; Tallerico, 2000; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). This is problematic because rural districts have unique characteristics, challenges, and issues that may present peculiar work-life issues within that particular environment. While researchers have indicated that “failure to achieve balance can lead to a variety of serious negative consequences for both individuals and organizations” (Hobson, et al., 2001, p. 38) focused examinations of how women

superintendents of rural public school districts consider their social identity as they navigate their multiple roles is lacking in the literature related to work-life balance.

To answer the call of Olesniewicz (2012) and Reeck-Rodgers (2013), I have identified this gap in the literature and have found that although much research has focused on the challenges women face in ascension to educational leadership positions, as well as the professional and personal issues that arise to challenge one's work-life balance, there remains a dearth of literature on how women superintendents of rural public school districts navigate work and family/life responsibilities within their multiple roles. Accordingly, to better understand the issues specific to women superintendents of rural districts and the strategies some women utilize to balance their professional and personal lives, this qualitative study will address the work-life experiences of women superintendents in rural public school districts through the lens of the social identity theory. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the perceived work-life issues of women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States?
2. What strategies do women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States employ to manage both professional and personal responsibilities?

### **Assumptions and Rationale for Using Qualitative Method**

Fundamental to this study was the examination the lived experiences of women superintendents of rural public school districts. Researchers suggest that the best way to extract fuller meaning and insight from the experiences of those in this study is to use qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Furthermore,

qualitative design enabled me to “explain the meaning of a social phenomenon with little disruption to the natural setting as possible” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Therefore, for this study, I employed a descriptive qualitative design to ascertain how women superintendents internalize their multiple roles and make sense of their work/life experiences.

A key assumption of the qualitative method is that it primarily utilizes inductive reasoning to generate theory (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009). The inductive process requires the researcher to build abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from details (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 1994). Another assumption for qualitative research design is that reality is socially constructed. Participants construct their own reality through their interaction with their social environment. This ontological position posits that there are multiple realities or interpretations. This is of particular importance to this study because while participants worked in similar district structures, they interpreted their experiences differently and therefore offered a broader understanding of the issues encountered in rural districts and strategies to address those perceived issues. Additionally, this insider’s (participant’s) perspective, referred to as emic, is key to qualitative studies and was thus the driving force for this study as such insider perspective helped to mold my (researcher/outsider) viewpoint, referred to as etic, in analyzing data and reporting findings (Merriam, 2009). I selected the descriptive qualitative research design for this study primarily because it emphasizes the participants’ perspectives which was a central component to this study and helped to explore and explain the issues and strategies of women superintendents within the rural setting.

The epistemological position of this qualitative approach is that “researchers do not ‘find’ knowledge, they construct it” (Merriam, 2009, p. 9). The process of data analysis is

thus interpretive and findings are typically “richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). As such, central to generating findings was my ability to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of participants. My role in helping to reveal knowledge and themes as they emerged throughout the research process was dependent on utilizing the social identity theory, to provide the “concepts, constructs, and propositions that are part and parcel of a theory” (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. 193). This descriptive qualitative study was designed to showcase how participants constructed reality in interaction with their social worlds, also referred to as constructivism. I was interested in understanding the meaning and experiences of women superintendents in managing their multiple roles to achieve work-life balance.

As Merriam (2009) notes, in qualitative research, the investigator was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; therefore, data were mediated through me, the investigator, who is considered an instrument. As the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, I interviewed women who were actively serving as superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern United States. Additionally, I analyzed documents such as job descriptions and work-life policies. The combination of interviews and documents support a descriptive qualitative design and deems this approach to be the most appropriate design based on my research questions. A final key assumption is that qualitative research findings may be “generalized to theoretical propositions although not to populations or universes” (Yin, 2009, p. 15). Such qualitative findings can be generalized to specific populations under similar circumstances, and these types of studies are therefore of value.

### **Research Design: Qualitative Descriptive Study**

Of the array of qualitative research designs available, the descriptive qualitative design was most suitable for this study based on two key factors: 1) the purpose of this study and 2)

the research questions which guided the study. Furthermore, the purpose of the descriptive design is “to explore the status of some phenomenon and to describe what exists with respect to the individual, group, or condition” (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017, p. 161). Interviews and documents were the most suitable means of data collection because the researcher was interested gaining a better understanding of the experiences of women superintendents in rural settings and how these women “engage in and make meaning of their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 23) with regard to work-life balance.

Therefore, for this descriptive study, I employed open-ended interviews with volunteer participants. As Patton (2002) suggests, “open-ended questions and probes yield in-depth responses about people’s experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings and knowledge” (p. 4). A primary advantage of open-ended interviews is that they are non-standardized, free-flowing interviews that are guided by the cues from the interviewees in order to draw from the perspectives and understandings of participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 1980, 2002). As Creswell (1994) suggests, “data will be analyzed simultaneously with data collection, data interpretation, and narrative reporting writing” (p. 153). I utilized a protocol consisting of five open-ended questions during the one-on-one open-ended interviews. During initial interviews, I asked probing questions based on participants’ responses in order to gain additional insight related to the purpose of the study. Concurrent analysis created follow-up questions.

An interview as defined by DeMarrais & Lapan (2004), is “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (p. 55). Through purposeful sampling of participants, I conducted interviews in order to provide a “holistic description and explanation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 43) into the barriers as

perceived by superintendents, and more importantly, the strategies they employed as they managed professional and personal demands. Dexter (1970) refers to these interviews as “conversations with a purpose” (p. 136). Participants responded to an email requesting demographic information and scheduled a follow-up interview to procure answers to additional questions. In addition to conducting interviews, I analyzed documents. The research study design depicted in Figure 1 illustrates the organization of this study.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

Research for this qualitative study was conducted in rural public school districts located in the southeastern region of the United States, as this geographic region was the focus of this study. According to NCES (2015), the southern region of the United States has the highest percentage of school districts throughout the US. Additionally, rural districts represent more than half of the public school districts in the United States (NCES, 2015). As noted by Merriam (2009), purposeful sampling “directly reflects the purpose of the study and guides in the identification of information-rich cases” (p. 78). Therefore, I purposefully selected Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee from which to draw my sample because these three states had the highest percentage of women superintendents who manage rural public school districts in the southeastern US. As interviews are helpful for collecting valuable data in most qualitative studies, I conducted eight interviews which was beyond the point of data redundancy or theoretical saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Redundancy or saturation is reached when collecting additional data does not yield any new insight. In support of Corbin and Strauss (2008), theoretical saturation for this study was achieved at the sixth interview. No effort was made to evenly distribute the participants

by states because the rural setting, not the state representation, was relevant to the context of this study.

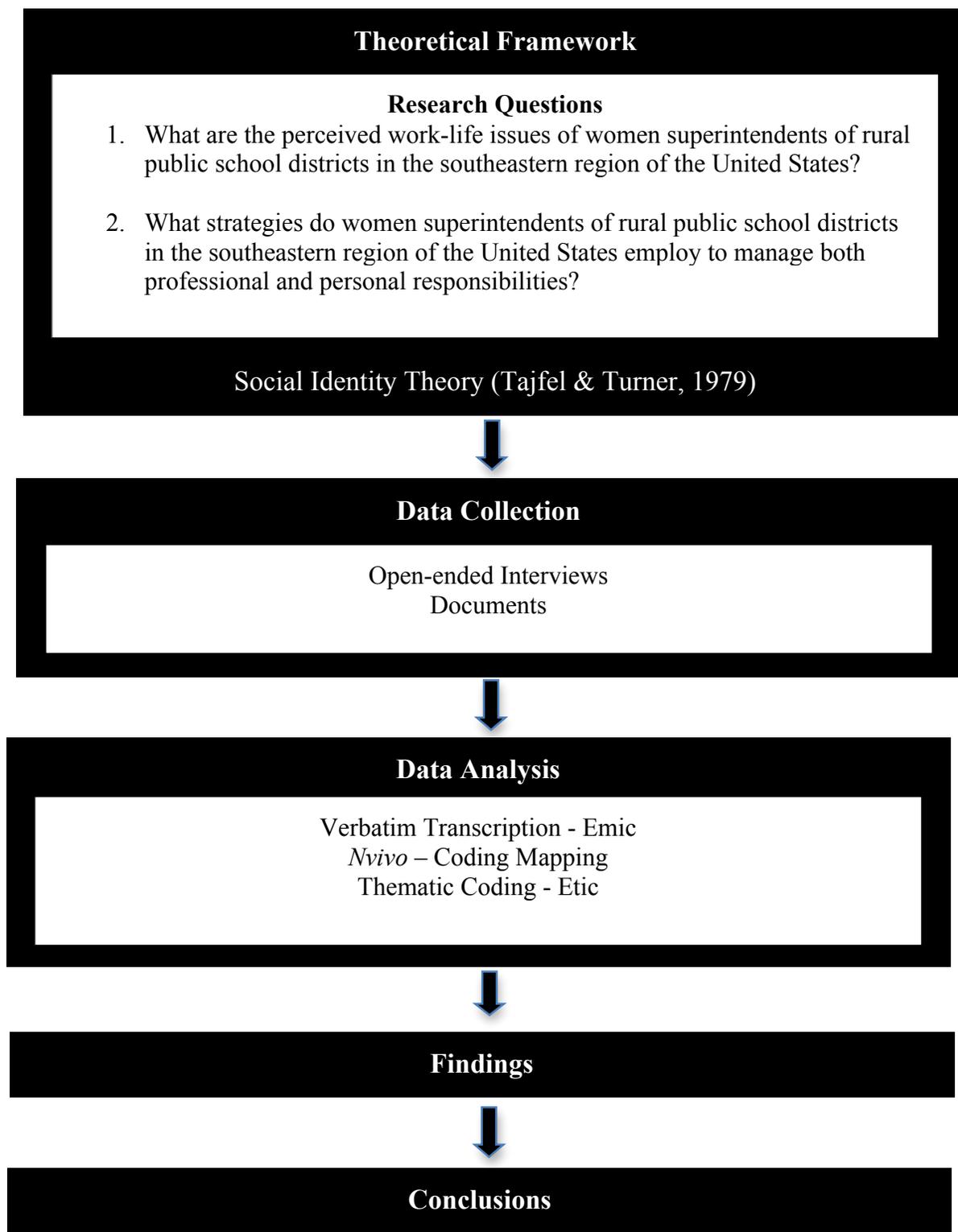


Figure 1: Visual Representation of Design of Study

To this end, I created a database of public school districts and superintendents located in the southeastern region of the United States as available online through NCES and the official State Department of Education websites for the respective states. Based on NCES designation of rural districts, I identified those districts that were 1) located at least five miles outside an urbanized area or not located within an urban cluster or 2) have been assigned urban-centric code of 41, 42, or 43 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Then, based upon the data available on each of the three states' Department of Education websites, I created a spreadsheet based on the female superintendents who directed rural public school districts. This process generated a list of 59 women superintendents of rural public school districts (Georgia-28, South Carolina-14, and Tennessee-17).

Using the information contained in the spreadsheet, I sent all prospective participants an email containing a New Subject Recruitment Letter (Appendix A) and an Informed Consent Form (Appendix B). The New Subject Recruitment Letter formally invited prospective volunteers to be a part of the study as well as provided an overview of the study. The Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) outlined assurances that participants' information would remain confidential and secure. By completing and signing the informed consent form, participants agreed to participate in the study. Participants then returned the signed informed consent form to me via email. Upon receipt of signed Informed Consent Forms from volunteer participants, I time stamped the form and recorded the date of receipt, as well as other pertinent information such as name of district, county, and the name of the superintendent on my spreadsheet. After a two-week period, I did not receive the desired ten consent forms and so I sent a second recruitment email. Two weeks after the second recruitment email, I personally called superintendents to elicit their participation. I received

informed consent forms from each participant and returned a signed official consent form to each participant.

### **Data Collection**

The two primary means of data collection this study utilized include: individual open-ended interviews consisting of five open-ended questions and documents such as job descriptions and work-life policy excerpts. Qualitative research relies on several sources of data (Creswell, 2002; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003). As Merriam and Tisdell (2015) note, humans are the best instruments for data collection and analysis as data collection requires one to be prudent with information gathered and keen to how that data is interpreted. As such, I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis of this qualitative study. Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Tennessee – Knoxville, the study commenced. In addition, prior to data collection, I conducted a pilot study of the interview protocol.

#### **Interviews.**

An interview is a useful tool for qualitative researchers to engage in focused conversations with participants regarding a particular topic of research (DeMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Merriam, 2009). While engaging in open-ended interviews (Patton, 2002) lasting approximately 60-90 minutes with each participant, I suspended personal opinions, experiences, and feelings. I addressed possible biases through bracketing techniques. A discussion of bracketing procedures will be further discussed in this chapter. The open-ended interview protocol (Appendix C) consisted of a five open-ended questions in order to allow participants to facilitate a “free-flowing” interview (Patton, 2002). The use of open-ended questions and probes helped to “yield in-depth responses about people’s experiences,

perceptions, opinions, feelings and knowledge” (Patton, 2002, p. 4). Merriam (2009) agrees that such open-ended questions enables the researcher to listen and be receptive to what participants have to share without imposing personal views or possibly even influencing the direction of the inquiry. Table 1 reflects the research questions in relation to the interview questions.

Open-ended interview questions allowed “interviews to be guided by cues from the interviewees in order to draw from the perspectives and understandings of participants” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Patton, 1980, 2002). Based on the cues of the interviewees, I probed to generate opportunities for “issues that needed to be explored” (Merriam, 2009, p. 89). A follow-up interview was conducted to clarify information. At a mutually convenient time, I

Table 1

*Research Questions in Relation to Interview Questions*

Research Question	Interview Questions
1. What are the perceived work-life issues of women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States?	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
2. What strategies do women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States employ to manage both professional and personal responsibilities?	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

conducted interviews via telephone. I engaged volunteer participants in individually scheduled open-ended interviews to address the two guiding research questions.

Both Patton (2002) and Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, and Sabshin (1981) note that incorporating varied question types is valuable in eliciting information. Interview questions for this study were based on several of Patton's (2002) six types of questions including: experience and behavior questions, opinion and value questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and background/demographic questions. Of particular interest to this study were the experiences, opinions, and behavior of participants. Therefore, experience and behavior type questions which primarily "get at the things a person does or did, his or her behaviors, actions, and activities" (p. 96) as well as opinion and value questions which delve into what participants think about something in particular and their personal opinions and beliefs about a given topic were utilized. The theoretical framework for which this study was couched helped to guide the formulation of interview questions based on Patton's (2002) recommendations for good interview questions. Salient to this study was the collection of data via a practical means of viewing an activity or phenomenon through the eyes of the participant. Table 2 illustrates the various question types in relation to the interview questions.

Prior to each interview, I emailed each participant to confirm the logistics (time, telephone or video conference) of the interview. Immediately before commencing with the interview, I discussed the parameters of the study, verified that the signed informed consent form had been received, and reassured the participant that her identify will remain confidential and will not be revealed as pseudonyms will be used. With the consent of each participant, I digitally recorded the interview. All participant information has remained

confidential and pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of each participant and district. During the interview, I took notes on both salient verbal and nonverbal communication. Following the interview, digital audio recordings (saved on a password protected computer), were transcribed. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on a password protected computer system and were available only to the researcher. All recordings will be destroyed after five years. When the results of the research are published or discussed at conferences, no information will be included that would reveal the identity of participants or school districts. Participants and the school district will continue to be protected through the use of pseudonyms. All data related to this study will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

Table 2

*Interview Questions in Relation to Types of Interview Questions*

<b>Type of Interview Questions</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
Experience and Behavior	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Opinion and Values	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Feelings	
Knowledge	
Sensory	
Background and Demographic	1, 5

Signed informed consent forms will be stored in a secure location in the Office of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at The University of Tennessee – Knoxville for a period of three years. Through these means, confidentiality will be maintained.

According to Yin (2003), the researcher should demonstrate the following skills to be effective in interviewing participants:

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).

Therefore, it was essential that I hone these skills to facilitate this process and gain the most pertinent information for identifying any issues women superintendents may have encountered within the rural setting, and the strategies they employed as they managed their professional and personal responsibilities. It is my hope that the knowledge on work-life strategies gained from analyzing data from participants with various perspectives and experiences within similar district structures, will offer insight to aspiring superintendents in subsisting within the position. Although the primary source of data for this study were interviews, I also reviewed and analyzed documents such as work-life policies and job descriptions. A discussion of document collection and analysis follows.

### **Documents.**

Various forms of data not generally referred to as interviews or observations are considered documents (Merriam, 2009). Documents may be categorized as public, personal, visual, and physical material. Data analysis of documents in qualitative studies is useful as

documents provide a record of events, obligations, conversations, decisions, ideas, and perspectives that are typically insightful as they are generally not originally created for a particular purpose and audience (Yin, 2003).

In support of this study, particular focus on the job descriptions and work-life policies were examined. Job descriptions illuminated the scope of the responsibilities of the position. Excerpts of policy handbooks were reviewed and analyzed for work-life policies that may pertain to the superintendent. This type of documentation provided me with information that cannot be observed (Patton, 2002); however, such information was helpful in providing a greater understanding of the scope of the responsibilities and supporting employment opportunities involved. During data collection, both the job descriptions and work-life policies were procured from participants and/or boards of education websites.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data were analyzed using the constant comparative method whereby interviews, documents, and the review of literature helped to generate codes and eventually themes through an iterative process (Merriam, 2009) in alignment with the purpose of the study. During the constant comparative process, I systematically compared data, as they were made available to determine any similarities or differences. Continuously examining interview transcripts enabled me to group similar data. Table 3 depicts the code map iterations. Interview data were simultaneously collected and examined for new meanings in relation to previous meanings in order to gain a deeper understanding of what the data reflected. An open coding system using *in vivo* (*in their own words* – the words of the participants; emic) was utilized in order to establish initial surface content codes. I then developed a thematic code. Following the development of a thematic code, I sorted the codes

into categories as a cluster as in axial coding or analytical coding (Corbin & Straus, 2008; Merriam, 2009). This inductive process helped to derive the themes based on the data. According to Creswell (2009), the researcher conducting a qualitative research study must undertake ongoing reflection of the data, asking general questions throughout the process (Creswell, 2009).

Data were analyzed simultaneously as gathered thereby allowing me to follow-up with participants when needed. While collecting data and analyzing said data, follow-up questions were crafted and asked of participants to address any ambiguity in responses or discover the need for further clarification based on emerging themes and codes. I contacted participants requesting time to address follow-up questions via telephone. Alternatively, participants responded to follow-up questions via email. The length of the follow-up interview varied based on the types and number of questions.

Documents were analyzed using document analysis. Documents (i.e. excerpts from the policy handbook addressing work-life policies and job descriptions) were scanned. I used *Nvivo* to analyze documents for relevance to the research questions. Ideas that ran across a preponderance of data were categorized as themes. I identified and tentatively labeled the conceptual categories. As the raw data were continuously analyzed, these categories were modified as additional data were procured. I employed axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) which involved re-examining the categories to determine the connection in order to build a conceptual model. The following is an overview of my role as the researcher, the means of data collection, and a discussion on safeguarding participants' identity.

Table 3

*Code Map: Research Questions Interview Data Analysis Iterations*

<b>Third Iteration: Theme</b>	
<b>Research Question#1:</b> Internal and External Barriers	<b>Research Question#2:</b> Communication, Deliberate Ethical Decision-making, and Support Systems
<b>Second Iteration: Categories/Pattern Variables</b>	
1A. Time Demands	2A. Communication
1B. Multiple Roles	2B. Prioritizing and Time Management
	2C. Relationship Building (staff, Board, community)
	2D. Support Systems
<b>First Iteration: Initial Codes</b>	
1A. Feel Like I'm Always On	2A. Communicate Expectations
1A. Vacation Not a True Vacation	2A. Communicate Vision
1A. Night Responsibilities	2A. Work Well with People
1A. Long Hours/Hectic Schedule/24/7 Job	2A. Listen to Advice
1A. Many Meetings	2B. Prioritize
1A. Missing out on Spending Time with Family and Friends	2B. Put Things in Perspective
1A. Small Circle of Friends	2B. Set Boundaries
1A. Lack of Time for Self	2B. Stay True to Commitments
1A. Professional Isolation	2B. "Do what's right for kids"
1B. Wear Many Hats	2B. Time Management
1B. Multiple Roles	2B. Planning
1B. No Privacy	2B. Work from Home
1B. Lack of anonymity	2B. Work on Weekends
	2B. Set Aside Time for Self, Family and Friends
	2B. Involve Family
	2B. Learn to Let Go
	2B. Be Intentional About Finding Balance
	2B. Get Done What You Can
	2C. Networking (Relationships Building)
	2C. Strong staff; Excellent, Smart, Hardworking Team
	2C. Mentor
	2C. Work Well with People
	2C. Listen to Advice
	2C. Personal Relationships with Kids, Parents, Grandparents
	2D. Supportive (partner/husband/family)
	2D. Support of School Board

*Note:* Adapted from "Qualitative Analysis on Stage: Making the Research Process More Public" by V.A. Anfara, Jr., K. M. Brown, and T. L. Mangione, 2002, *Educational Researcher*, 31, p. 32.

## **Role of the Researcher and Ethical Considerations**

As the researcher of this study, I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). I adhered to the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative's (CITI) Social and Behavioral Research guidelines when conducting this study. Additionally, I protected the identity of participants by maintaining confidentiality of participants' names and site school districts. Instead, pseudonyms (Superintendent A, Superintendent B, Superintendent C, etc.) were used. Information acquired through data collection procedures were digitally recorded, transcribed, and secured in password protected computer system only available to the researcher. The signed informed consent forms will be in a secure location in the Office of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies located at The University of Tennessee – Knoxville for a period of three years. As the primary instrument for this study, I provided assurance to maintain the integrity of the research and findings. The subsequent discussions address my bias and attempts to reduce the influence of bias in this study.

## **Researcher Bias**

As the researcher conducting interviews and reviewing documents, my biases may skew data. However, a heightened awareness of my biases helped me to monitor such biases throughout the data collection and analysis processes. A personal bias I considered is the fact that although I have not served as a superintendent of schools, I have considered becoming a superintendent. My preconceived notions of what the position entails and the time demands may have presented as a bias.

To manage such bias, I utilized bracketing techniques. Bracketing, typically used in phenomenological studies whereby the researcher talks about his/her past experiences, beliefs,

understanding, and biases that may impact the study, allowed me to bracket the various bias that may influence the study positively or negatively. I realized the importance of being objective in data collection and analysis. These strategies and heightened awareness of my bias helped me to monitor bias throughout the data collection and analysis processes to maintain validity and reliability of my findings. Methods of verification also ensured that any interference from bias was minimized. Methods of verification are explained below.

### **Methods of Verification**

I established credibility, trustworthiness, and rigor through various methods of verification, triangulation, and convergence. Additionally, data from interviews and documents were examined for reliability, validity, and trustworthiness through the use of member checks, audit trail, and pilot testing.

#### **Trustworthiness.**

To ensure validity and reliability, I “conducted the investigation in an ethical manner” (Merriam, 2009, p. 209). Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants. Interview protocols were used during digitally recorded interviews with participants. Recorded interviews were safeguarded and secured. Transcripts were secured. Data will be kept confidential and participants and respondents’ identities were not revealed. Additionally, careful attention to the theoretical framework, the conceptualization of the study, and the manner in which data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the findings presented (Firestone, 1987) were maintained to ensure standards of conduct for reliability and validity.

#### **Member checks.**

Participants were provided opportunities to give feedback. According to Maxwell (2005) member check also referred to as respondent validation is

the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your (researcher's) own biases and misunderstanding of what you (researcher) observed. (p. 111)

The participants' validation throughout this process helped to ensure that the "researcher is not misinterpreting meanings" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 126). Throughout the data collection process, I solicited feedback from participants to check for accuracy. Member checking involved asking each participant of the study to verify my reporting of her interview data for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After I transcribed the interviews and double-checked for accuracy, I emailed each participant her transcript and asked her to take a few moments to review the transcript for accuracy as well as share any other challenges/strategies she may have thought of after the conclusion of our interview. In said email, I asked participants to respond to follow-up questions (See Appendix D) related to demographic and background information. Participants were also given the choice to share additional information via email or a follow-up telephone interview. Three participants did not respond to the emailed transcript review request. One participant noted a few corrections. Participants commented on the accuracy of reporting based on interview (Creswell, 2005). Participants were asked to confirm the accuracy and completeness of the report, descriptions, themes and interpretations (Creswell, 2002). Thus, I "adequately engaged in data collection" (Merriam, 2009, p. 219) in order to gain an understanding similar to that of the participants.

### **Triangulation.**

Data were collected from multiple sources (interviews and documents) to achieve triangulation. According to Patton (2002), triangulation of data sources helped to corroborate the phenomenon studied and “multiple sources of evidence will be rated more highly in terms of their overall quality, than those that relied on only single sources of information” (Yin, 2009, p. 117). Documents such as job descriptions and workplace policies were gathered and analyzed. The findings based on triangulation and convergence lines of inquiring are therefore more convincing and accurate when based on several different sources of information (Yin, 2009).

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 outlined and presented the methodology for this study along with the rationale and assumptions for this study’s design. This chapter also outlined the site and participant selection process, procedures for data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. Finally, the chapter concluded with an explanation of the methods of verification to ensure trustworthiness, reliability and validity. Chapter 4 will present the findings of the study based on the analysis of the data collected from eight women superintendents of rural public districts in the southeastern United States who met the selection criteria and agreed to take part in the study and ultimately until saturation was achieved. Chapter 5 will follow with a discussion on the data collected and analyzed with a focus on implications for women aspiring to achieve work-life balance.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings**

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study was to gain a greater understanding of work-life experiences of women superintendents in rural public school districts in the southeastern US. More specifically, this study focused on the strategies women superintendents utilized to achieve a sense of balance between their personal and profession lives. Chapter 4, therefore, presents the analysis and findings of the data collected for this study. These findings may help to better prepare women superintendent aspirants, those currently serving in the position, and superintendent preparation programs by offering guideposts in helping to anticipate and navigate the professional and personal demands that may affect work-life balance. For this study, work-life balance has been defined as “the sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in the home and workplace” (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007, p. 248). Therefore, participants were asked to consider this definition in relation to their responses.

Findings were based on data collected from one-on-one interviews with participants as well as documents (such as job descriptions and excerpts of policies related to work-life balance [vacation days, personal days, and sick leave]) as described in Chapter 3. In alignment with the purpose of this study, qualitative data were analyzed simultaneously as gathered using the constant comparative method whereby interviews, documents, and the review of the literature helped to generate codes and eventually themes through an iterative process (Merriam, 2009). Recorded interviews were transcribed and then coded based on the purpose of the study, the research questions, the review of the literature, and recurring categories. Ideas that ran across a preponderance of data were categorized as themes. Superintendents were interviewed until saturation was achieved. While initial interviews with

participants lasted approximately an hour and were guided by the primary instrument for data collection for this study, the Interview Protocol: An Open-ended Informal Interview into the Work-life Balance Experiences of Women Superintendents of Rural Public School Districts (see Appendix C), follow-up questions were asked of participants to gain clarity of responses when needed.

Data were collected, interpreted, and analyzed using triangulation of data from various sources to support findings for this study (See Chapter 3). I maintained confidentiality of participants of this study by referring to participants as Superintendent A, Superintendent B, Superintendent C, etc. While no other identifying information has been included in the reporting of findings in this study, descriptions of participants are limited to due to privacy. Through richer descriptions of participants one might be able to identify participants because of the limited number of women who serve in rural fringe and rural distant districts in the southeastern US. Therefore, care has been taken to uphold the confidentiality and privacy of participants. Through these measures I have protected the identity of participants.

The data gathered and analyzed for this study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived work-life balance issues of women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States?
2. What strategies do women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States employ to manage both professional and personal responsibilities?

The following is an overview of this study's eight participants and their districts. Following the overview, the findings of each research question, informed by prior literature, and the themes that emerged as a result of the analysis of each question, will be presented.

### **Participant Overview**

I contacted via email or telephone fifty-nine (59) female superintendents of rural public school districts in Georgia, Tennessee, and South Carolina to invite them to participate in my study. While several superintendents expressed a desire to participate in my study and have their voices heard, unfortunately they declined to participate for several reasons. The four noteworthy notifications to decline participation in the study revolved around caring for self, loved ones, and the lack of time. Several superintendents were quite busy and requested their secretaries/assistants to coordinate the interview. During the process of determining the interest of a superintendent to participate, one superintendent's secretary indicated that while her superintendent was interested in having her voice heard, "her [superintendent's] mother was in hospice" and dying. Another superintendent declined due to personal health issues and indicated that it was not a good time. A third female superintendent declined because she found the interview process "a rather long interview process" and noted that I [the researcher] "will find out that superintendents, men or women, do not have time..." A fourth superintendent declined and noted,

Your study is certainly of interest to me. Regrettably, I will not be able to participate. Is it the time commitment? No. Nor is it my failure to appreciate the significance of your area of study? It is about the protection of the identity of my system in an area of the state that keeps no secrets, despite your best efforts to do so. So why am I responding in such detail to you? My intent is to let you know that despite the fact that

... districts like mine are in the middle of high-stakes testing, budget and personnel actions which may result in a very low response rate - my decline to participate is for other reasons. Female superintendents in small, rural districts are 'vulnerable' long before the stress of the job can weigh them down, particularly if they did not grow up in the system they are attempting to lead. As such, even if the superintendents you reach are not swamped with budget and personnel challenges, I do not believe they will be willing to jeopardize the trust they are trying so hard to build by sharing their struggles with anyone outside their circle.

Time to participate due to the demands of the job, caring for self or others, and the vulnerability of being exposed did not discount the expressed desire of superintendents who declined participation in this research study which they considered important.

Of the 59 women superintendents in three southeastern states, eight agreed to share their experiences as leaders of rural districts. The women superintendents who participated in this study led rural public school districts in Georgia, Tennessee, or South Carolina. Three (3) districts were categorized as *rural distant* and according to NCES (2015), are located between 5-25 miles from an urbanized area as well as between 2.5-10 miles from an urbanized cluster. Five (5) were labeled *rural fringe* which according to NCES (2015) are located "less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster."

All participants had earned a doctorate degree (7 Ed.D. and 1 Ph.D.) and ranged in age from 44-66 years old. Four participants were between 44-55 years of age, two were between 55-64, and two were 65 years of age or older. The majority (75%) of participants were

married with children. Of all participants, 50% had adult children, 25% had minor children, and 25% had no children. Meanwhile, 38% were caregivers for an aging parent.

Participants led rural districts varying in size (823-7,500 students) and demographics. For the purposes of this study, school districts were categorized by size according to the following guidelines: small school districts served 400-3,999 students, medium-size school districts served a student population of 4,000-11,999, and large school districts consisted of 12,000+ students.

All participants demonstrated a commitment to the position, a strong work ethic, and a passion for offering quality education in their respective districts. They each expressed a commitment to meeting the expectations of the position, a connectedness to the students they serve, and a personal satisfaction in serving as the superintendent of the district. Participants typically worked 50-65 hours per week and rarely took time off despite available work-life policies that afforded them vacation time, personal days, and sick leave. Participants were also involved in various civic, philanthropic, and community endeavors in their respective communities. Table 4 below presents an overview of the eight superintendents who were interviewed for this study.

Superintendent A is the only African American superintendent who participated in my study. She was quite eager to be a part of my study and openly shared her lived experiences with me. Superintendent A has been married for 17 years, has no children, and cares for an aging parent. Her husband is a professor at a nearby college. She has several siblings as well as many nieces and nephews to whom she offers financial assistance. Superintendent A is actively involved in the community and serves as a board member for various civic organizations.

Superintendent B is married, has adult children (who do not live at home), is a grandmother, and a caregiver for an elderly parent. She has previously served as superintendent in primarily small, rural school districts.

Superintendent C is married and has one son and two grandchildren. She lost an adult child approximately ten years ago which was naturally quite difficult for her and her family. She is a native of the community, sits on several boards, and is engaged in various civic groups. She speaks of her district being like a family. After the loss of her adult child, the entire community as well as the board provided support. The board recommended that she take whatever time she needed to grieve.

Superintendent D has been married for 36 years, has two adult children, and six grandchildren. She has served the district for 15 years and has been the only female superintendent of the district, a historic accomplishment for which is extremely proud.

Superintendent E never married nor had any children. She is a caretaker for an aging parent diagnosed with dementia. Although she is in her second year as superintendent in her current district, this is her third superintendency.

Superintendent F is married and has three adult children. She has served as a superintendent for nine years and is the first female superintendent of her district.

Superintendent G has been married for 24 years and has two young children. She is active in the community and teaches Sunday school classes. She assumes a variety of roles and engages in community, civic, and governmental entities.

Superintendent H has three children ranging in age from 2 to 20 years old. She is involved in her community and church, and serves on various boards.

Table 4

*Participant Overview*

<b>Superintendent</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>Years as Superintendent (in current district)</b>	<b>NCES District Designation</b>	<b>District Size</b>
Superintendent A	40-44	Married	0	2	Fringe	Small
Superintendent B	60-65	Married	5	5	Distant	Small
Superintendent C	45-49	Married	1	8	Fringe	Small
Superintendent D	50-54	Married	2	15	Distant	Small
Superintendent E	65-69	Single	0	2	Distant	Small
Superintendent F	65-68	Married	3	9	Fringe	Medium
Superintendent G	45-49	Married	2	3	Fringe	Medium
Superintendent H	45-49	Single	3	1	Fringe	Medium

**District Overview**

All districts represented in this study were selected based on the rural definition and designation established by NCES. NCES categorized districts based on size and location. For the purposes of this study, participants managed districts that were categorized as rural and that had an urban-centric locale code of 41, 42, or 43 (rural fringe, rural distant, and rural, remote respectively). The districts represented in this study, ranged in size and demographics, but all shared several common challenges (discussed later in this chapter) unique to the rural setting.

School District A was a small, rural district that served approximately 1,100 students in four schools (grades PK-1, 2-5, 6-8 and 9-12). The average class size was 15 students and the student demographics reflected 22% Caucasian, 72% African-American, and 5% Hispanic. Approximately 8% of the student population were students with disabilities and therefore had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). English Language Learners (ELL) comprised of 14% of the student population. The district as described by its superintendent

was a supportive, close-knit community that cared about education, the future of its students, and the overall community. Within this small, rural community with a population of approximately 8,300 within an almost 10 square mile radius, 22% of its population lived in poverty. Everyone knew each other within the district and community. There was an array of civic organizations such as the United Way, Historic Preservation, and the Rotary Club.

School District B was a small, rural district that served approximately 800 students at two schools (PK-8 and 9-12). The class size was approximately 15 students. Throughout the school district, student demographics reflected 55% Caucasian, 2% African American, 40% Hispanic, 1% Native American, and 1% other. School District B held a slightly higher percentage of male students (52%) than female students (48%); and served 15% ELL students and 8% special education students. District B spanned 414 square miles and had a population of approximately 4,000 people – 27% who lived in poverty.

School District C was a small, rural district consisting of approximately 1,800 students in three schools (grades PK-5, 6-8 and 9-12). The average class size was 15 students. Student demographics throughout the district was comprised of 41% Caucasian, 34% African American, 21% Hispanic, and 3% other. School District C had slightly more male students (52%) than female students (48%) and served 10% ELL students and 11% students with IEPs. The estimated population was 10,700 living in a land area of 182 square miles. Approximately 27% of the population lived in poverty.

School District D was a small, rural public school district consisting of approximately 1,000 students in three schools (grades PK-3, 4-6 and 7-12). Similar to other districts in this study, class size was approximately 15 students. Student demographics throughout the district consisted of 75% Caucasian, 18% African American, 4% Hispanic, and 3% other.

School District D had slightly more male students (52%) than female students (48%). School District D served approximately 4% ELL students and 17% of students with IEPs. School District D served students from three counties. It has a population of approximately 53,797 living within approximately 552 square miles. Twenty-two percent of the population lived in poverty.

School District E was a small, rural district that served approximately 1,700 students in four schools (PK-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12 grades). Class size was approximately 15 students. Student demographics throughout the district was comprised of 75% Caucasian, 18% African American, 4% Hispanic, and 3% other. School District E had slightly more male students (51%) than female students (48%). School District E served approximately 4% ELL students and 17% of students with IEPs. It had a population of approximately 70,000 living in a 454-mile radius. Approximately 22% of its population lived in poverty.

School District F was a medium-size, rural district consisting of approximately 4,400 students in five schools (three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school). Class size was approximately 16 students. Student demographics throughout the district was comprised of 58% Caucasian, 34% African American, 3% Hispanic, and 5% other. School District F had an almost equal distribution of male students (50.4%) and female students (49.6%). School District F served approximately .8% ELL students and 12% of students with IEPs. It had a population of approximately 26,300 living in a land area of 323 miles, with 26% of its population living in poverty.

School District G was a medium-size, rural district consisting of approximately 7,300 students in 13 schools. Class size was approximately 17 students. Student demographics throughout the district was comprised of 78% Caucasian, 4% African American, 12%

Hispanic, and 6% other. School District F had slightly more male students (51.1%) than female students (48.9%). School District G served approximately 3.6% ELL students and 13.9% of students with IEPs. School District G had a population of approximately 63,300 living in a radius of 339 miles, with 13% living in poverty.

School District H was a medium-sized rural district consisting of approximately 6,300 students in eight schools. Class size was approximately 16 students. Student demographics throughout the district was comprised of 66% Caucasian, 28% African American, 3% Hispanic, and 3% other. School District H had an almost equal distribution of male students (50.3%) and female students (49.7%). School District H served approximately .6% ELL students and 8.5% of students with IEPs. Its estimated population was 47,731 with 25% living in poverty. The land area spanned 807 square miles.

### **Research Question One: Work-life Challenges**

This section will examine the data collected and analyzed through the lens of Research Question One which asked: “What are the perceived work-life issues of women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States?” Data were collected, coded and analyzed from eight women superintendents who managed a rural public school district in a state located in the southeastern US. Initial codes (emic) were categorized using the three-step iterative process of identifying patterns to develop themes. Two major themes that emerged from the data in support of research question one were Internal and External Barriers. The code map displaying how these broad themes were derived is illustrated in Table 3 (See Chapter 3). A discussion of these two themes follows.

### **Internal barriers.**

In many instances, positions of leadership have required women to make difficult choices to balance family and personal obligations (Gordon & Galloway, 2008). The superintendency is no exception. Internal barriers are personal barriers whereby the individual needs to make changes related to issues such as values and self-efficacy (Shakeshaft, 1987). Participants' responses indicated that they experienced internal barriers such as professional and personal isolation, sense of guilt, and lack of anonymity that affected their work-life balance. These issues presented conflicts in gaining a sense of satisfaction in their personal and professional domains. A more detailed explanation of each follows.

Professional and personal isolation. Superintendents experienced both professional and personal isolation. Based on this study's findings, professional isolation was an undermining issue for many women superintendents because often times, limited time and the dearth of women superintendents were not available for the type of networking and collaboration needed to establish productive and supportive networks. Superintendent H expressed, "Nothing will prepare you for that feeling [of isolation]. When they say it's lonely on the top, it's probably quadruple lonely for a woman." Superintendent D described that being the only female in a consortium of over 10 superintendents that meets monthly, and having no other women within the professional consortium, made it difficult to form professional networks with others who may face similar gender issues. Superintendent D expressed that male superintendents of the consortium tend to form their own groups, and acknowledged that she is not included in those groups. Therefore, she resolved, "I have done this for 15 years. I don't have close superintendent friends. There's nobody really close by that I can 'pow' with." Fifty percent of participants echoed feelings of isolation. The feelings

of professional isolation stemmed from being the only female or one of two female superintendents among a group of male superintendents. Nonexistent for women superintendents within consortiums primarily comprised of men, was a similar network to the *good ole boys club* that often times benefitted male superintendents. The low percentage (18%) of women superintendents nationally and regionally (Kowalski, et al., 2011), makes it difficult for women superintendents to build comparable professional networks with other women for support. As Superintendent H claimed, "...so many times you just can't share stuff and it is so much easier sometimes if you could bounce an idea off somebody or think out loud." Within the personal domain, women superintendents also experienced feelings of isolation. Participants expressed having an increasingly smaller social circle of friends the higher they advanced in their careers. Participants attributed the effects of having few friends to not only having to make difficult, and sometimes unpopular decisions, but also to the work-laden demands of the position that consumed participants' time and offered little to no opportunity for maintaining relationships. As Superintendent D explained: "...over the course of these 15 years, I can tell you that my social circle has gotten a lot smaller. People who I knew and considered to be friends perhaps are no longer considered to be friends." Superintendent G noted, that while she has colleagues who are also superintendents, those individuals "share the same world" that she does, and so "there's not a lot of time quite frankly for friendships—just pure friendships. That is not something, unfortunately, that there is any time for."

While the relative paucity of women superintendents contributes to the professional isolation participants must navigate, the work demands, time commitments, and tough decisions impede personal or social relationships. In addition to feelings of isolation, some

superintendents also expressed feelings of guilt. Demands on superintendents' time seemed to play a significant role in the sense of guilt experienced by participants. This issue will be discussed next.

*Sense of guilt.* Half of the participants described experiencing a sense of guilt for not only being unable to maintain a healthy lifestyle, but also for not having time to spend with children, grandchildren, spouses, family members, friends, or self. Superintendent B confessed,

I feel like I'm missing out on all my grandchildren's stuff because I constantly have to attend things. I am busy attending school functions rather than my family's functions and that is a difficult situation.

Superintendent C conveyed similar sentiments when speaking of her grandchildren: "I have not spoiled them to the point that they should be spoiled at this time by me. I have not been doing my job as grandmother." Feelings of guilt also surfaced for Superintendent D who, when considering the fact that she is of retirement age, can retire and care for her twin grandbabies who are just a year old, indicated that she was not yet ready nor willing to retire and keep her grandchildren. She expressed, "I'm not ready to do that. I still feel...I love work. I love doing what I'm doing and being involved in educating children." Despite such feelings of guilt, participants seemed to have given consideration to their personal desires and interests.

Superintendent A meanwhile acknowledged that she tries to attend significant events for her family; however, most of the time, "work wins out." Thus, she finds herself having to "make it up to family." Having no children does not absolve Superintendent A from feelings of guilt that stem from her inability to attend family functions. Superintendent B shared

similar feelings of guilt as she explained that she recognizes that she's "short-changing" her family because of the demands of the position and the expectations of meeting the needs of the district.

While most participants expressed a sense of guilt toward not being available to spend time with friends, family or loved ones, Superintendent H, who has young children, expressed no feelings of guilt when having to work late several nights per week. She described herself as "career-driven," and she "does not mind working late" while her mother-in-law cares for her young children. Notably, Superintendent H does not condone societal expectations of her role as a mother. Yet her mother-in-law's comments reflected views typical of the societal expectations of women to which Superintendent H did not subscribe. According to Superintendent H, "My mother-in-law occasionally gives me the 'I just can't believe that you've got something after work two nights this week?'" In addition to experiencing a sense of guilt, most participants also perceived that lack of privacy affected their work-life balance.

***Lack of anonymity.*** As stated in Lamkin's (2006) study, and further supported in Klatt's (2009) study, participants of this study faced work-life conflict due to lack of privacy. Living and working within small rural communities, created challenges of work-life balance. "Rural superintendents suffer a unique lack of privacy; they enjoy little private life and come under scrutiny for everything they do" (Lamkin, 2006, p. 17). Data from four (4) of the participants revealed that lack of privacy has been an issue with which they must navigate to achieve a sense of work-life balance. Superintendent D noted: "You can't even put on a hat and sunglasses and not be recognized." Even when running errands or going shopping, participants admitted to being stopped by stakeholders who asked work-related questions. Participants described feeling as if there was no separation from the job. "You're never

completely away from your work,” stated Superintendent G who further revealed, “I attend church. I live. I grocery shop. I get my hair cut. Everything that I do, every single day, 24/7 happens in the same place where I work, so that’s probably the biggest challenge I have.” Public visibility and scrutiny have caused participants to experience lack of privacy and anonymity. While feelings of isolation, sense of guilt, and lack of anonymity surfaced as internal barriers that contributed to the work-life conflict of women superintendents of public school districts in the southeastern US, external barriers such as significant demands on time and assuming multiple roles also challenged participants’ work-life balance. The next section speaks to the theme of external barriers.

**External barriers.**

External barriers refer to obstacles presented by society that are not controlled by the individual (Tallerico, 2000). Participants noted that external barriers associated with organizational structure contributed to work-life conflict. In particular, time demands and assuming multiple roles impacted participants’ work-life balance. Each of these factors will be discussed next.

***Time Demands.*** All superintendents in this study expressed that time demands of the position negatively influenced their work-life balance. Demands on superintendents’ time stemmed from inadequate resources to hire personnel resulting in the need to assume multiple roles, attend numerous meetings, engage in long work hours, and address seemingly endless paperwork. Nevertheless, all participants expressed a sincere commitment to the position and attempted to meet the high expectations of the school board, the community, and themselves. Participants often and regularly took work home, worked on weekends, and had limited time with family and friends. They recognized that being on call 24/7 meant that they were

“always on.” They felt as if they could never turn the responsibilities of the job off or shut down. Superintendent A acknowledged the long hours and hectic schedule of the position as a challenge; however, she believed in “staying true to commitments” – a value instilled in her by her parents. This belief has been her guiding post in decision-making as it relates to resolving time-related conflicts in her personal and professional responsibilities. She explained,

Once I took this position, it was a three-year commitment to a lot of things... I try to think about what's best. I show up at community events sometimes when I would rather be at another function enjoying myself with a sorority group of friends that are servicing the community in a different way. I always think about—that I work for this city, and I think about taxpayer dollars. And then I think about the roles and responsibilities that are expected of me. And so I hold that near and dear to my heart—that when I took this position, that I have certain expectations that I have to live up to. And although there are a lot of times there are things that I want to do personally, I can't.

The sense of commitment to the position was a common sentiment among all participants. While substantial demand of superintendents' time was also reflected in the extended workday that involved work commitments beyond the typical 8-5 such as early morning meetings, evening and nighttime obligations, and weekend work, participants acknowledged that they sometimes had weekly work-related breakfast meetings at 6:00 a.m. Then they reported to the office by 7:00 a.m. for a full day's work that was typically followed by an evening function. On average, superintendents attended evening functions approximately 2-4 nights per week, leaving little to no time for self, family, or friends.

Finding time to do all that they wanted and needed to do during the day was a challenge for participants. According to Superintendent G: “Many days I say, ‘Did I go to the bathroom today?’ I can’t remember if I went to the bathroom today.”

The nature of the position dictated involvement in other community-related organizations – another factor that seemed to contribute to the extended day of the superintendent. Many superintendents and school boards were aware of the value of participating in civic and community organizations. In fact, some school boards promoted superintendents’ involvement in local civic and community organizations such as the Rotary Club, United Way, or the Lions Club and even provided financial support in the form of membership dues for some superintendents. Despite being worthwhile endeavors, involvement in these organizations presented an additional layer of responsibility and commitment to an already hectic schedule. Superintendent H who had two young children living at home, noted that she had very limited time with her children and so “the time that I’m with the children, it’s quality. I mean there’s time and there’s quality time.” Each participant discussed the difficulty in balancing time with family and friends with their work demands.

Time demands, enormous workload, and the high expectations of the position all influenced participants’ decision not to take time off even though their contracts afford them various types of leave (personal, sick, vacation). As Superintendent G stated, “I’ve got tons of sick leave built up. I never take it. And thank God I never needed it, but it’s there...I usually don’t use those [sick leave].” The fact that superintendents do not typically take time off even though their contracts allow them vacation days and leave, speaks to the time and commitment involved in fulfilling the responsibilities of the job and the professional

commitment to running a school district. Time demands and workload of the position are indications that the responsibilities and expectations do not afford superintendents the ability to be away from work which may affect the social and psychological well-being of superintendents. Superintendent A explained:

Rarely do I take off...It's kind of like a mother who does not want to leave her kids. It is better if I'm here I can deal with it—deal with any problems that may arise...I don't like being out when school is in session.

In fact, participants had been urged by their office managers, secretaries, or board members to use their accumulating leave; however, participants indicated that they rarely took time off because they believed that taking time off would cause them to have more work upon their return. Superintendents found that while away for work, the temporal demands of the position caused them to fall behind or allowed time for situations to escalate – situations that could have been addressed had they been present at work. They felt as if taking time off caused them to fall behind the continuous flow of work that is generated.

Although the position is inherently demanding of participants' time and energy, superintendents expressed a strong desire to serve in their role as the leader of the school district because they enjoyed working to help shape education and the community they served. The lack of time did not overshadow participants' love for their work and the significance of their role; however, the data gathered supported time demands as the single most common factor that challenged participants' work-life balance. In addition to the time demands of the position, superintendents also revealed that assuming multiple roles also affected their work-life balance as discussed in the following section.

***Multiple Roles.*** A cumulative examination of the roles and responsibilities of participants determined that in addition to the daily oversight of the district, participants in many instances also assumed other responsibilities typically assigned to assistant superintendents in larger districts. Collectively, participants indicated that the responsibilities associated with the position required them to “wear many hats.” Superintendent B explained:

I am the director of transportation, director of food services, director of special education, director of federal programs. I mean these are things that are full-time jobs that I'm doing, as a superintendent of a small district, in addition to all of the normal operational teaching and learning things. So, one of the struggles is the fact that you have to do so much hands-on direction. For example, riding on a bus with the bus driver to do the annual evaluation.

Additionally, while superintendents and school boards alike held an expectation that superintendents should sit on various boards, these additional roles served to influence participants' work-life balance. Superintendent G spoke at length about her involvement in various roles throughout the community:

This is the most important role of the school district and in terms of navigating the improvement of our community. I happen to think that public education is the defining element for the quality of the community. So I'm very vested in continuous improvement in our school system and I obviously serve on a variety of roles including our Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Council, Board of Control for our regional educational support services. I serve on the Governor's Advisory. The Board of Health is another that I serve on.

Assuming responsibilities of multiple roles meant engaging in related meetings, events and activities inherently causing participants to forfeit personal time with family, friends, or self.

**Summary of research question one: Challenges.**

This section concludes the analysis of Research Question One: “What are the perceived work-life issues of women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States?” While various internal and external barriers influenced women superintendents’ work-life balance, the most significant factor that affected all participants was the time demands of the position. Participants further expressed that the position caused them to feel as if they were “always on.” They admitted the job is a 24/7 position and that they regularly work on weekends, take work home, and have evening work commitments approximately 2-4 nights per week. The enormous demands on their time to complete professional tasks on a daily basis, compounds the issue for lack of time for self and family which often times results in feelings of guilt for not only being unable to maintain a healthy lifestyle, but also for not having time to spend with children, grandchildren, spouses, other family members or friends.

This study found that women superintendents perceived constraints on their time for self, family, friends, and professional networking with other female superintendents as a significant work-life issue. Additionally, participants indicated that the key factors which negatively impacted their work-life balance included: assuming multiple roles, personal and professional isolation, sense of guilt, and lack of privacy. Participants devised ways to address these issues which were found to be most common among women superintendents of rural public school districts. Research Question Two will now address the strategies employed to navigate work-life challenges.

## **Research Question Two: Work-Life Balance Strategies**

This section will examine the data collected and analyzed through the lens of Research Question Two which asked: “What strategies do women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States employ to manage both professional and personal responsibilities?” Data collected, coded and analyzed were derived from eight women superintendents who managed a rural public school district in a state located in the southeastern US. Initial codes (emic) were categorized using the three-step iterative process of identifying patterns to develop themes. Three major themes emerged from the data in support of Research Question Two: Communication, Deliberate Ethical Decision-making, and Support Systems. The code map displaying how these broad themes were derived is illustrated in Table 3 (See Chapter 3). A discussion of these three themes will now be discussed.

### **Communication.**

All participants regarded communication as effective and necessary for resolving conflict that may threaten their work-life balance. Thus, participants’ valued communication as a means of addressing issues that surfaced as well as a means of garnering support. Communication was instrumental in establishing, nurturing, and sustaining relationships in an effort to create networks of supporters within their respective communities.

In particular, superintendents used communication within their professional work environment to share their vision and expectations. Stakeholders were kept abreast of happenings throughout the district via various mediums. Superintendent A, who proactively kept the lines of communication open between her and her school board members, principals, and entire staff through a weekly newsletter released every Friday, apprised stakeholders of

the upcoming week's happenings. Superintendent A regarded communication as "a big part of my job." In addition to the weekly newsletter, Superintendent A communicated daily via email to continuously inform the school board of potential issues.

Superintendent D noted that as a leader of a school system, it was not only important to communicate her vision, but also to recognize that she is the one who has all the details to make ethical, tough decisions. She noted that when considering the dynamics of board members:

You've got to realize that you're going to work with board members who have varying personalities, and there's always going to be that one, maybe two, on the board that will give you fits. You know, you just have to learn that's the way it's going to be. You're just going to have to win them over if you can by being as tolerant of their positions as you can and try to educate them. You just have to be good at forming relationships—at having that really tough hide when it comes to critics because there's always going to be critics no matter what you do.

Many participants expressed the need to use communication to build networks throughout the community. Superintendent A noted,

If someone is asking me to do something that is not legal or favorable, I'll try to get ahead of the game by calling all of board members or just say this is my stance on it. I also have a personal relationship with the mayor and the chief of police. And so I try to get ahead of the game by getting out there networking and getting advice. I'm new to the city, and so they've been here for quite a while, and they know people and they will give their advice. So I'm learning. I'm learning that knowing the right people and getting their advice, following their advice makes a big difference. So networking is

the biggest strategy that I found to work well with this position. Joining Rotary was huge for me because whenever I'm challenged on a position my Rotarian friends will stand up for me. And that is priceless.

Communication supported by the need to build relationships resonated throughout the data and was identified as critical to the success of the superintendent and district. Participants viewed communication as a key strategy in helping to manage work-life issues. A second strategy employed by superintendents was deliberate ethical decision-making.

### **Deliberate ethical decision-making.**

Participants' decision-making was premised on a few key factors: doing what's right for the students of their respective districts, staying true to commitments, and prioritizing. Superintendent A indicated that she daily generated a list of priorities that needed her attention. She then recognized and addressed small issues so that they did not become bigger issues. Superintendent A offered the following example:

If there's a parent that's not happy, and I don't take the time to try to reach out to the parent, to try to solve the problem, they may go to the media. And what may seem to be a very small problem is taking up, now, my whole week because I didn't address it in the beginning or I may have not known about it to stop it.

Additionally, issues with board members became priority and were placed on the top of the list because as Superintendent A stated, "they are my bosses." Cumulatively, participants typically weighed all options to determine the most significant impact and best avenue to pursue. Whether considering how to handle an affair between a principal and an employee or having to address erroneous allegations, superintendents face difficult situations that they must address.

Living up to the expectations superintendents place on themselves and the expectations of others can be an enormous feat. Superintendent G explained,

Well, I think quite frankly, it [superintendency] is the most (pause) demanding role and the least rewarding. The most rewarding role that I have is a parent, and seeing my own children being able to excel, and quite frankly, be happy and healthy. So it is probably the most demanding and the least rewarding. It comes from a passion and commitment and it's just a work ethic that I was raised with. I have to constantly self-monitor because it's easy to measure how much work you get done, when you have work; but it's hard to measure the impact with your children. And, it's very easy to inadvertently overlook the things that you know matter most.

Admittedly, Superintendent G stated that she does not know whether she parents well. Even with a supportive school board that “recognizes that parenting is important” managing the personal and professional demands is difficult. While prioritizing is helpful in decision-making, self-monitoring of involvement in various aspects of life’s responsibilities may prove beneficial in helping to achieve work-life balance. When time demands challenge managing personal responsibilities, participants integrated work and life responsibilities.

Participants with small children acknowledged that their role as a parent was more important than being a superintendent; however, they identified more with the position. In some instances, participants were career women and superintendents longer than they had been mothers. In all instances, even those participants at retirement age gained personal satisfaction from serving as superintendent. When possible, women superintendents created a sense of work-life harmony as Superintendent G explained: “I take my kids to things that they can be a part of such as banquets, programs, or other appropriate events.” Additionally, she

noted: “Quite frankly, whether it be car talk or just driving to a banquet, or just talking about their own vision—anything that I can involve them in so that I can accomplish work and motherhood, I do that.” Superintendents also took their spouses on business trips as a means of creating more of a harmony between both the professional and personal spheres. The substantial demand on superintendents’ time, as was previously noted, created a challenge that required participants to think outside the box to achieve work-life balance. Therefore, participants employed deliberate ethical decision-making to navigate work-life conflicts.

### **Support systems.**

Married participants (Superintendents A, B, C, D, F, and G) spoke gratefully of the support their husbands provided in caring for the affairs of the home and children.

Superintendent A stated,

I am grateful that I have a partner who is very supportive because there are a lot of days when I leave before the sun gets up and I get home after the sun is down.

Such support is invaluable. The support of family members particularly helped when superintendents dealt with the emotional strain of the job which was also daunting. As

Superintendent A noted, “I have a staff member that's dying of cancer, and that's very, very emotionally draining for all of us.” Supportive partners encouraged their superintendent wives to “do what she needs to do” and not worry about the home, cooking, or cleaning.

Superintendent C also received support from the members of her community, her husband, and her son following the passing of her oldest child. Overall, however, she expressed, “My husband is such a big help. He's very supportive of my job and my son also.” Superintendent F explained, “my husband has always supported me and said don't worry. And he said, just do what you need to do.”

Participants found that personal support systems helped to foster a sense of work-life balance in their lives. When considering the superintendency, Superintendent C indicated, It [the superintendency] has been a huge part of my life for 8 years. My entire career has been a huge part of my life. But it's something that my husband and I share. We talk about lots of things having to do with school, and he advises me about a lot of stuff and I listen. Sometimes I don't do what he says, but I do listen. He's pretty smart. He supported me to go back to school. I didn't start teaching til I was 33, so he supported me in doing that and he has been very supportive raising our kids, and me working, and working on my Masters and my Doctorate. He's very, very supportive of that. He's just always been. We're good partners about things like that. He helps out at home and does a lot of things so I don't have to worry. And, that's a big help.

Superintendent G, concerned about the power differential between her and the school personnel (teachers, principals, etc.) within the school district responsible for educating her young children, determined that her husband should deal with the affairs of the school as they relate to their children. Superintendent G indicated,

I'll keep a very significant professional distance because I don't want to overstep my bounds as a superintendent. So I have my husband deal with a lot of their things that have to do with school because I'm also their teachers' boss and I don't want to put anybody in an uncomfortable position.

The support systems participants have in place helped to alleviate some of the work-life issues and create more of a balance between their personal and professional lives.

### **Summary of research question two: Strategies**

This section concludes the analysis of Research Question Two which asked: “What strategies do women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States employ to manage both professional and personal responsibilities?” While women superintendents’ noted various strategies they employed to manage their professional and personal responsibilities, the most significant strategy identified was communication. In addition, deliberate ethical decision-making (based on doing what was right and staying true to commitments), and support systems were noted as key in helping superintendents achieve a sense of satisfaction in both their professional and personal lives.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided the results of this study’s research as well as the analysis of the two research questions based on the purpose of the study, review of the literature, and recurring categories. The results of this study were based on data analysis of eight interviews as well as documents. The following chapter offers a discussion of the findings and implications for practice and policy, and will conclude with recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of work-life experiences of women superintendents in rural public school districts in the southeastern US. More specifically, this study investigated how participants addressed perceived work-life issues in an attempt to attain a sense of achievement and satisfaction in both their personal and professional lives. While gender was a construct in which to examine this phenomenon, and a social group to which participants identified, the context of the rural setting was also given particular attention to better understand how women superintendents navigated work-life issues within rural communities. The two research questions that guided the inquiry of this qualitative descriptive study into the 21st century work-life challenges women superintendents of rural public school districts encountered and how they resolved those issues were:

1. What are the perceived work-life balance issues of women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States?
2. What strategies do women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States employ to manage both professional and personal responsibilities?

This chapter will discuss findings of this study through the lens of the social identity theory (SIT) which posits that one's self-concept is constructed from perceived membership in relevant social groups (gender, profession, etc.) and that one behaves in a way that is intended to yield a positive self-concept or positive social identity thereby promoting positive ingroup distinctiveness (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). More specifically, according to Tajfel and Turner (1979), positive ingroup distinctiveness is achieved when individuals make decisions

and do what is best for the group to which they belong (ingroup) even at the expense of personal self-interests. In this regard, depersonalization of self promotes group cohesiveness and prototype behavior in alignment with the behavioral expectations of the social group. When “the identity that is functioning psychologically to increase the influence of one’s membership in that group on perception and behavior” (Oakes, 1987, p. 118) is activated, such behavior is referred to as social identity salience. Thus, the psychological significance of a particular membership determines the social identity that will be activated – the social identity salience. As Hogg, Terry and White (1995) noted,

the social category into which one falls and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category—a self-definition that is part of the self-concept. People have a repertoire of such discrete category memberships that vary in relative overall importance in the self-concept. Each of these memberships is represented in the individual member’s mind as a social identity that both describes and prescribes one’s attributes as a member of that group— that is what one should think and feel, and how one should behave. Thus, when a specific social identity becomes the salient basis for self-regulation in a particular context, self-perception and conduct become ingroup stereotypical and normative, perceptions of relevant outgroup members become outgroup stereotypical, and intergroup behavior acquires competitive and discriminatory properties to varying degrees depending on the nature of relations between the groups. ...Because social identities have important self-evaluative consequences, groups and their members are strongly motivated to adopt behavioral strategies for achieving or maintaining

ingroup/outgroup comparisons that favor the ingroup, and thus of course the self. (p. 60)

As previously noted, the social identity theory attempts to explain social psychological behavior in terms of salience based on an individual's need to promote positive ingroup distinctiveness. Based on the findings and extant literature, this study offers a broader understanding of how social identity explains how women superintendents of the 21<sup>st</sup> century address issues in rural communities within the southeastern US. Based on the findings and related literature, I propose recommendations for navigating the most often cited work-life challenges for women superintendents of rural districts in the southeastern US whose identity salience rested within the professional realm. In addition, implications for practice and recommendations for future research will be provided.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study indicated that participants not only assumed multiple roles and identities in both their personal and professional lives but also generally experienced similar work-life challenges unique to the rural context. More specifically as noted in this study's findings, participants experienced internal barriers (i.e. professional and personal isolation, sense of guilt, and lack of anonymity) and external barriers (time demands and multiple roles) that served as challenges to achieving work-life balance. As a result of participants' desire to manage their multiple roles and respond to work-life issues, women superintendents employed similar strategies such as effective communication, deliberate ethical decision-making, and maintaining support systems. Additionally, women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the US experienced work-life issues unique to the major social groups (gender and context) to which

they identified. The social identity theory, the framework through which this phenomenon was examined, helped to explain the perceived work-life issues participants experienced and their behavioral responses based on participants' most salient social identity (the superintendency) to achieve work-life balance. To further explicate the role of social identity salience on participants' behavior, both gender and context were examined. The social identity salience of participants in relation to the constructs of gender and family will be discussed.

### **Social identity salience and gender.**

The paucity of women in the superintendency presented a challenge for participants. When faced with professional challenges, participants did not typically have other female superintendents within the same social group with whom they could consult, collaborate, or confide. The lack of such a professional network challenged participants' work-life balance as participants did not benefit from collaboration or advice as their male counterparts have through the *good ole boys network*. While male superintendents (the outgroup) enjoyed the benefits of collaborating and networking with other male superintendents, women superintendents experienced professional isolation with the rural setting (Lamkin, 2006). Unlike their male counterparts, women superintendents, were not able to form professional networks that often benefitted members of a common social group. The gender construct created work-life issues for female superintendents of rural public school districts by not affording women the opportunity to form professional networks; however, participants sought positive ways to circumnavigate such challenges in spite of negative ingroup distinctiveness. In addition, participants' expressed identity salience to the role of the superintendency predicted that participants would engage in behavior that maintains or promotes positive

ingroup distinctiveness/positive self-esteem even at the expense of personal self-interests. Resulting behavior reflected seeking other networks for support to help fill this need. Individuals in both the professional setting and personal domain helped to fill the much-needed void for collaboration. Some participants relied on their spouses while others, to the extent allowable, confided in colleagues such as assistant superintendents.

Existing research suggested that even though women assume leadership roles, some women continue to maintain the home responsibilities regardless of their workload (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Dufur et al., 2010; Hobson et al., 2001; Loder, 2005; Mahitivanichcha, 2006); however, this study found that women superintendents did not conform to the societal expectations of maintaining home responsibilities, nor did they adopt society's view of gender norms which values men at work as the breadwinner and women at home as the caregiver. Despite negative ingroup distinctiveness whereby participants recognized that the expectation for caring for the home responsibilities and children might not have been the same for men, women superintendents, keenly aware of the societal expectations of women's role in the home, created a paradigm that benefitted their needs and operated within that paradigm. Husbands of participants provided personal support and took care of household responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for the house and children. Participants noted that within the workplace, employees and colleagues offered assistance with both work-related challenges and personal issues. Conclusively, these findings affirm Reilly and Bauer's (2015) conclusion that women who have support systems in place at work and at home have found success in balancing work and family life. Notably, this study's findings further substantiated Baumgartner and Schneider (2010) as well as Myers and Ginsberg's (1994) studies that revealed that while personal and professional responsibilities present challenges

for many female educational leaders, family and spousal support were essential to managing family care responsibilities. Additionally, there was no expectation on the part of the superintendent or her spouse that she would come home after a day's work to tend to the affairs of the home. Support systems on the home front and at work afforded participants a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction both at home and work in spite of participants' expressed negative ingroup distinctiveness due to gender-related expectations. Men were not perceived as having societal expectation of caring for children or the home.

### **Social identity salience and context.**

While participants' social identity salience was to the superintendency, the rural context also challenged women superintendents' work-life balance. Participants typically assumed multiple roles and expressed that their counterparts in larger, more urban districts did not have to contend with inadequate resources. Participants' negative ingroup distinctiveness stemmed from the awareness that superintendents in larger, more urban districts had adequate funds to hire needed personnel, and did not have to assume multiple roles. Assuming multiple roles within the rural district meant working long hours, engaging in various work-related meetings, events and activities inherently causing participants to forfeit personal time with family, friends, or self.

The rural context also caused negative ingroup distinctiveness in relation to lack of privacy. Within small, rural community where participants worked and lived, participants suffered "a unique lack of privacy; they enjoy little private life and come under scrutiny for everything they do" (Lamkin, 2006, p. 17). The public visibility and scrutiny have caused participants to experience lack of privacy and anonymity.

### **Social identity salience and family.**

Within the personal domain, participants self-identified as female, mother, grandmother, wife, daughter, aunt and/or caregiver for a family member. Participants did not view themselves in conflict with outgroups (nonfamily members or other family members). Married participants did not typically subscribe to the normative behavior historically associated with the role of women within the home and caring for the home. This study's findings echoed Reilly and Bauer's (2015) study which reported that support systems (personal and work) are needed for women to experience work-life balance. As such, participants' husbands, offspring or other family members provided personal support and took care of household responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for the house and children. The family unit was described as supportive and patient.

Participants noted that within the workplace, employees and colleagues offered assistance/support with both work-related challenges and personal issues. Conclusively, these findings affirm Reilly and Bauer's (2015) conclusion that women who have support systems in place at work and at home have found success in balancing work and family life. Notably, this study's findings further substantiated Baumgartner and Schneider, (2010) as well as Myers and Ginsberg's (1994) studies that revealed that while personal and professional responsibilities present challenges for many female educational leaders, family and spousal support were essential to managing family care responsibilities. There was no expectation on the part of the superintendent or her spouse that she would come home after a day's work to tend to the affairs of the home. Support systems on the home front and at work afforded participants a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction both at home and work.

According to participants, gender, personal and professional relationships, and social interactions helped to influence their identities, but communication played an integral role in addressing work-life issues in various realms. Within the personal realm, participants identified with being a part of a family unit (wife, mother, grandmother, daughter, homemaker, and caregiver). And so, when faced with the dilemma of either attending work functions or family events, participants' salience, typically dictated by priorities, helped to direct their decision-making. While most participants expressed that they felt that the most important role was being a member of their family, participants' social identity salience was strongest to their position as superintendent. This was particularly evident as participants expressed that work often wins out over personal commitments. Work responsibilities helped to shape a positive self-image and often took precedence over personal obligations. Nonetheless, not being able to attend family functions or spend time with loved ones seemed to have taken an emotional toll on participants that created internal conflict and expressed feelings of guilt which speaks to the social identity theory's postulation that activating the most salient identity to create positive ingroup distinctiveness may be at the expense of personal self-interests. In addition to the family sphere, participants also formed identities as members of various community organizations. Whether working on the library board, health board, or the chamber of commerce, participants realized the value of their presence, involvement, and guidance and willingly actively engaged in the community. However, such involvement came with a price – time. Participating in community organizations and activities meant that superintendents relinquished time with family, friends or self. Through the lens of the social identity theory, participants' decision to be involved in the community

and to maintain a connection with stakeholders further supports the concept of salience. Such involvement helped to shape a positive self-image at the risk of neglecting others or self.

Nevertheless, when participants' role salience was activated, they communicated priorities and attended to such needs. Communication was therefore valued as a means of addressing issues as well as a means of garnering support. As Voss, Bianco, Riche and Reilly (2007) noted in the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) study which ranked the "qualities desired in superintendents by the Communications Accountability Project of the National School Public Relations Association," communication skills was ranked as the second most desired skill by school boards conducting a superintendent search. According to the NSPRA study, communication skills were essential for the success of the superintendent in "building consensus among various groups/individuals, imposing dramatic educational reform, fostering/maintaining interpersonal and external relationships, and managing an administrative team" (p. 5). Within the personal sphere, participants indicated that open, effective communication with loved ones fostered an understanding and acceptance of the responsibilities and expectations of the position as well as the time demands of the job. Participants noted their inability to attend many family functions or spend time with loved ones, but through open communication, family members, in most cases, understood the sacrifice and the infeasibility of participants to spend large amounts of time with family. The time spent with family was, therefore, regarded as quality time and was protected.

When participants faced challenges from men who supported societal norms or expectations that women should not occupy the superintendency, participants communicated their vision for the district and attempted to reshape or challenge such androcentric views. In this vein, participants' social identity salience was activated. Participants were empowered

and relied on communication to help guide and shape androcentric views of women and power. Social identity salience of participants appeared to be strengthened by their commitment to the role as well as the resolve to do what's best for the children within the district and the future of the community. Communicating those priorities established expectations others should have of participants and refuted traditionally held views of women's roles. Clear and open communication with colleagues and family members was considered an effective work-life balance strategy in addressing priorities and achieving a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in the professional and personal realms.

An analysis of these findings through the social identity theory, the framework that guided this study, revealed that participants not only identified most with their professional role but also demonstrated behavior that supported their most salient identity. While most participants expressed the importance of family and their roles within the family unit, their behaviors supported their salient role as women superintendents. Participants identified with being a member of a relatively small social group – female superintendent of rural public school districts. Women superintendents of this study demonstrated behavior that navigated work-life challenges in a positive way. Their deliberate time commitment, involvement, investment, and dedication to their role as superintendent coupled with their commitment to the significance of their leadership helped to promote positive ingroup distinctiveness and positive self-concept.

Findings revealed that participants held social identity salience to their role as superintendent. Identity salience to the profession further revealed that when gender was considered, participants typically experienced negative ingroup distinctiveness due to the relative paucity of women superintendents with whom they could connect, collaborate, and

network. The *good ole boys network* that still persists today does not afford women superintendents the same benefits of shared learned experiences from others who may have similar experiences or helpful insight. The results also indicated that the rural context presented work-life issues for women superintendents and impacted the time demands of the position as participants often times assumed multiple roles, worked long hours, and rarely took time off from work. The social identity theory proved beneficial in examining participants' behavior when confronted with work-life issues and showed how women superintendents' social identity salience helped them navigate work-life challenges to achieve a sense of achievement and satisfaction in their personal and professional lives.

### **Implications for Practice**

The dearth of women superintendents has significant implications. Women superintendents, like most employed individuals, have both professional and personal responsibilities that challenge their work-life balance, but how do women superintendents whose position is inherently demanding on one's time achieve a sense of satisfaction and achievement in both spheres? According to Matthew Kelly's (2011) study, people do not seek "balance" but rather satisfaction that requires daily attention, self-awareness, and discipline. This study's findings have implications for aspiring and current women superintendents as well as for superintendent preparation programs, superintendent search committees and school boards. Aspiring female superintendents and those currently serving in the position may benefit from the strategies and the perspectives of participants detailed in this study, as findings from this study may help to enlighten prospective women superintendents of rural districts or other district types, strategies for addressing work-life issues when the salient identity is the superintendency.

In spite of the internal and external barriers participants of this study experienced, participants forged beyond societal expectations and norms to create a paradigm that they deemed valuable and relevant for addressing their work-life issues. Effective communication, deliberate ethical decision-making, and reliable support systems helped participants navigate their professional and personal roles and responsibilities. Therefore, superintendent preparation programs, superintendent search committees, and school boards may inform prospective superintendents of possible challenges prospects may encounter. School boards may also consider more intentional means of creating opportunities for women superintendents to network with others with whom they share the same social group as they too could benefit from collaborations similar to those experienced by men in the *good ole boys network*.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The role of the superintendent is significant to the everyday management of a school system and the future of communities. Therefore, further research on women superintendents' work-life balance will help to address recurring work-life challenges as well as new issues. Findings in this study have raised questions that serve as merit for future research. The following recommendations for future research are based on what could be examined to further question and understand how women superintendents balance work and family and what can be done to promote more women to the superintendency:

1. While this study did not establish a delimitation of superintendent mothers of young children or female superintendents with no children or grown children, future research may include a comparison based on motherhood or the number of young children in the home to better understand the degree to which these factors influence the work-life

balance of women superintendents of rural districts and determine social identity salience.

2. The rural public school district presents issues unique to the setting; however, an examination of the perceived work-life issues of urban and suburban women superintendents and strategies they utilize may also highlight distinctions that may aid superintendent preparation programs, school boards, and current/aspiring women superintendents.
3. While self-monitoring was mentioned as a means of gauging the extent to which one balances self-defined priorities, an examination of how women superintendents reflect, monitor, and discern their involvement in both their professional and personal spheres may yield additional insight for achieving and monitoring work-life balance within various settings.
4. Both men and women experience work-life conflict; therefore, a comparative study examining the social identity salience and work-life balance issues/strategies of men and women superintendents of rural public school districts will add to the existing literature to better understand the gender-based challenges.

## **Conclusion**

There are two major conclusions that can be drawn from this study of the perceived work-life balance issues and strategies of women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern US. First, it appears that both internal and external barriers persist as challenges to women superintendents' work-life balance. Even though women superintendents in this study did not subscribe to the societal norms and expectations that have historically dictated women's roles at home and at work, they contended with such

work-life challenges of the *good ole boys network* and a negative male perception of women occupying the superintendency. In addition, they experienced professional isolation associated with being in small, remote rural districts.

The results of this study may offer women superintendent aspirants and women superintendents of rural public school systems, who share similar experiences, strategies from the experiences of participants of this study. Other women leaders may modify or employ the strategies outlined herein. Participants found that the strategies they implemented allowed them to have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in both the personal and professional spheres. While all participants expressed that they understood and appreciated their significant role in shaping the future despite the constant struggle with issues which challenged their work-life balance and made it difficult for them to spend time with family, friends, and self; they credited their support systems such as their spouses, family members, work family, and close-knit community for offering support needed to address work and home responsibilities. Nevertheless, the amount of work and demands on time plagued women superintendents of rural districts; however, participants sought ways to be successful through communication, deliberate ethical decision-making, and having professional and personal support systems.

Women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern US noticeably realized that they did not belong to the outgroup (male superintendents), but their non-membership did not appear to stifle or negatively influence their self-concept. Rather participants sought ways to positively assert themselves and maintain positive self-esteem through various work-life strategies. Participants were characterized by a strong work ethic, pride in their work, passion for their role in shaping education, and perseverance. The work-

life issues and strategies revealed in this study may offer future and current superintendents, superintendent preparation programs, and policy makers a means of addressing some key issues within rural communities in the southeastern region of the United States.

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## Appendices

## **Appendix A: New Subject Recruitment Letter**

Dear Superintendent,

I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and am conducting research for my doctoral dissertation on women superintendents' work-life. Specifically, I seek to gain a greater understanding of the unique issues women superintendents of rural districts face related to balancing professional and personal obligations. Moreover, I am particularly interested in the strategies women superintendents employ that help to support a balance of work and life responsibilities.

The purpose of this correspondence is to invite you to participate in this study as you have been identified as a potential participant for this study. While the preponderance of research has focused on the work-life issues of women superintendents in general, there has been little research conducted about work-life issues and strategies of women superintendents who manage districts which may present unique issues due to the distinct characteristics otherwise not experienced in more urban districts. This study aims to fill this gap in existing research and gives voice to the women who manage these districts, the issues they encounter, and the strategies they employ while governing rural districts.

The study is open to women superintendents of rural districts in the southeastern region of the United States. You are therefore invited to participate in an open-ended interview consisting of five open-ended interview questions. The interview should last approximately 60-90 minutes and is designed to gain a greater understanding about women superintendents' work-life issues and the strategies used to manage multiple roles. The interview may take place at an agreed upon date and time via telephone or video conferencing. With your permission, the interview will be digitally recorded and then transcribed. You will have an opportunity to verify the transcript for accuracy. Following the interview, I may wish to contact you should there be a need for follow-up questions or clarification. Please note that your confidentiality will be protected through the use of pseudonyms (i.e. Superintendent A, Superintendent B, Superintendent C, etc). Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you withdraw from the study prior to the completion of the data collection process, your data will be destroyed.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns regarding this study. I can be reached by email at [cniles@vols.utk.edu](mailto:cniles@vols.utk.edu).

Sincerely,

Cedelle Niles

## **Appendix B: Informed Consent**

**Research Title:** *Work-Life Issues and Strategies of Women Superintendents in Rural Public School Districts in the Southeastern Region of the United States*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Cedelle Niles about work/life balance issues. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you have been identified as a female superintendent of a rural public school district located in the southeastern US. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate. Your participation is voluntary. You are encouraged to read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate. Take as much time as you need to read the consent form. You may also decide to discuss your decision to participate with your family or friends. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and return it to me. I will provide you with a signed copy of this form. The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the perceived work-life issues of women superintendents of rural public school districts in the southeastern region of the United States. The secondary purpose of this study is to examine the strategies women superintendents in rural public school districts employ as they manage work and home responsibilities.

### **INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete one interview about your perceptions of work-life balance, the challenges that you experience professionally and personally, and the strategies you employ as you manage your responsibilities. One-on-one interviews will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will be audio recorded with your permission. If you do not wish to be recorded, you may still participate in the study. Should the need arise for follow-up, you may be asked to respond to an email or participate in a follow-up interview via phone or video conferencing. Audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed and all participants and districts will be given pseudonyms. Your name will not be used in any publication based on this study.

### **RISKS**

The risks involved with your participation in this study are minimal. Although it may be possible that someone could find out that you are a participant in this study or see your information, I will do my best to protect your information. Inadvertent release of my notes may be a risk; however, confidentiality is insured through identification of participants by letter (i.e. Superintendent A, Superintendent B, Superintendent C, etc). Such coding minimizes the risk of identifying you as a participant. Identification of participants is unlikely to occur.

Some questions could be sensitive and may provoke an emotional response (i.e. questions about family, discrimination). Should you wish to speak with a counselor or obtain assistance with dealing with issues that may arise, please contact the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), if in crisis. Alternatively, you may contact the Substance Abuse and

\_\_\_\_\_ Participant's initials

Mental Health Service Administration at 1-800-662-4357 for non-crisis assistance. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

**BENEFITS**

You will not directly benefit from participating in this study. Others may use findings from this study to implement programs, develop policies, or navigate work-life responsibilities.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Audio recordings, transcripts, notes, data analysis, and code key will be stored on a password-protected computer system and will be available only to the researcher. All recordings, the code key and other identifiable data (i.e. consent forms) will be destroyed five years after the completion of this research study. When the results of the research are published or discussed at conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity or your district's identity. Participants and school districts will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. Data related to this study may be used for future research.

**CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Cedelle Niles, at P.O. Box 14305, Knoxville, Tennessee 37914, and (678) 357-3133 or Faculty Advisor/Doctoral Chair, Dr. Pamela Angelle at The University of Tennessee, College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies located at A323 Jane and David Bailey Education Complex 1126 Volunteer Boulevard, Knoxville, Tennessee 37996-3400 and (865) 974-4139. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at (865) 974-7697.

**PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may decline to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be destroyed.

**CONSENT**

I have read the above information. I freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I can still participate in this study even if I do not wish to be recorded.

*I agree to be audio-taped.*

*I do not wish to be audio taped.*

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix C: Interview Protocol: An Open-ended Informal Interview into the Work-life Balance Experiences of Women Superintendents of Rural Public School Districts**

Thank you for taking the time to share your experience as a superintendent with me. I'm going to ask your thoughts about your work/life. We begin first by talking about your roles and responsibilities.

1. When you think about the roles and responsibilities you have, I'd like you to think about such things as your family, your work, community, society and so forth. Please talk about some of the roles and responsibilities you have in your professional and personal life.
2. Given those roles and responsibilities, what is great and not so great about working as a superintendent of a rural district?
3. When thinking of your position as a superintendent, how do you view that role in relation to your other roles? Of your many work and personal roles, do you identify with one more than others? If yes, can you expound on which one and why you believe you feel this way?
4. Have you ever had any conflicts when trying to negotiate your personal and professional responsibilities? If yes, can you talk about that? When this happened, how did you respond?
5. Please feel free to share anything else you would like at this time.

**Appendix D: Follow-up Interview Questions**

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_ or  
Age Range:  
25-30/31-35/36-40/41-45/46-50/51-55/56-60/61-65/66-70/71-75
2. Number of years as a superintendent (total): \_\_\_\_\_
3. Number of years as a superintendent (in current district): \_\_\_\_\_
4. Average number of hours worked per week: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Household responsibilities: Yes/No                      Most/Some/Little/None
6. Top three issues you encounter as a female superintendent of a rural district (ranked in order of most significant to least):
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.

## **Vita**

Cedelle Niles was born in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands and is the second daughter of Navarro and Laraine Niles. Cedelle graduated from Wesleyan Academy in 1990 and continued her education at Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois where she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 1993. She then earned her Master of Arts degree in Education with a concentration in Administration and Supervision from the University of the Virgin Islands in 1998. In 2009, Cedelle relocated from St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands to Knoxville, Tennessee and matriculated as a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at The University of Tennessee where she has served as a Graduate Teaching Assistant for the Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education. She was a Morris DeCastro Fellow, Alliance of Doctoral Women Scholar, University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) Barbara Jackson Scholar, and Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) Doctoral Scholar.