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The impact of mentorship on attracting and sustaining female superintendents in the State of Washington

Michelle Kuss-Cybula
Western Washington University, mcybula@gmail.com

THE IMPACT OF MENTORSHIP ON ATTRACTING AND SUSTAINING FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS IN THE STATE OF WASHINGTON

By

Michelle Kuss-Cybula

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

_____

Chair, Dr. Wayne Robertson

_____

Dr. Donald Larsen

_____

Dr. Kristi Dominguez

_____

Dr. Gene Sharratt

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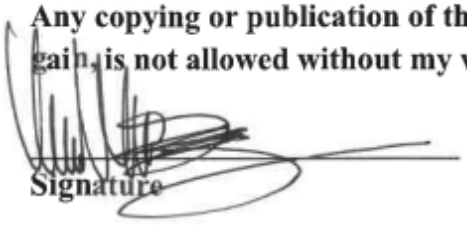

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Date

The Impact Of Mentorship On Attracting and Sustaining Female Superintendents In The State Of Washington

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

by
Michelle Kuss-Cybula
June 2023

DEDICATION

This dedication is a testament to the power of storytelling from the heart and soul of five incredibly brave women. Without their courage to share their stories, I never would have been able to complete this study. Your powerful stories have created a house of refuge where our sisters, daughters, and colleagues can come to seek solace, and leave with the courage they need to continue their journey. You trusted me with your stories, allowed me to cry with you and help carry the weight of your journey. Your stories will always have a special place in my heart. Thank you!

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My appetite for a Doctorate began at the age of 16 in my Junior year of High School. My guidance counselor told me I was not college material and kindly replaced my college application with an employment application to the local grocery store. It was that slight gesture but lasting value statement that stoked the fire in my belly to prove to the doubters I was worthy of more. And so began my pursuit of all that college had to offer.

The topic I selected for my dissertation was very personal for me. Throughout my life and career, I have been privileged to encounter many incredible mentors. It all started with my elementary school teachers, women who quietly gave me confidence. These incredible educators were the small-town heroes who saw our potential and taught us about life beyond the confines of our small, remote town. For the doubters, thank you for challenging me to test my own inner strength and gift me with the determination I needed to overcome the many hurdles along my journey. *Tell me I can't, and I will show you how.*

I want to give a special thank you to the visionaries; Dr. Wayne Robertson, Dr. Donald Larsen, and Dr. Tim Bruce, who did not give up the dream of creating Western Washington University's first Education Doctorate program. For my committee; Dr. Wayne Robertson, Dr. Donald Larsen, Dr. Kristi Dominguez, and Dr. Gene Sharratt, your kindness and support. A special thank you to Dr. Gene Sharratt for allowing me to stand on your shoulders. You paved the path forward and gave space for the voice of women to be respected and honored. One day, we will achieve a gender balance in the superintendency.

For my Western Washington University Cohort I family and our dedicated advisors, thank you for your laughter, shoulders, and pep-talks at all the right moments in time. We made a

commitment to be the first class to cross the finish line arm and arm, and we did it! For my own family and close circle of friends, I know I have not been very present over these past few years. Thank you for your understanding and allowing me the space I needed to dig into my research and work. I could not have done it without you.

My final dedication goes out to my best friend and husband of 29 years, Dan Cybula. Thank you for being my loyal and supportive partner, friend, and best ally in this incredible journey of self-discovery. You always made sure I kept it real. Thank you! To my daughters, Abby and Izzy Cybula who have given me the confidence I needed to pursue relentlessly my dream of completing my doctorate. I am incredibly proud of the path you have carved in this world and will be forever grateful for your belief in me. Your texts, voicemails, emojis, and admittedly, even the TikToks, got me through the most difficult days in this journey.

For my siblings Melissa, Mark, and Meagan; how did we make it? Together we managed to break away from our prescribed destiny and interrupt the trajectory of our past. We learned to fight and survive together. I am so proud of the incredible educators, parents, and kind humans you have become.

To all the men and women who believe in the power of shared leadership, this job is too difficult to do alone. I dedicate this research to you and the future women who deserve a seat at the table. Let us hold the door open for them.

ABSTRACT

Female superintendents continue to make up a small fraction of public-school superintendents in this country. This study focused on gathering stories of current female superintendents in the state of Washington, all of whom are within their first three years of their superintendency to determine the extent to which mentoring had an impact on their career path leading into the superintendency role and the impact of mentoring in sustaining their role as a seated superintendent.

This qualitative study focused on five essential questions:

- What kinds of mentoring do female school superintendents experience on their pathway to becoming chief executive of a school district?
- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably positive or beneficial?
- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably negative or not beneficial?
- To what extent, or in what ways, do current female superintendents seek opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with other female school leaders?

In this study, I focused on current female superintendents in the state of Washington who are within their first three years in the role as superintendent. The importance of identifying a group of women who were new to their superintendent position was to take advantage of their most recent experiences, stories, and opportunities while they were fresh in their minds and, by the nature of their experience, relatively new to applying their college preparatory experiences to their superintendent role. This research contributes to the existing body of research on the gender

gap that persists in attracting and retaining female superintendents in Washington and across the country.

The study implemented a narrative inquiry approach using qualitative methodologies based on in-depth interviews of five female superintendents in the state of Washington. I chose narrative inquiry as the instrument for collecting authentic stories of female superintendents through a personal interview. This allowed the participants to share their continual process and interpretation of their lived experiences through the language of storytelling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The significance of this study is to examine closely why the gender gap persists for women superintendents. Data shows that women outpace men when it comes to degrees and classroom experiences, and yet women continue to be underrepresented in the top roles of our educational systems. Seventy-six percent of teachers, 56% of principals, and 30% of central office staff are female yet female superintendents represent less than one third of all superintendents in the United States (Superville, 2022). When it comes to degrees, females outperform their male counterparts by 100 to 75 for bachelor's degrees and even fewer men graduate with a master's degree (Reeves & Smith, 2022). A recent study conducted by ILO (In the Life Of), a women-owned organization, found that out of the open positions of the country's top school districts, men were selected for the superintendent role in 16 of the 17 open positions in 2021 (Superville, 2022). If women hold more positions in education and outpace men when it comes to degrees and experience, why are the highest positions in the organization held by men? In a review of the recent literature, the myth that women forgo the superintendency due to societal, organizational, or parenting barriers were dispelled (Robinson et al., 2017). However, recent literature revealed that other factors such as the lack of mentorship may contribute to the

persistent gender gap. Importantly, limited research exists that focus on mentorships as a pathway for females to obtain and sustain the position of superintendent. Understanding the attributes of a successful mentor-mentee relationship may be critical in discovering how to eliminate the gender gap and help to clear the path for access to these highly compensated and sought out positions for future female leaders across our nation.

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Introduction

Background of Study.

"One of the criticisms I've faced over the years is that I'm not aggressive enough or assertive enough or maybe somehow, because I'm empathetic, it means I'm weak. I totally rebel against that. I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong." –Jacinda Ardern as Prime Minister of New Zealand (Dowd, 2018).

On Parkside Avenue in Chicago, Illinois sits an elementary school named after Ella Flagg Young, a woman of many firsts. Ms. Young was the first woman to earn $10,000 a year, the first female president of the National Education Association, and at the age of 64, the first female superintendent of a large urban school district in 1909 (Smith, J. K, 1976). Women across America have learned how to survive in a patriarchal society where society's expectations for women have continued to perpetuate stereotypes: women are too sensitive, women are not good with math, women are emotional. Because of these stereotypes, women have had to invite themselves to the conversations, even if this means breaking down doors and bringing our own chairs into the room in order to have a seat at the table. As a mother of two beautiful, intelligent, and assertive women, and as a woman who has successfully traversed a sometimes- challenging pathway to attain my own aspirations, I am acutely aware of the impact these stereotypes have had on women who have had to navigate these hurdles on their path to adulthood. Like Ella Flagg Young, our female ancestors fought hard for the rights many of us take for granted today. And yet here we are, continuing to speak louder about the inequities that persist; overturning the right to choose what is best for our own bodies: *Roe vs. Wade*, #metoo, paid family leave, equal pay, childcare; the list is endless. This research study is a microscopic lens into the lives and

journeys of my female counterparts, where they will unpack their stories about success, failures, and the people in their lives who helped shine the light through their darkness. More importantly this research is a two-year inquiry that focuses on the art of storytelling as a method to understand more clearly and to overcome the labyrinth of challenges that women face in their journey to the superintendency in a public school setting.

Statement of Problem

The unbalanced representation of female leaders in education has remained a steady pattern for over a century. Even though the percentage of women superintendents nearly doubled during the 1990s from 6.6% to 13.2% (Glass, 1999), as of 2022, only 27% of superintendents are women. This is quite an astonishing number considering that 76% of all public-school teachers are women (Perry, A. 2020). Despite intentional efforts and advancement in closing the gender gap in the role of female superintendents in the United States, significant disparities continue to persist. For the purpose of this study, gender refers to those social, cultural, and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts (Lindsey, 2016, p. 11).

Extensive research on this topic has uncovered both external and internal barriers that continue to perpetuate the institutional gender gap in public education. Yet, the gap in female superintendents has remained a perpetual challenge for centuries. In 1909, the country's first female superintendent, Ms. Ella Flagg Young, stated to the nation that “In the near future, we will have more women than men in executive charge of the vast educational system” (DiCanio, et. al, 2016; Blount, 1998, p. 71). Over 100 years later, only 23% of females occupied the position of superintendent across our nation, increasing only 0.7% annually. At this rate, it will take nearly 80 years for females to be equitably represented in public schools across our country (*Women*, 2017). In order to understand this problem, I have chosen to lean into personal

testimonies of current female superintendents to understand more clearly how they have succeeded, despite challenges, in attaining and sustaining their role as a superintendent.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is to unpack the root causes of this phenomenon by looking at the impact that mentorship has on females who aspire to become a superintendent and the mentorship dynamics that contribute to the sustainability of females in the role as superintendent. This study will look at statistical data, empirical data, and narrative inquiry to help identify the barriers that current female superintendents have faced in their journey to becoming a superintendent, as well as the influence and efficacy of mentorship in supporting these superintendents' career pathways. I defined the superintendent as the head of a school district; not an associate, interim, or deputy.

It does not suffice to focus on the barriers and admire the challenges as a method of closing the gender gap. This study seeks to uncover the impact of mentorship on their success as a current active-duty superintendent as well as the impact mentorship had along their career path to becoming a superintendent.

Significance of the Study

In an effort to understand clearly the barriers that keep women from entering the superintendent role, this study focused on the "underbelly" of this phenomenon by looking at current data and more importantly, focusing on the personal narrative stories of current female superintendents. Brené Brown, a well-known storyteller and grounded theory researcher, pointed out in her book *Dare to Lead*, "In the absence of data, we will always make up stories" (p. 258). Understanding the conditions in which this study was to be conducted, by creating a safe and

trusting environment, was essential to the personal narrative storytelling. Women have a long history of secret-keeping, tucking away their innermost fears, heartbreaks, and stories.

> The opposite of recognizing that we're feeling something is denying our emotions. The opposite of being curious is disengaging. When we deny our stories and disengage from tough emotions, they don't go away; instead, they own us, they define us. Our job is not to deny the story, but to defy the ending—to rise strong, recognize our story, and rumble with the truth until we get to a place where we think, yes. This is what happened. This is my truth. And I will choose how this story ends. (Brown, B. 2017, p. 84)

This study was focused on listening to the stories of women who overcame barriers to obtain the position of school superintendent. Who helped them overcome these barriers? Did they have a mentor or mentors? Who sponsored them, supported them, and advocated for them? Did they have mentors who steered them away from the role? What are the successful attributes to mentorship in the eyes and experience of these women? Understanding the impact of a mentor in the career trajectory of these women may unpack a phenomenon that could lead to development of successful mentoring programs for women in education and bring balance to the gender gap of female superintendents in the state of Washington.

Specific Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

- What kinds of mentoring do female school superintendents experience on their pathway to becoming chief executive of a school district?
- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably positive or beneficial?

- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably negative or not beneficial?
- To what extent, or in what ways, do current female superintendents seek opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with other female school leaders?

The interviews for this qualitative study focused on four essential guiding questions: (a) Describe your mentoring experience on your path to becoming a superintendent (b) What characteristics or attributes of these experiences were beneficial? (c) What characteristics or attributes of these experiences were negative, or not beneficial? (d) Describe your current networking and mentoring relationships with other female leaders.

Limitations

One of the underlying assumptions of qualitative research is that reality is multi-dimensional, contextual, and constantly evolving. Qualitative research acknowledges that individuals and groups experience the world in different ways, and that these experiences are shaped by their social, cultural, and historical contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In contrast to quantitative research, which typically seeks to measure and generalize findings using statistical methods, qualitative research aims to provide a deep, nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena through storytelling.

For the purpose of this study, I focused on selecting female superintendents who were within their first three years into the role. In an effort to ensure that the women within their first three years had a more accurate account of their mentor relationships, I did not consider the experiences of other women who were well beyond their first few years into the superintendency.

First person accounts using a narrative inquiry approach serves as the story telling of what people recall from their experiences. While this format is an effective way to research lived experiences, it is also left up to the storyteller to recall these events accurately and left up to the researcher to sort through the copious amount of data to make sense of the emerging themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, the limitation of my study was the reliance on memory of my participants and the bias when sorting through the data.

I considered that the stories told by these women were accurate and honest accounts of their own experiences. These stories are not an overall representation on how all female superintendents feel when considering the impact of mentoring on their career trajectory.

Chapter II:

Review of the Literature

History of the Superintendency

The role of a school superintendent first appeared in Buffalo, New York followed by Louisville, Kentucky in 1837 (Grieder et al., 1969). The earliest school superintendents served roles that were mainly clerical in nature; managing the daily technical operations of the school. They were hired by local school boards and were responsible for collecting data and distributing state funds (Houston, 2001). In 1865, the demands of the job took on more supervisory responsibilities, which included overseeing teachers and maintaining sole accountability for implementing state and federal curriculum mandates. The supervision of curriculum and instruction required a master teacher with instructional experience and deep knowledge of curriculum and standards. The National Education Association advocated for and solidified the job of the superintendent as a profession, elevating the role and the requirements of a school superintendent to the highest position in the education hierarchy for public schools. The job expectations of a superintendent became solidified by the late 1830s as an exclusively male-dominated role and has remained so for decades (Robinson et al., 2017).

In a book published in 1916, titled *Public School Administration*, author and superintendent Ellwood P. Cubberley outlines the role of a superintendent:

> The position of superintendent of schools, if filled properly, is a full man's job. And calls for the best that is in a strong, capable, well-trained, and mature man. It is a position in which a young man ought to be willing to spend many years in hard and painstaking preparation…. He is the authority, direction, inspiration flow….he is the executive officer of the school board. And also its eyes, ears, and brains. (Cubberley, 1916, p. 147)

History of Working Women

America was founded by farmers who came to this country with the hopes of harvesting their own land without the burden of taxes and governmental oversight. Women became the housewives, preparing meals, rearing children, and overseeing the daily domestic chores. A woman's place was in the home. As advancements in technology made their way across America, women began to see their roles shift, allowing them to take on extra work for pay. World War I gave way to the first big movement of women entering the workforce, prompting the first organized attempt by working women to demand minimum wage, safety in the workplace and the right to vote. The right to vote was finally allowed via the 19th Amendment in 1920.

During the Second World War, America's factories were emptied out to allow men to go off to war, leaving the factory lines open and available to women who joined the assembly lines to keep up with the production of weapons and food for our American soldiers. When the war ended, our country was ready to go back to the status quo: men in the workforce and women, only if invited to work, should remain ready to serve the household and their families. By the mid 1950s, amidst the need and the push from women, society expanded employment opportunities for educated women into career roles as nurses, secretaries, and teachers. Men were expected to hold higher-level positions of authority over women: boss, doctor, lawyer, and superintendent. In the 1960s and 70s, women entering the workforce increased from 34% in 1950 to 43% in 1970 (*The Record*, 2001). Yet, by 1970, women only accounted for 3% of acting superintendents in the United States (Glass, 1999). While women continued to enter the workforce at greater numbers than men, they continued to be held back when it came to upper management or senior-level positions.

During the 1990s, women continued to dominate the entry-level roles as teachers as well as in the university preparation programs for school administration but failed to make it into the executive roles as school superintendents (Glass, 1999). At the university level, women made up 57% of the bachelor's degrees, 60% of the master's degrees, and more than 53% of all doctoral degrees (Northouse, 2022); yet in higher education, only 9% of women have tenure for a full-time professorship (Flaherty, 2016). Women remain underrepresented when it comes to the upper echelon of leadership positions across the United States. In Fortune 500 companies, only 5.8% of women hold a CEO position; and in law, 46% of women earn their law degree but only 22.7% make partners (Northouse, 2022).

Glass Ceiling Shattered

"Glass ceiling" has been used to describe the phenomenon of a career barrier for women seeking leadership roles; this term was first coined by two Wall Street journalists in 1986 (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986) to describe an invisible barrier that barred women from top leadership positions. This metaphor was a strongly held belief by many, considering the widely held cultures and beliefs about women. In a recording made public by the Freedom of Information Act in which President Richard Nixon explained why a woman should not be appointed to the United States Supreme Court, Nixon described women as "erratic and emotional" (Eagly, A. et al, 2007, p. 64). As women proved over time contrary to this belief, the metaphor of glass ceiling shifted to "leadership labyrinth", which better describes the current reality that female leaders face. While the glass ceiling implies that women must overcome a single barrier in order to shatter the glass ceiling, leadership labyrinth acknowledges the complexity and challenges women face throughout their leadership journey (Eagly & Carli, 2018). Sheryl Sanberg, former CEO of Facebook, describes the labyrinth as a jungle in her

book, *Lean In*; women must not only navigate the complexities of juggling more work and family duties than men, but they must do so by becoming more agile in order to overcome the hurdles of the jungle gym (Sandberg & Scovell, 2016).

External Barriers Women Face

The underrepresentation of women in top-level leadership positions has continued to intrigue and astound researchers for years. In particular, the misrepresentation of female teachers to male superintendents is troubling. In order to understand the complexity of this phenomenon, this research study has been broken down into two categories: internal barriers and external barriers.

External barriers are systemic barriers. Examples of systemic barriers that have prevented women from stepping into the superintendency are gender barriers embedded in hiring practices, perceptions of females as leaders, and pathways. Perceptions of leaders are most often associated with masculine attributes. These attributes demonstrate that a position of authority is defined by traits closely associated with the image of a male: tough, assertive, influential, political, and positional. Historically, the primary role of any superintendent was to develop and maintain a healthy school budget and manage people with authority. Meaning, if you are not good with money, then you will likely fail as a school superintendent. Superintendents ultimately have to make those tough decisions (Meador, 2019). When women are seen as being tough, they are often labeled as being too aggressive, but if women are too passionate, they can quickly be labeled as being too emotional. Yet, emotionality in men is viewed as being assertive and strategic. Researchers Derrington and Sharratt (2009) identified “resolves” as means to success. Women must recognize that while a gender bias still exists in the recruiting and hiring of female superintendents, women who aspire to these roles must fight harder, be open to scrutiny, and

wait much longer for these opportunities than their male counterparts, which takes determination and iron will (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). According to the Pew Research Center survey on women and leadership, most Americans find women indistinguishable from men on key leadership traits such as intelligence and capacity for innovation, with many saying women are stronger than men in terms of being compassionate and organized leaders (*Women*, 2015).

Further data found that experiences women faced in the role of the superintendent in their daily interactions with male and female colleagues suggested that women often kept quiet, suppressing their frustrations or disagreements. “Because women fear asking...likely a result of their cultural upbringing and conditioning...and often are not even aware of how beneficial the efforts to acquire sponsors are, their pathways to reaching a desired superintendency are not quite as smooth....” (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006, p.188). This can be detrimental when it comes to sponsorship, as women who keep quiet are viewed as not decisive, timid, and unable to make tough decisions.

There is an unofficial practice of pathway prerequisites for the superintendency. Many current superintendents spend several years in the role of high school principal. The high school principal is a primer for the superintendency, balancing large budgets, facility oversight, managing numerous staff, and serving as a political and public figure, making the step into superintendency a natural progression. Notably, while women dominate the elementary teaching and administration positions, males dominate the positions of administration at the middle and high school levels. Nationally, women account for 54% of principals at all grade levels; 68% of elementary principals are female while men make up 67.3% of high school principals and 60% of middle school principals. In 2015, 81% of all new superintendents came from middle and high school principalships (Ramaswamy, 2020). Males tend to follow the career path of teacher,

coach, to fast-tracking from high school principal to the superintendency, whereas women typically follow a longer career path of teacher, elementary school principal, secondary school principal, central office, then the superintendency (Robinson et al., 2017).

Women continue to be marginalized when it comes to recruitment and hiring practices. One of the most important public roles that local school boards play is hiring, supervising, and firing the school superintendent. During the recruitment and hiring process, local school boards most often hire a search consultant to oversee the process. In 2000, researcher Tallerico investigated the impact that search consultants have on the selection process for recruiting and hiring superintendents. The study found that search consultants participated in 95% of all superintendent vacancies (Tallerico, 2000). Most recruiters are retired former superintendents who are hired by local school boards to conduct the superintendent search for their school district. These recruiters meet with the community stakeholders, current superintendent, and board members to gather input for what type of leader they are seeking. After collecting, recruiting, and sorting through applications, these recruiters then share their subjective opinion with the school board's members. Because most superintendent search consultants are networked and are composed of sitting or former superintendents, they lean heavily on the opinions of those in their network. Given that only 24% of all superintendents are women, most of the input for potential candidates derives from men. School board members are also viewed as key gatekeepers in the hiring process, where roughly two thirds of all school board members across the nation are men (Tallerico, 1993). Ideal superintendent candidates are most closely described as leaders who have successfully taught three to five years, have secondary principalship experience, and had experience either as an assistant superintendent or in a central office leadership position (Tallerico, 2000). Male candidates are automatically assumed to understand

politics, discipline, finances, and non-instructional needs, while women tend to be more closely scrutinized about their background and experiences. Women are often viewed as not acting tough enough by school board members (Tallerico, 1993). While 82% of women superintendents in a study conducted by The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) indicated that school board members did not see them as strong managers; 76% felt that their school board did not feel they were capable of handling finances. Interestingly, 43% of male superintendents in the same study indicated that school boards tend to view women superintendents as incapable of managing school finances (Glass, 2000). Taken together, these data points reflect the stereotypical image of what a socially accepted leader should look like and do as a school superintendent.

Internal Barriers Women Encounter

Not all barriers are external. In *Underestimating One's Leadership Impact,* (Taylor, et al., 2016, pp. 132-138) the researchers set out to unpack the internal barriers that may exist in the gap of male versus female superintendents. Two themes emerged from the interviews conducted: self-esteem (knowing and understanding oneself) and the "forgotten" component of self-esteem (the ability to anticipate how accurately others perceive us). In this study, women shared their perceptions of how others see them as one barrier to seeking a leadership role. This correlation may be a contributing factor in the number of females as classroom teachers versus females in central office leadership roles. This data alone indicates that self-perception, one's ability to be confident in the role of a leader and one's assumptions that their peers and superiors also do not see them as a leader, may contribute to the potential gap in the number of women applying for leadership positions in education.

In a study conducted by Mary Lynn Derrington and Gene Sharratt, the researchers concluded that self-doubt was a contributing factor in women applying for superintendent positions (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). The researchers interviewed several current female school leaders who were aspiring to the superintendency and females who currently held the position of a school superintendent in the state of Washington. In the first survey conducted in 1993, the researchers discovered that the hindrances women faced on their career path to becoming a superintendent were perceived to be based on external barriers of societal practices such as discrimination and stereotyping based on gender. In addition, they perceived alternative barriers as institutionalized within the organization. However, 14 years later, the same survey was conducted with different results. While the respondents still encountered obstacles, they shifted from external to internal and self-perceived barriers. According to the researchers, they discovered that "barriers are perceived either as institutionalized and evidenced by problematic gender discrimination practices or as self-imposed" (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009, p. 1). At the "current annual rate of increase, it won't be until the year 2035 that we will see a 50-50 gender ratio in superintendents" (Derrington & Sharrett, 2009, p. 10).

Women typically enter the superintendency much later in their career than their male counterparts. In a 10-year study conducted by Thomas Glass, women acknowledged that the role of the superintendent requires over 50 hours a week and often requires many late-night and evening commitments (Glass, 2000). Women were making a conscious choice not to pursue the role of a school superintendent due to their perception of and commitment to their role in the home, which included family responsibilities. "Many women do a "double-day", they are expected to adopt the same work patterns as their male counterparts on the job and still perform all the traditional female duties at home" (Derrington & Sharrett, 2009, p. 11). The role of a

mother can very well prohibit or restrain women from entering superintendency until much later in life (Glass, 2000). This phenomenon is alarming considering that while more women have entered the workforce, and advances in technology have eased many household duties, women still feel a tug of guilt and responsibility if they cannot achieve both career and family, ultimately placing family over career. Married mothers increased their household responsibilities over time (from 10.6 hours a week in 1965 to 12.9 hours a week in 2000), even despite an increase in married fathers taking on more responsibilities in domestic duties at home (Parker, 2022).

Self-perceived barriers extend beyond family responsibilities. The term "imposter syndrome" has frequently been attributed to a barrier that women face when it comes to positions of leadership and greater responsibility. The term refers to an internal idea or experience of fooling others into believing they are qualified for their role. Despite their high degrees, professional work experience, and intellectual capacity, they have a strong belief that they are not intelligent and therefore not qualified (Clance & Imes, 1978). In a study conducted by Georgia State University students Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, the researchers closely interviewed over 150 highly successful women and found:

> The imposter is so convinced her belief is correct that nothing can be done to change it…that if she revealed her assumption of unique feelings of phoniness she would meet with criticism or at least very little understanding on the part of others. We have been amazed at the self-perpetuating nature of the imposter syndrome with the pervasiveness and longevity of the imposter feelings of our high achieving women, with her continual discounting of their own abilities and persistent fear of failure. (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 6)

Leadership roles assume certain stereotypes which hold true today. “Think manager, think male” was coined by researchers Schein and Davidson. In this phenomenon, key attributes of successful top-level managers were stereotypically male attributes (Schein & Davidson, 1993). This phenomenon is still prevalent today among men and women alike. Many job descriptions for school superintendents include male-stereotyped attributes in the job descriptions as well as the questions in the interview process. When traits are assigned to gender-specific roles, then assumptions and stereotypes serve as the gatekeeper. This becomes problematic when these same implicit biases closely associated with male dominance filter into the recruiting, interviewing, and therefore the hiring practices. In general, women tend to withhold applying to these positions when they themselves subconsciously “think manager, think male”, doubting their qualifications would meet the criteria of the job description. More often than not, men will apply for a leadership position if they meet 60% of the qualifications listed in the job description, while women will only apply if they have met 100% of the descriptors outlined in the job description (Ramaswamy, 2020). This self-doubt is frequently attributed to why more women maintain building-level or central office-level leadership positions for longer durations of time compared to their male counterparts.

Support Systems for Women

Both internal and external barriers continue to perpetuate the gender gap for women superintendents across the United States. Research has suggested there is evidence that intentionality in mentoring programs for recruiting and sustaining female leadership in education can be successful (Gardiner et al., 2000). In educational mentorship, the lack of female leadership at top levels has made it difficult for aspiring female leaders to find senior, successful

female leaders, who might serve as mentors. In a study conducted by S. Edson in 1995 on aspiring school administrators, 42% of women who went on to successful careers in administration identified mentors that they leaned on to support them entering and maintaining a successful career as an administrator (Gardiner et al., 2000). The same study was duplicated in 1996 and found that 92 out of 151 women attributed their success in administrative roles, varying from school administration to superintendency, was possibly due to having a significant number of positive role models and mentors in their lives (Gardiner et al., 2000). Given the isolation characteristic of the role of a female superintendent, strong personal and professional systems may be attributed to the success of those currently in the position of a female superintendent.

Mentorship

Mentoring is an accepted form of identifying and promoting talent in all types of organizations. For the purpose of this study, mentoring is defined as a mechanism of change to support female leaders by sharing inside information and coaching women leaders on how to work within the power structures that exist in a male-dominated system (Gardiner et al., 2000). Mentorship can range from formal to informal in nature. Some businesses pair senior employees with new employees to help induct them into the organization. Informal mentorships are more organic in nature and occur more naturally without the help of a specific program or employment capacity. These informal mentorships tend to be more authentic and personal to both the mentor and mentee. While mentors may not be a “one-size fits all”, it is helpful to understand that multiple mentors may serve a variety of purposes for each individual.

To break this cycle of gender oppression, we need to interrupt the systems and break stereotypes. Often the pathway to the superintendency for women is constrained due to an absence of extensive female networking and support systems. Mentors provide the capacity for

females to access the inside support they need to navigate the political inner workings as well as provide the necessary personal support to gain access to and survive top positions that are overwhelmingly served by males. Recognizing the importance for mentorship of women, many organizations have made concerted attempts to provide intentional mentorship outreach to women. In a recent conversation with two directors from Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA), offering intentional networking opportunities for women aspiring to the top levels of school district leadership has seen a significant increase in attendees. According to a personal communication with Kim Fry, WASA's professional learning coordinator and former superintendent of the Rochester School District in Washington State, three years ago, WASA held their first Women in Leadership conference, attended by 25 women. By contrast, in 2023 more than 200 women have signed up to attend the Women in Leadership Conference.

In researching the disproportionality of female superintendents to male superintendents, researcher Teresa Wallace (2015) identified four main challenges that women face when compared to their male counterparts: women take a longer career path before becoming a superintendent, women work under more pressure to balance family and work life than men, overcoming gender bias in the job description and interview process, and finding other qualified and supportive female mentors who have overcome these barriers. Female leaders who have successful women leaders with whom to share their experiences and stories in their journey to overcome these barriers further help recruit and support more females into the role of a superintendent (Arriaga et al., 2020). Traditionally, women have had to seek male mentors while serving as a superintendent due to limited access to other successful female superintendents. Yet, gender matters when it comes to supporting women. Women tend to benefit from cultures of

collaboration over competitive environments. Women who belong to an inclusive group of supportive women are more likely to find success at the top (Arriaga et al, 2020).

In educational administration, success is often defined by who you know. Typically, mentorship is a relationship established between a mentor and a protegee, someone whom the mentor believes has the potential to advance personally and professionally (Gardiner, 2000). In educational settings, mentorship has traditionally been cast as the "old-boys network" (Gupton & Slick, 1996). In order to climb to the top, you need someone who sees themselves in who their next protégé will be. With very few women at the top, looking for gender-like role models, or protégés, becomes challenging.

Attributes of a Mentor

Mentors are often seen as experienced, well-seasoned veterans who have knowledge, occupy top management positions, and have a high quality and active internal and external networking system that advocates for and prepares candidates for advancement. Mentors consistently provide professional development support for their mentee by sharing resources, materials, and feedback. In the world of education, mentors have often taken the form of retired or senior educators who have status within the organization. Typically, since the majority of these mentoring roles of senior mentors have been held by white males, most mentors for female superintendents have tended to be white males (Arriaga et al., 2020). The term "sponsor" has often become synonymous with the term "mentor." A sponsor alone is one who holds positional power in networking and hiring. While these two terms have been used interchangeably in the educational world, for the purpose of this study, I have focused on mentorship. Specifically, this study examined the attributes of a successful mentor by the shared experiences of sitting female

superintendents. Moreover, these stories helped clarify, shape, and further define the role of a mentor for obtaining and sustaining the role of a superintendent as a female.

Conceptual Frameworks

For the purpose of this study, I will defer to the work of Gall, Gall, and Borg (2006), and further outlined in the work of Wallace, 2015. The researchers identified the need for a grounded research model referred to as a conceptual framework. Conceptual frameworks support and guide the research into organized and logical interrelated terms throughout the study (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2009) (Wallace, 2015). The framework, therefore, serves as a structure in which these phenomena reside within a given theory. The conceptual frameworks will assist how these concepts are operationalized and measured for the purpose of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

This study adds to the body of research and exploration of two intersecting theories. The first theory is grounded in the research of Bandura's self-efficacy theory, specifically, the culture associated with gender roles as introspective and retrospective (Locke & Latham, 2009). The second theory, feminism theory, is more pronounced in this study and addresses the gender barriers faced by women in positions of leadership and authority. Feminism theory allows the researcher to understand the nature of inequality told through the lens of lived experiences of women by examining how their roles and experience shape these inequalities over time and enables the researcher to unlock how the participants interact within "systems and possibly offer solutions to confront and eradicate oppressive systems and structures. Feminist theory considers the lived experience of any person/people, not just women, with an emphasis on oppression" (Arinder, 2020, p. 2). I researched and applied these theoretical frameworks to understand better

the issues some women superintendents face as well as the methods that have been successful in overcoming barriers.

Feminism Theory

Feminism theory provides a framework for understanding the experiences women face through life stories. Feminism theories bring political and social power to the forefront by highlighting the oppression and gender inequality women face in society. Feminist researchers have used their research and understanding these phenomena of gender inequality, oppression, and sexism to understand better how we can deconstruct the institutional barriers that continue to restrict women leaders' advancement professionally. When it comes to issues of social and political marginalization, those who have experienced oppression and marginalization themselves often have a unique perspective and insight that can be productive for inquiry and problem solving. However, it is important to recognize that those who occupy positions of social and political privilege, even if they are not directly impacted by marginalization, have a responsibility to understand and address these issues. Feminists who have successfully overcome systemic barriers have much to teach us. The feminism theory approach allows us to overcome gender oppression by identifying key barriers and developing an awareness to address this phenomenon. Researcher Jo Ann Arinder uses the feminist theory to shift the power for unrepresented women because "when power and oppression are acknowledged and disrupted, understanding, advocacy, and change can occur" (Arinder, 2020, p.1).

By acknowledging and understanding the barriers women face in political and social situations, oppressors can shift away from oppression, injustice, and inequality and work to disrupt the systems and co-construct more inclusive and equitable experiences for women (Arinder, 2020) . Organizational structures and hierarchy play a key role for many institutions

when it comes to career advancement. Learning from the lived experiences of women is one strategy that the feminist researchers have found most influential in their work to educate and help eradicate all forms of oppression.

By applying the feminist framework to the role of the superintendent, we can understand better the social paradigm. In particular, we can explore through the feminism framework why there are so few women in these top roles. In the United States, the superintendent is the chief visionary, advocate, communicator, and negotiator who wields a tremendous influence over the quality of teaching and learning that occurs under his/her stewardship (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). The role of administrators or educational leaders is influenced by the duties they are expected to perform. Superintendents are expected to step into the role of a politician, manage personnel, secure fiscal resources, negotiate contracts, and organize workflow within the system, as well as implement solid instructional practices across the system.

Educational leaders' behaviors and expectations are influenced by society's image and expectation of leadership, dominance, confidence, authority. These ideations and expectations for the role of a superintendent are associated with the characteristics closely associated with men, which creates a bias when it comes to hiring and accepting women as top leaders, regardless of their experience and record. In a recent article published by EdWeek, not only did men make up 72% of the superintendents in the United States, 27.8% of those male superintendents had the same 15 first names (Peetz, 2023, p. 1). This seems to be concerning especially when “over two-thirds of superintendents newly hired in the past three years were men and more than half of the superintendents hired between 2019 and 2023 were men who replaced other men whereas another 18% were men who replaced women superintendents" (Peetz, 2023).

Even though trends have been interrupted over time, the pattern still remains: women dominate the teaching profession, while males dominate the top roles in education: central office administration roles and principalship at the secondary levels and the role of the school superintendent. In the latest 10-year examination of the profession, AASA found that women accounted for 297 of the 2,262 superintendents in that study. Of the 297 women superintendents in the AASA study, 130 were former elementary teachers (Glass, 2000). The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 seemed to have a more damaging impact on women seeking superintendent positions. At the height of the pandemic, out of 500 of the largest school districts in the country, 186 saw a dramatic turn over in superintendents; these districts overwhelmingly hired males as replacements (Sawchuk, 2022). The pandemic turned education upside down, forcing many female educators and women in leadership roles to take leaves in order to care for and balance their own family needs. In a report released in September 2021 by the National Superintendents Roundtable, out of 400 male and female superintendents surveyed, the report revealed that these superintendents revealed that COVID-19 was the hardest year of their career due to stress of the pandemic, politics, safety concerns, and staffing shortages. In the same study, while 83% remained in their role, over two-thirds contemplated quitting (Arundel, 2022). “Despite clear evidence that women leaders are underrepresented in education, even when they are equally or better qualified than the men being appointed, the majority of women who leave superintendent positions are still being replaced by men” (Rafel-Baer, J, 2022 as cited in Arundel, 2022, p. 1).

In the largest school districts across the nation, women remain underrepresented at a higher rate. In 2020, 150 of the largest 500 school districts in the United States had female superintendents (Arundel, 2022). As many superintendents and school boards endured heated school board meetings and unreasonable demands from their community and a daily barrage of

criticism, female superintendents faced criticism that was abusive, threatening, and gendered in nature (Sawchuk, 2022). In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020-2022, 94 of the female superintendents in the largest school districts across our nation left their positions, but only 32 of these were replaced by other females; the 62 remaining positions were filled by men (Arundel, 2022).

Feminism theory not only values women's experiences as the focus of attention, but it also sheds light on the stereotypical attributes most closely associated with the role of school superintendent to understand more clearly these injustices. Feminism as a theory rests on assumptions that exist between oppression and personal and collective actions. For example, feminism theory allows the researcher to recognize people, women, as agents participating in their own realities, and that by understanding these realities, we can deconstruct and understand these barriers and so allow us to reconstruct systems to better support women in closing the gender gap for the superintendency (Gardiner, 2000).

Self-Efficacy Theory

The second and perhaps more pronounced theoretical framework is self-efficacy. Psychologist and professor of psychology, Alfred Bandura is a well-known theorist. Bandura explains:

> Perceived self-efficacy occupies a pivotal role in casual structures because it affects human functioning not only directly, but through its impact on other important classes of determinants. These determinants include goal aspirations. Incentives and disincentives rooted in outcome expectations, and perceived impediments and opportunity structures in social systems. (*Albert Bandura's, 2021*)

Nothing is more important in our lives than feeling our contributions make a difference in the lives of others. Women tend to believe that when it comes to leader versus follower, we are more apt to be the influencers on the ground, the followers. In the most primitive form, women are nurturers. When it comes to stepping on the stage and into the leader role, women tend to self-doubt in their abilities. “Human behavior is extensively motivated and regulated through the exercise of self-influence” explains Bandura in his research on self-efficacy (Bandura, 2009, p. 179). When faced with challenging situations, those who experience low self-esteem in their skills or abilities will doubt themselves and eventually step down or permanently give up. However, those who have a strong belief in their skills and abilities tend to step up to the challenges when faced with adversity. Self-efficacy is perception of one’s abilities; “When one is faced with obstacles, or failures, those who doubt their capabilities slacken their efforts. Give up prematurely, or settle for poorer solutions. Those who have a strong belief in their capabilities redouble their effort to master the challenge” (Bandura, 2009, p. 180). Self is a form of identity that is constantly being created and recreated through experiences, social interactions, and discourse (Gardiner, 2000). In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, “Your beliefs become your thoughts. Your thoughts become your words. Your words become your actions. Your actions become your habits. Your habits become your values. Your values become your destiny” (Ganguly, 2019, p. 1). While self-efficacy is evident in males and females alike, women tend to experience great self-doubt when it comes to male-dominated careers.

Summary

As the research shows, women continue to be underrepresented and unsupported in obtaining the superintendency. While the review of literature considers many obstacles to this phenomenon, women continue to be underrepresented in the superintendent role. An emerging

theme throughout the literature review indicates that women who have people who look like them and serve in the capacity of a mentor or role model help to promote and support women into the superintendent role. To look more closely into this critical research, I have overlaid two key conceptual frameworks: self-efficacy and feminism theories.

Understanding how these theories co-exist in this theoretical framework will help to deconstruct the vast difference in rights, access, and opportunities for women compared to their male counterparts. These frameworks not only provide context for this research study, they provide a structured approach in our quest to close the gender gap, eliminate inequity for women and women of color, and in particular, allow women to step into roles as educational leaders.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

The qualitative research design sought to add to existing research on the impact of mentorship for attracting and sustaining women into the superintendency. In order to understand better the barriers that preclude access to women, this research elevates the personal voice of women who have earned the superintendent's chair in school districts in the state of Washington by a narrative inquiry approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). "Narrative is an ancient practice of human culture, enhanced today with technologies, personal mobilities, and intercultural connections" (Daiute, 2014, p. xviii). For this particular research study, narrative inquiry allowed the researcher and participants to build trust over time and create a platform for honest, trustworthy dialogue that naturally assists in unpacking the perceived and lived barriers women face. These first-person accounts constitute the narrative text and will serve as the data set for which this research will be analyzed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34). This qualitative strategy is effective in understanding the challenges women face and fundamental structures that have kept women from leadership roles. Participants' narratives shed light on the barriers as well as the opportunities found with the support of a mentor. Qualitative researchers recognize that reality is subjective and complex, and seek to capture this complexity by engaging with participants in a meaningful and respectful way.

Through the narrative inquiry process, participants shared their perspectives on the existing gender gap and addressed the potential impact that mentorship has on elevating women to leadership positions and the care to support and sustain women once they have achieved the leadership position of a public-school superintendent. This qualitative research study will

provide rich, detailed insights into the lived experiences of these women, and to challenge dominant narratives and assumptions about the women in the superintendent seat.

Purpose of the Study

The significance of this study is to examine closely the extent to which a gender gap continues to persist for female superintendents by understanding the impact that mentors have had in their pursuit of and sustainability in their current role as a successful superintendent. While similar studies have demonstrated the significance in mentorship for women in top CEO and leadership roles outside of education, limited data exist for women in education and for female superintendents in particular. Data show that women outpace men when it comes to degrees and classroom experiences, yet women are underrepresented in the top roles in our educational systems. A similar, though less pronounced, skewing is evident in the school board roles across the country where 51% of school board members are men (Vail, 2020). From the boardroom to the superintendent's office, men continue to dominate top leadership positions across the country and nation. Despite an increasing number of women who aspire to and attain the role of school superintendent, female superintendents remain in the minority among school district CEO positions. In a 2020 Superintendent Decennial study published by AASA, The American Association of School Administrators, females holding a superintendent position increased slightly from 24.1 % in 2010 to 26.68% in 2020. The study also found that women ascended into central office leadership positions at a rate higher than women in Fortune 500 S&P positions which have held steady at 5.4% (Goldman, 2020).

Among the perpetual and historic barriers that have shaped the labyrinth in school leadership is the paucity of mentors for female superintendents. Understanding the tremendous impact that a mentor has on preparing female leaders for access to these highly compensated and

sought-out positions may be a way in which we can begin to understand and address the gender gap for superintendents across our nation. "With a greater understanding of what stands in the way of gender-balanced leadership, we draw nearer to attaining it in our time" (Eagly, et al, 2003, p. 71). Other barriers have abetted the disproportionality, including parental barriers, which may delay a women's decision to pursue the superintendent role (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). The purpose of this study is to gather information from current female superintendents in the state of Washington who are within their first three years of their first superintendency to identify the extent to which mentoring impacted them in their journey to becoming and sustaining a superintendent role.

Research Design

"Tell the story of the mountain you climbed. Your words could become a page in someone else's survival guide." –Morgan Harper Nicols (2023)

Stories are a powerful and alternative way in which researchers share data, facts, and figures. When people share their stories, they take the audience on a lifelong journey through time moving in and out of perspectives, facts, and lived experiences. Stories are the fabric of our society's history and have outlasted statistical data. Social scientist and researcher Brene Brown states in her most recent book, *Rising Strong: How our ability to reset transforms the ways we live, love, parent, and lead:* "Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing we'll ever do" (Brown, 2017, p.73).

Some researchers dismiss narrative inquiry as mere storytelling. In-depth, narrative inquiry is a qualitative interview process that sharply contrasts to the work of quantitative data gathering (Rubin & Rubin, 2016). Rather than stripping away the richness in the experiences of people to be replaced with data and numbers, narrative inquiry allows individuals to share their

lived experiences in a manner that is open, honest, and raw, leaving behind a trail of themes for the researcher to organize and weave together in order to tell a universal story. An abundance of research data exists on the gender gap, and this gap continues to persist over time. Using narrative inquiry is a rich method to share lived experiences to get beneath the hard facts and uncover the emotional experiences of this phenomenon. In capturing stories, the researcher hopes to thread the needle on gender inequality of school superintendents and patch together a tapestry of action steps that can be considered, implemented, and corrected in order to turn the corner on females in leadership positions across the nation. As poet Margan Harper Nicols once wrote, “Tell the story of the mountain you climbed. Your words could become a page in someone else’s survival guide” (Harper Nicols, 2023).

This qualitative study used a narrative approach to document the beliefs, experiences, and work associated with female participants’ role as a current superintendent. The role of the superintendent is fast paced, challenging, and highly complex. By focusing on superintendents who are within their first three years, I was able to gather perspectives from females relatively fresh in their superintendent role allowing the participants to share their most current experiences as they relate to their ascension into the superintendency.

Phase I

To initiate the study, all qualified participants who were current female superintendents in Washington state within their first three years of their first superintendency and a member of Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) were sent an email introduction about the research study. Embedded in the initial email was a survey link for participants willing to provide feedback as well as information for those who wished to participate in the comprehensive research study.

I asked interested participants to provide the following information: Name, age, ethnicity, gender preference, email, phone number, current role, number of years in which they have served in their current role, name of school district, and current student population of the school district in which they work. An open-ended format was used to capture experiences of these participants using the following questions:

1. Describe your mentoring experience on your path to becoming a superintendent.
2. What characteristics or attributes of these experiences were beneficial?
3. How did mentoring support you in obtaining your current position?
4. What does mentoring look like for you in your current role as a mentor or mentee?

Prior to beginning the initial survey, I field-tested survey questions with three current female superintendents who had more than three years of experience in the state of Washington, two sitting assistant superintendents, and two committee chairs. The survey questions were embedded in a Google Forms link, which was field tested by a current superintendent. I conducted this test for ease of access, accuracy, and fluidity in the survey formatting structure.

The initial intent was to divide the data into categories:

- Age: below age 45 and age 45 and above
- Ethnicity
- District enrollment into three categories: less than 2,000 students, between 2,000 - 4, 000 students, and greater than 4, 000.

This purposeful sampling was intentional to help ensure appropriate participant representation and to avoid redundancy in the data. The total number possible of this group was 23 based on the database from WASA and local ESD (Educational Service District) superintendents. WASA and

all ESD superintendents were notified about the survey via email, as well as a follow-up phone call to their administrative assistants. I also searched each school district's website, as well as school directories, to confirm the data was accurate and aligned with both of my data sources. From there, I created an excel spreadsheet of each possible participant, sorted by the size of their district, ESD region, email contact, and phone number.

The initial survey was sent out to all 23 female superintendents who met the criteria I had set for my participant sample. The survey was sent by email at the end of January 2023 with a Google Forms hyperlink embedded within the body of the email. The email outlined the nature of the study (Appendix A and Appendix C) and linked a Google Form that asked 13 questions, as noted in Appendix D. Out of 23 email invitations sent, 12 responded. Of the 12 that responded, 75% were white, 16.7% were Asian, and 8.3% were Hispanic/Latino(a). 50% of the respondents were within their first year of their superintendent role, 41% were in their second year, and the remaining 8.3% were in their third year. All of these respondents identified as female.

Phase II

The second phase of the research study was focused on identifying a total of 10 women who would be interested in participating in the research component of the study. Understanding the time sensitivity of this study and the job demands of superintendents, identifying 10 potential participants allowed me the flexibility to select from a larger list of participants if time constraints or last-minute cancellations were of concern. After selecting 10 potential participants, my next step was to divide participants into three categories: half of the participants above the age of 45 and older, half below the age of 45; ethnicity; and equal distribution based on school size: fewer than 2,000, between 2,000 - 4,000, and greater than 4,000. However, after receiving data from the survey, it was not possible to divide by these two categories. None of the

superintendents were below the age of 45; and, due to the sensitivity expressed in the initial responses, dividing by ethnicity and school size would have rendered disguising the identity of the participants impossible. Therefore, to protect the confidentiality of the research participants, ethnicity and school district size were not attached to the individual participants in this study.

I notified all 10 of the participants by email (Appendix C), and I followed up with a personal phone call or Google Meet. I provided an overview of the study "The Impact of Mentoring for Current Female Superintendents" (Appendix A) and consent form (Appendix B) in advance of my initial conversation with the participant. After having an initial meeting, the potential participants were provided an option to decline further participation in the study. Based on this initial conversation, the information allowed me to decline a participant who would not be available or willing to commit fully to the research study, allowing flexibility in purposefully narrowing the list. At the end of this process, I selected six participants for this study.

Due to scheduling conflicts and cancellations, I was able to interview five, not six, participants. After participants provided verbal consent, interviews with each participant took place on an individual basis lasting from 90 minutes to two hours and 12 minutes through a Google meet platform. Although each participant was offered the option of interviewing in person or remotely, all five of the participants selected a virtual interview due to availability. One of these interviews occurred on a Saturday, the rest of these interviews took place during the week. I asked two of the participants to respond to follow up questions via phone, conversations that lasted no more than 20 minutes.

Research Questions

This qualitative study focused on five essential questions based on the research surrounding mentorship:

- What kinds of mentoring do female school superintendents experience on their pathway to becoming chief executive of a school district?
- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably positive or beneficial?
- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably negative or not beneficial?
- To what extent, or in what ways, do current female superintendents seek opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with other female school leaders?

Setting and Instrumentation

I gave participants the option to participate remotely or in person. The purpose of the choice in setting was to allow the participant to select the method that was most convenient for their time and a location that they felt was safe to respond freely and in a confidential manner.

Due to the sensitivity of this topic and the targeted audience, I implemented a responsive and semi-structured interviewing style for this qualitative study. Responsive interviewing is a gentle approach to interviewing; it is a process that builds trust between the interviewee and interviewer and allows more elasticity in the conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2016). The interviewer is more often the partner in the conversation and does not dominate the conversation. This process allows the interviewer and interviewee to engage in the conversation jointly and actively, building respect and trust along the way. Because personal stories shared by the interviewees can evoke emotion and the potential to say something embarrassing, interviewers have the obligation to protect their interviewees in this process, assuming a fair degree of reciprocity (Rubin & Rubin, 2016).

To maintain a framework to ensure that the key research questions were being addressed, the semi-structured interview process allowed the conversations to flow at a comfortable pace while ensuring the questions essential to the study were being addressed and were adapted to the context of each particular interview. Semi- structured questions allowed the interviewee to answer questions with clarity and detail and, as necessary, go into depth when they felt a topic was of importance to their journey (Rubin & Rubin, 2016). Establishing a detailed structure for the responsive interviewing process is a research strategy employed by Rubin and Rubin (Rubin & Rubin, 2016). Unlike survey questions, each interview is uniquely different; therefore, each person's story and lived experiences are equally unique (Rubin & Rubin, 2016). By using these two interviewing techniques, I was able to look for the richness and nuances associated with the questioning strategy, which allowed me to elevate key moments and guide the conversation deeper, as needed, to understand better the details of the conversation most closely associated with my research topic.

I used Google surveys to capture the initial criteria qualifications, potential interest, and demographic data which included: Name, age, ethnicity, name of school district, current student population of the school district in which they work, gender preference, years in current position, and total years' experience as a superintendent.

I used Google technology to capture, record, and transcribe all interview data. For participants who selected remote participation, Google Meet and Zoom were the platforms used to conduct the interviews. Cameras embedded in Google Meet and ZOOM were used for the interviewer and interviewee. I recorded and archived all remote interviews in a secure and encrypted digital platform. Each participant gave permission in advance for all recordings of in-

person and remote interviews. One participant was not comfortable with the Google recording but allowed Google Translation feature to be used during her interview.

Procedures and Data Collection

After all five interviews were complete, I uploaded the recorded transcripts to Google documents. I edited each interview for accuracy and corrected errors in grammar and spelling. The Google recording was used as a cross reference tool when the transcript did not capture accurate information. In addition, I took personal notes during each interview, a tool that also served as a cross reference when editing each transcript. Once all transcripts were "cleaned up", I saved these documents to Microsoft Word and redacted the names of the original participants. I used different colors embedded in the digital tools to identify powerful direct quotes, common key words and phrases, questions, and emerging themes. Since the interviews were also recorded using Google Meet, I compared the transcripts with the recordings. When the interviewee used body language to make a statement, I noted this in the comment box next to the coordinating transcript.

Data Analysis

After all editing was complete, I printed a clean copy of each transcript and then re-read each transcript, in chronological order. This allowed me to "sit" with the transcripts and re-read each one individually for tone and overall context, omitting to the extent possible any overt bias in my thinking. Using Rubin and Rubin's (2016) seven step method for data analysis in the responsive interviewing model, the first and most important step was coding the transcripts. Using the Delve platform, I uploaded all of the clean transcripts to the Delve software platform (https://delvetool.com/) to begin my qualitative coding process. Qualitative coding allows the researcher to use unstructured data from transcripts systematically and look for emerging

patterns and themes. During this process, I implemented both inductive and deductive coding methods. I started with deductive coding as determined by my research questions:

- What kinds of mentoring do female school superintendents experience on their pathway to becoming chief executive of a school district?
- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably positive or beneficial?
- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably negative or not beneficial?
- To what extent, or in what ways, do current female superintendents seek opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with other female school leaders?

From there, I went back through my transcripts to search for codes outside of the essential research questions but emerged as recurring patterns throughout the transcripts. Once completed, I clarified my codes by looking for redundancy and omitted codes that lacked multiple data points from the transcripts. Once I had completed coding, I identified themes and sorted the codes by themes. Themes describe or explain what is occurring within the research study about what is happening (Rubin & Rubin, 2016). It was important during this process that the themes became organic to the transcripts and did not rely heavily on the research literature. This was also true for the coding process.

Limitations

In the process of qualitative research, the research assumes the role of data collector (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As such, there are inherent limitations in this process that may affect

the subjectivity of the study. This is essential when moving forward with data collection, and monitoring the implicit bias that is part of the subjectivity of this form of data collection.

In the review of literature, my focus remained on gender, and I did not look at the intersectionality within the gender gap. While white women superintendents make up 89.2% of total populations of female superintendents in the United States, only 5.4 identified as black and 2.9 % as Latino (Finnan & McCord, 2016). This was particularly of interest to my research as the participants were a highly diverse group of women. However, due to the confidentiality and ensuring non-identifiable data, I needed to be careful not to become distracted by these outliers when looking at the emerging themes in the data.

As qualitative research is mostly open-ended questioning, the participants have more control over the content of the data collected. Thus, the researcher is not able to verify the results objectively against the scenarios stated by the respondents (Chetty, 2016). While tools, such as Delve, can be used to mitigate this limitation, the collection of the data is determined by the researcher. This particular qualitative study required a labor-intensive analysis process such as categorization, recoding, etc. (Chetty, 2016) which can cause researcher fatigue when synthesizing the data. Similarly, qualitative research requires the researcher to obtain the targeted data from the group of respondents. This means that different conclusions are derived based on the same information depending on the personal characteristics of the researcher (Chetty, 2016).

Identifiable Limitations and Subject Positioning

This study focused on women superintendents within their first three years in their first superintendency in the state of Washington. In a recent report released in March 2022 by the International Labour Organization, in regional data Washington is ranked second to last when it comes to female superintendents who preside over one of the top 500 school districts across the

country where only 26% of these elite school districts are served by females (International Labor Organization, 2022). While there are many success stories of current female superintendents all across the country who have succeeded in their position for more than three years, this particular study captured the most recent mentorship memories and experiences of these women. This narrowed the possible participants in the study to less than 21 women, limiting my ability to divide further my participants by district size, ethnicity, and age.

Based on research and lived experiences, I hypothesized that women who are in larger districts have more social networks within the boundaries of their district, whereas smaller districts tend to be more remote and often more isolated in terms of social networking and support systems. My desire as a researcher was to make sure that the participants represented a diverse demographic of female superintendents in age, ethnicity, and school populations to provide broad experiences on the mentoring impact that these women experienced.

Chapter IV

Results

Reviewing the Research Questions

The significance of this qualitative study was to examine closely the extent to which mentoring impacted the persistent gender gap of female superintendents across the country using the narrative interviewing process. In a keynote address, University of Pittsburgh Pennsylvania's Dr. Charles Daugherty stated to the audience:

> We must make efforts to bring the number of women in leadership positions into closer proportion with the number of women in education. We owe this effort to our daughters, and to all future generations who will benefit from more inclusive educational institutions. (Soberhart, 2009, p. Xxi as cited by Wallace, 2015)

Dr. Rachel White, Assistant Professor at University of Tennessee at Knoxville, uncovered startling data in her 2022-2023 research suggesting there is a reason that we continue to see a gender gap in superintendent positions. Men hold over 72% of all superintendent positions in the country, a trend that is perpetual. In the last three years, over two thirds of superintendents hired were men who replaced men. While women make up 28% of the superintendents across the country, men with the same 15 names (Michael, David, John, Scott, Mark, Daniel, Brian, Stephen, James, Robert, Jason, Jeff, Kevin, Chris, and Matthew) make up 28%. (Sullivan, E. T., 2023). The data represents that, for every sitting female superintendent, there is a good chance that their supervisor or colleague is a white male with one of these names. The current research study sought to explore the impact of mentors, specifically the impact mentors had on the career trajectories of sitting female superintendents. From the outset of my consideration of this topic, several research questions have guided this inquiry:

- What kinds of mentoring do female school superintendents experience on their pathway to becoming chief executive of a school district?
- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably positive or beneficial?
- Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably negative or not beneficial?
- To what extent, or in what ways, do current female superintendents seek opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with other female school leaders?

To understand better why this gap exists, this qualitative research study explored the impact mentorship had on the lives and career paths of five women from early childhood to their current role as a sitting superintendent. To guide this study, I focused on four overarching interview questions:

1. Describe your mentoring experience on your path to becoming a superintendent.
2. What characteristics or attributes of these experiences were beneficial?
3. What characteristics or attributes of these experiences were negative, or not beneficial?
4. Describe your current networking and mentoring relationships with other female leaders.

I used the framework of questions in Appendix E. to further guide the conversations during the interview process for each participant.

Over the course of this chapter, I will present the themes and concepts that emerged from the interviews of these five women. I will define the attributes of mentors, explore different structures of mentorship, and carefully unpack successful and unsuccessful mentoring

experiences of these women. I will unfold these themes, definitions, and concepts in order of sequential understanding, starting with the overview of my research participants.

Preserving Confidentiality

For the purpose of my research study, I used the narrative inquiry as the vehicle for telling the stories of five female school superintendents. The primary purpose for implementing a narrative inquiry approach for this study was based on the premise that these women live storied lives; and through these personal stories, I will be able to give voice to this marginalized population of women that defied the odds in order to obtain a superintendent role. My hope was to uncover, through narrative storytelling of current female superintendents, how mentorship impacted their career trajectory and supported their navigation into one of the highest levels of school leadership positions in the United States.

In the United States the ethnic profile of female superintendents is 65% white, followed by 14% Hispanic or Latino, and 11% Black ("School Superintendent Demographics," 2023). While this study was not focused on ethnicity, the proportion of women of color in this population was greater than the national average. The results of this study are solely based on the lived experiences of these women and are not representative of the perceptions of other female superintendents who were not part of this study. Maintaining participant confidentiality while presenting rich, and often sensitive data, was extremely challenging due to several factors. In particular, the sampling size was smaller than originally anticipated. Out of 21 potential participants, only five were available to participate in the study. These five participants were from a variety of cultural backgrounds and experiences. However, given the limited number of female superintendents in the state of Washington, maintaining anonymity was particularly challenging. In order to maximize confidentiality of these women, given the sensitivity of

conversations, I have used pseudonyms. These profiles and names are not a true representation of their real identity. For tracking purposes and to ensure that each participant's voice can be identified in the themes and narratives that follow, I have identified these participants using the following pseudonyms: S'Alisa, Kiva, Felicia, Maria, and Winnie.

Table 1:

Superintendent Pseudonym Profiles

Name	Children	Relationship Status
S'Alisa	0	Married
Kiva	1, grown	Divorced
Felicia	3, grown	Married
Maria	0	Married
Winnie	1, grown	Married

Childhood Mentors and Influencers

To understand better the relationship between the mentor and mentees, I discovered that early influencers and mentors had deeply contributed to the success of these participants. For all of these women, their experience with mentors started early in their lives. Four of the women grew up in situational poverty where toxic stress was commonplace either in their home or their community. Situational poverty experienced during childhood can have adverse effects on adults throughout their lives. While this is not one of the frameworks grounded in my particular research study, it became a focus for early mentor intervention and support that proved to be pivotal in their self-actualization and self-efficacy journey.

Researchers Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes discovered through their observations that the lack of self-confidence begins to develop early in girls in relation to the family dynamic (Clance & Imes, 1978). Winnie shared her experience growing up in poverty:

> I think that there was a familiarity with college and a very strong emphasis on education, and that helped shape my view in life and other watershed moments in my experience with my own education; and so at age 12, I knew that I had to get out of poverty, and in order to do that I really needed to have an education.

Felicia, who was raised by her father and older brothers, talked about how the influence of abject poverty impacted her:

> I lived in a community where I saw a lot of failure. I saw a lot of financial failure, high death rates, a lot of dropouts, murders, and drug use. I saw all levels of it, society failure, friends who went to prison, who died, just so many things and still, what they held core to me was the value of relationships, family, and community. I think a lot of that influenced me.

From an early age, these women felt the need to survive and admitted they had "drive" to succeed at an early age. However, they didn't become aware of their internal drive until after their interactions with a mentor. Each of the women in this study recognized that their earliest unofficial mentor was a parent, teacher, or neighbor. They described the characteristics of these early mentors as someone who nurtured them, saw potential in them even if they did not see that same potential in themselves, and made them feel special.

S'Alisa recognized that school became a safe place to learn and credits several of her early teachers as mentors for elevating her confidence: "I couldn't believe what my teachers were telling me to do. They kept telling me, 'You can do this [college],' and I started to think if

they believed I could do it, then I've got to believe it too." S'Alisa recognizes that these early mentors continued to give her confidence and advocate on her behalf all through public school; she recalled, "I used to go back and visit [one of my mentors]. I never forgot about her. It was how she always made me feel, that I didn't have to be ashamed of myself. I was always scared but she made me feel like I belonged there."

For Felicia, her teachers became her maternal figures. In particular, it was her Kindergarten teacher who served as her earliest mentor:

> She loved each one of us. She had a big clawfoot tub in her classroom filled with books. I remember one time, we had this big Newsprint paper with the three lines, and we had to copy our spelling words off the board and write them down. I remember so clearly sitting in that tub trying to write. I could not copy off the board because I couldn't see it (due to my disability). She would say look again, and I would say "I can't see it." I kept copying the way I was seeing it, and she just would sit with me for hours and hours. I just remember her telling me, not in these exact words, but the message that fed my heart was, "Don't let this define you. People don't define you. You get to define yourself." And I think that was critical.

Other forms of early mentorship came from parental figures. For Maria, it wasn't until later in life that she was able to look back and recognize the power of her mother's mentorship: "My mother, she was a relic to us kids. She was a stay at home mom and was on a local board as an office figure. She was always involved in community events and organizations but she never saw herself as a teacher."

For Kiva, her early mentors supported her with establishing routines and discipline, making chores and homework part of her daily mentoring. Recognizing that her family did not

have a lot of money, Kiva's best friend's parents and family friends collectively took her under their wing.

> I went after school to babysit for a family that I also ended up working for after high school. They kept me busy because they knew that I wasn't close to my mom. I also spent a lot of time out of the home with my best friend's family. Between both of these families, they would always encourage me to go to college. They were a big influence on my career.

All of these women recognized that these early forms of mentorship had a longstanding impact on their lives. Common themes of specific mentoring qualities begin to emerge within the powerful stories described by these women. Early mentors provided a safe environment, encouragement, confidence, advice, and growth and equally served as the cheerleaders who helped these women discover, sharpen, and refine their identity.

Attributes of a Mentor

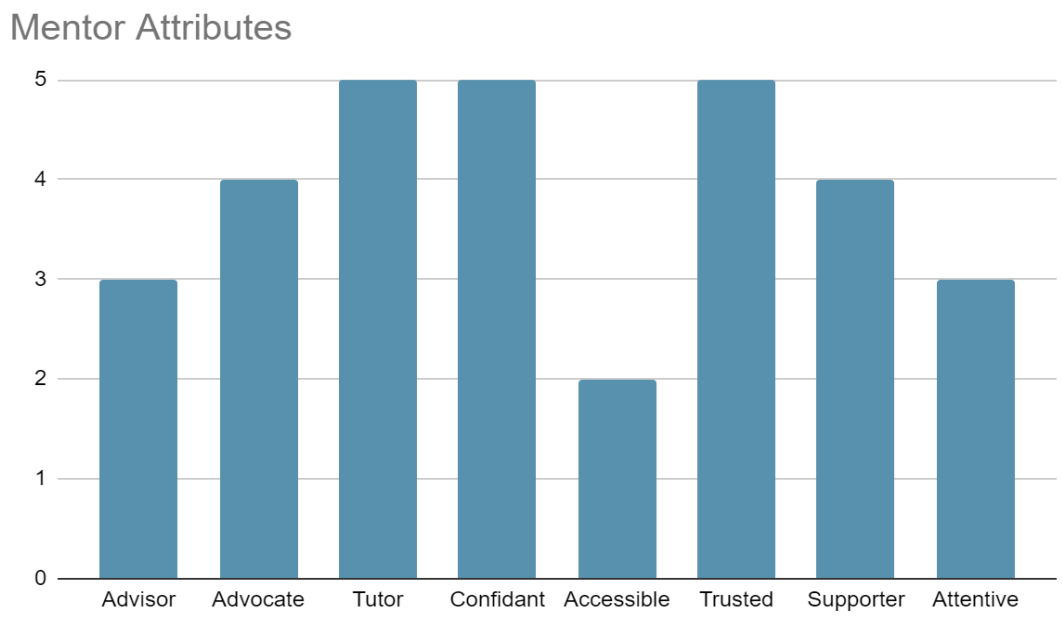
What defines a mentor? While mentors helped shape the lives and careers of these women from childhood to adulthood, all of the mentors had key common attributes that these women could identify as essential attributes. In research question (2), What characteristics or attributes of these experiences were beneficial? I asked these women to identify the attributes that best described their mentors when the mentoring experience was beneficial. The scale below represents each individual participant. Pulled together, the scale allows us to see how these terms were used by the participants to describe their mentors. See Table 2.

In the next section, the eight attributes are woven into the mentorship experiences of these women. As in the previous theme, each of the participants provided her perspective.

Weighing these attributes, Winnie described affirmation as one of the most powerful attributes in her mentoring experience:

Table 2:

Mentor Attributes



> Messages of affirmation in action, "I see you." It's the belief and words in action together. It's all of those mentors who actively sought opportunities for me, who tapped me on the shoulder when there was an opening they thought I should apply for and told me why I would be good. That kind of affirmation, continuously, that they believe in you, is so powerful.

Unfortunately, Several of the women expressed a feeling of being marginalized throughout their career. Women are not a statistical minority; however, they have less power and privilege than men, especially when it comes to the male-dominated career of the superintendency. For women, affirmation is especially powerful when you are in an environment as a minority. Winnie explains, "Even though I wasn't very confident, the emails, the

conversations, the messages of affirmation from my mentor—they sat with me, and later, at some point, they become a part of you." Words have power; and when mentors speak words of power and support for women seeking leadership positions, they have a greater influence and impact on those women than they realize (Arriaga et al., 2020). Affirmation was a powerful mentoring tool for these women when they struggled with self-doubt and the imposter syndrome. As described earlier in the study, the imposter syndrome is most notable in women and defined as one who is lacking the confidence to believe in their skills and abilities.

While affirmation was a prevalent descriptor for many of the mentors, one important aspect of affirmation was through direct observation. Mentees were able to describe how beneficial it was to have other women mentors to observe. By observing these female mentors navigate these marginalized spaces with confidence, it provided the mentees with affirmation that they, too, could have a seat at the table. In *Leading While Female,* authors Arriaga, Stanley, and Lindsey claim that it is important to understand that women are seen and served in varying degrees by the more dominant culture which requires leaders and mentors with more power and influence to recognize this and be intentional about creating spaces that intentionally make room for aspiring female leaders (Arriaga et al., 2020). Modeling is a powerful teaching tool, especially in rooms where oppression is part of the toxic culture. In a 1993 study, researchers Warner and DeFleur discovered that women who have a male mentor can be potentially advantageous for women in order to assist them with developing skills to navigate the power structures, especially in the "Good Ol' Boys network" of education (Warner & DeFleur, 1993). S'Alisa was able to observe interactions with her mentor at district-level meetings that supported her later in spaces where gender was a prevalent concern.

> We would have meetings at the district level where I would observe and then she and I would have debriefed meetings after. For example, if we were talking about curriculum, I would watch how she would share her ideas in a room where she and I were the only women. I would observe how she had to navigate that space differently because she was a woman. I got to see how she managed it and how at the same time she didn't compromise her ability to do a really great job and be a good leader. Like, she held her own, and they [the male leaders in the meetings] knew that. They respected her and so she helped me feel strong, too. I thought, "If she can do it, I can do it." She built me up.

Many of these women experienced invisibility, especially when they failed to receive any encouragement or acknowledgement from a mentor experience. Felicia referred to her experiences of affirmation more organically. She described how she had to learn how to navigate these oppressed structures and systems within her organization by debriefing with a colleague who served as her mentor.

> I could sit in a female space and talk and jab, but I had to code switch when I was in an all-white male space. I remember having all this internal dialogue, "Did that just happen? Am I seeing this differently?" Then I shared these with my mentor. He affirmed what I was experiencing. I would say, "Oh my gosh, like you saw it too?" It was like someone else was pulling back the curtain and narrating what I had been experiencing. It was just a feeling of being affirmed. I was able to watch other women in my organization navigate these biased and gender oppressed systems and learn from them. I was able to use that to gear up and prepare me for that next piece.

While the term code-switching refers to the ability to flip intentionally between two different worlds, the experiences of these women included being able to access the male-

dominated spaces by developing code switching skills learned through observations and conversations with their mentors.

Early Career Mentors

In the interviews, participants described early-career mentoring as a critical path to the superintendency. These experiences allowed these women to discover inner strengths and skills that, absent these occurrences, they may not have tapped into. When the participants reflected on their early-career mentors, they readily identified several mentors who encouraged them to pursue a leadership role in education. For the purpose of this next section, I defined mentorship by two categories: structured and unstructured. Structured mentorship is synonymous with a person or people with whom the mentee is associated with through an endorsed program, such as a professor in a college or university program. Structured mentors are also mentors who serve as a direct supervisor or program evaluator. The structured mentor is seen as a person of greater knowledge and experience, and in a position of influence and status. An unstructured mentor is a mentor who is a friend, neighbor, former classmate, or colleague to the mentee. An unstructured mentor is viewed as a person with whom the mentee has trust, common experiences, and a closer personal relationship. Interactions with an unstructured mentor are more intermittent and organic.

Structured Mentorship

Throughout the interview process, each participant was able to point to several examples of early-career mentors who helped shape their vision and experience in a leadership capacity. The majority of these mentors fell into the "structured" category. For some women, the initial idea of leadership was planted by someone with whom they worked directly, such as a supervisor or colleague. Among the most influential early career mentors were the visionary mentors,

mentors who allowed the mentee to see themselves as an educational leader. Here, S'Alisa shared her first experience with a visionary mentor:

> I actually thought it would be fun to be a principal because I got to see up close what he did; but I never really and I never thought I actually *could* until one day, a woman came into the office. She looked a lot like me. She just came prancing in, like she was all that and a bag of chips. I wondered, "Who is this?" She's just came into the office with…like you know…. confident. I thought, "Oh well then, I can totally do that." I thought if she can do it, it's possible for me to do that as well. Then, I just somehow knew I could.

This powerful visionary mentor became a close confidant and supporter throughout S'Alisa's career. "She's like my mother"; S'Alisa reflects on their relationship, "She is always mentoring me on jobs, how to get better, I have a great deal of respect for her."

Several women vividly remember their first experience of leadership. For most of these women, this idea of leadership came from the male supervisors of colleagues with whom they worked. Three of the women recalled with great clarity the day they were tapped on the shoulder by these men who not only supervised them, but pushed them to consider either applying for jobs or promoting them to someone else for a position. In this capacity, these structured mentors are both mentors, supporting and developing growth, as well as sponsors, promoting their work and their name to others.

When Maria was working at a middle school as an instructional coach, her supervising administrators were always supportive of her work and provided her ongoing feedback and encouraged her to consider maximizing her leadership potential. "I remember them saying, 'We want you to be a full-time intern because we know you will continue to grow as a leader and if you applied for the intern position, you could just focus on your internship and not have to worry

about teaching.' That became her first of many leadership opportunities prior to becoming a superintendent. "They saw my potential and gave me a lot of opportunities to grow and learn. I became a full-time principal intern, and I did everything," reflected Maria.

For Felicia, she was content being in the classroom as an elementary school teacher and never had a desire to move into a leadership position. "I never thought I would leave the classroom. My kindergarten teacher made an incredible impact on my life, and I wanted to do the same for my students." However, Felicia's principal saw leadership potential in her.

> I loved him and I admired him because as a principal he could show up in spaces and have a genuine relationship with kids, families, and staff. I just felt so honored by him. He was a remarkable individual to work for but also witnessed my work and tapped me for leadership on three occasions. I said no, no, no. The third time I applied for the job but during the interview I told them I did not want the job. I told the team that I loved teaching and only applied because my boss kept asking and he wasn't going to stop. I got the job but then told them I'd do it for one, maybe two years, and after that I wanted to go back to the classroom.

Felicia never returned to the classroom and continued to be supported and mentored by her principal throughout her time with the district.

Felicia, Maria, and S'Alisa, Winnie, and Kiva experienced some form of shoulder tapping as encouragement to pursue leadership by mentors for whom they had deep respect as a leader. These mentors saw beyond what these aspiring female leaders saw in themselves and recognized their talents and capabilities, setting in motion their career trajectory in educational leadership (Arriaga et al., 2020).

In several situations, these women spoke about their experiences with college-level mentors who nudged them into the superintendency and supported them every step of their journey. In particular, three women spoke about their cohort of mentors that was formed as a result of their enrollment in university programs for continuing education.

S'Alisa remembers speaking to her professor about the superintendent program. At the time, all the students enrolled in the program were in a district-level position.

> I remember telling her [my professor] that I could be the first. I signed up and I showed up to the first seminar and they're all these white men and a couple of white women. They were all directors or assistant directors. I was the only principal, but they were all great.

Over the course of that program, S'Alisa began developing connections with her cohort group, the members of which served as some of her most influential and supportive unstructured mentors. These cohort connections remain some of her most supportive allies.

Kiva spoke about how her co-workers and superintendent had seen potential in her skills and encouraged her to consider going back to school for her superintendent credentials. At the time, Kiva was a single mom living on one income. Feeling the pressure from her colleagues, all of whom were male and had earned doctorate degrees, Kiva felt their support as they continued to encourage and develop her leadership work. In addition, her superintendent at the time personally knew the professor of the program and endorsed her candidacy.

> I never pictured myself a superintendent until they put that idea in my head. They visualized it for me. They said, "You can do this." They gave me great feedback and pushed me to push myself. I was accepted into the program without having to go through the application process.

Career Advancement Mentors

For women to succeed in attaining the highest levels of education positions, mentoring must occur. The lack of mentors is a significant factor contributing to the persistent gap in women ascending into the superintendency (Weatherly, 2011). Mentoring experiences help women develop self-esteem, navigate aggressive managerial personalities, and non-traditional attitudes about women and employment. The nurturing of attitudes and characteristics would allow for success within and throughout the organization (Growe & Montgomery, 1999). When mentoring is done well, it can provide a great deal of support for mentees in learning how to navigate new challenges. S'Alisa worked with a mentor who helped her sharpen her superintendent skills at every opportunity and was intentional in ensuring she had multiple and diverse opportunities as an Assistant Superintendent on the job and out in the community.

> My superintendent was a male. Just a wonderful, good human. He supported me and he challenged me. He had high expectations that he didn't really verbalize those, they just were the expectations and I knew he expected me to do. He gave me a lot of opportunities and took me to all the Chamber [of Commerce] meetings, Kiwanis meetings, and Saturday Pancake feeds in the community. He wanted me to be a superintendent one day and wanted me to have these experiences because he knew that I wanted to be a superintendent.

For Maria, her superintendent also served as an early-career mentor when she moved to the district office as an Assistant Superintendent. For her, the idea of trust was important: "He completely trusted and relied on me for that instructional side of the house. I was able to do a lot of things in the system in an assistant superintendent role that in many districts I would not have been able to have done."

Kiva recognized that her former superintendent developed structures that allowed her to step into experiencing the superintendent role early in her career:

> I was doing the work of a superintendent: I filled in, I did board meetings. I covered when the superintendent was gone. They [Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent] just made it easy for me to learn the role of a superintendent. They also supported me when I needed to get away: I was a single mom. I couldn't imagine myself being in school because I had at the time my son to take care of. But they encouraged me to take online classes and gave me time to do that work. They also helped me with different ideas to present to the board on cash-out's so I could get enough money to pay for the classes.

Unstructured Mentorship

For all of these women, the mentoring capacity of unstructured mentorship elevated their self-esteem and boosted their confidence in knowledge, skills, and opportunities. For Maria, S'Alisa, and Winnie, their strongest support was from their cohort colleagues. As Maria reflected on her cohort, she said, "We pushed each other and we would challenge each other's thinking. That type of setting helped me grow and learn more than the leaders I worked with." Unstructured mentors also encourage the mentee to be vulnerable. For Winnie, it was a friend of hers on whom she leaned for advice and guidance who encouraged her to step into a district leadership role. "If it weren't for people who saw my potential and kind of pushed me and nudged me, I probably would have been content just being a principal—and not that there's anything wrong with that."

Obtaining a top-level executive position can be a lonely place. Many of the women in this study shared the challenges of experiencing loneliness in their work. Mentors do not always have

to have the best advice or most experience. As noted in Table 2, being a good listener is one of the most powerful attributes of a successful mentor. Felicia explains,

> Sometimes the support just looked like listening. But when you're in that corner, like a boxer, they go round and round and after a while, they can't sustain it. So they go back to their corner and they get cleaned up. They spit out whatever, they take a drink of water, but there is that person in their face telling them, "You got this, you can keep doing it." That's what it sometimes feels like. It wasn't that they [mentors] could do the fight for me; it wasn't that they could give me any more strength, but they could give me the words of "You can do it. I believe in you, I see you. I get it, but you gotta keep going."

For women like Felicia, friends and former colleagues were her strongest supporters.

It takes a certain level of humility to become a mentor. A selfless mentor makes you feel like you can confide in them without ego or threat. Winnie shared her experience with selfless mentorship:

> I don't mean modest humility. I mean humility, to be able to acknowledge that there are people out there who can be just as good if not better than you and to have the humility to accept that. You know, they may eclipse me, and I am just fine with that. Because if you feel threatened by somebody else, then you don't have humility.

Winnie knows that her time is demanding, but she can always count on her network of mentors to be available. "They're always there for you, they're accessible, they check in on you. 'Hey, how's it going?' They get to know you. 'What can I do to support you?'" Often, the role of a mentor can be a quick check in with a text, phone call, or email.

Unsuccessful Mentoring Experiences

As these women were able to share how positive mentoring experience influenced their early career, they also provided several examples of mentors who became obstacles in their journey to the superintendency. Mentors in the workplace can be seen as positive influences, as well as negative influences and have adverse effects on the leadership trajectory, especially if these structured mentors carry positional authority. "Mentoring in the workplace by a more senior level position is a common practice. However, not all workplace mentorships are productive and can potentially have lasting physical and psychological effects on the mentee" (Schnieders, 2018, p. 68). Winnie shared her experience with working with a mentor who was viewed by staff and administrators as being ineffective, as shared here: "What if I could be part of the solution? Maybe that's my way of addressing an issue because right now we're just drowning in the toxicity of this whole thing," Winnie asked her husband. Poor mentorship prompted some of these women to consider stepping into a leadership role because they felt compelled to change the system of ineffectiveness. Maria described how she processed her experience with her direct supervisor: "I can learn as much from a negative example as I can from a positive example, so in that sense, I was able to learn a lot from her". Maria also admits that, while this woman was ineffective in developing and growing Maria's leadership skills, she often gave Maria positive affirmations in her own way.

For two of the women who participated in the study, a formal mentor was assigned by their university. "At first, I felt like I was able to grow and learn a lot," mentioned one woman. However, when I started to apply for jobs, his [the mentor's] demeanor changed and I felt like an outcast," Kiva shared. She continued,

> When I got the job in another district, he made me leave immediately. It was like a bad breakup. I think he was hurt that he was not in control. He was really difficult to work for because he constantly let a lot of people go if they did not agree with him or had more control than he did. It was weird to watch, and you never know if you're next. Under those kinds of situations, it was hard to work.

Felicia, another superintendent who shared her experiences, was able to observe different mentoring support based on gender and status within her organization.

> I remember that year, my counterpart had applied and interviewed for a superintendent job. He was offered a lot of mentoring opportunities by our superintendent. They spent hours talking about contracts and even interview preparation, even outside of work together, with my superintendent helping him to prepare. When I was applying, I didn't have those same opportunities of support from him. In fact, when I told him I was considering applying for a position, he laughed. So I got help from a superintendent who had left our district a few years earlier. She helped prep me for the interview and application.

The Washington Association of School Administrators provides support for new superintendents through the Early Career Superintendent Academy. While the women all acknowledged that they participated in the new superintendent Early Career Superintendent Academy as well as the paired Mentor program, also supported by WASA, neither program was noted as extremely beneficial to the women. Felicia shared:

> When I first came to the superintendency, the very first thing I was told was, "I'm really surprised they hired a woman because you know, the last one they hired didn't really work"; and I thought, that's someone I won't be leaning on for support. Then they paired

> me with another female who was struggling. When I asked about the pairing, I was told, because she's in your region. I would have had a better experience with a male…. But I found another mentor. We had previously worked together. I think we help sponsor one another and I find that important. I also ended up hiring my own mentor to support me professionally.

In Maria's situation, she initially was paired with a female mentor whom she did not feel was a good fit.

> I wasn't afraid to email back and say I really don't feel that person is a good fit. I liked that person, but just not a good fit. I told them that I really would prefer someone from a smaller district who was a better fit. I was offered another name that I didn't know. I'd heard of her, and I did actually do some checking, read her stuff. I think there's some value in having some formal setup for a mentorship to try and understand from the mentee what they believe their needs are going to be.

Kiva is a superintendent in a district that is more remote than the other women interviewed in this study. Due to the size and location of her district, Kiva was interested in someone who could understand some of her unique needs. However, Kiva has yet to meet up with her assigned mentor. "She's busy. I get it. There are no hard feelings or anything, but I tried reaching out, especially because I wanted her perspective about board meetings," Kiva shared. When I asked why she was paired with that particular mentor, she stated, "A couple people asked me, 'Why her? She doesn't really have a lot of experience.' I got the sense that it was based only on gender. I don't think location should have to do with it necessarily."

For these women, the lack of intentionality in assigning mentors as part of Washington Association of School Administrators Superintendent Mentorship Program was not extremely

impactful unless they intentionally advocated for whom or what they wished to have in their mentor-mentee relationship. “Even though I am a superintendent now, I still do not feel like I can be myself when I’m in a room with other superintendents,” explains Winnie. Similar examples were provided by two other women. S’Alisa shared,

> I think I feel more of the imposter syndrome when I'm around other superintendents. Right before the retreat I thought, “What did I get myself into? Are they really going to take me seriously? Or am I gonna look like I don’t know what I’m talking about?”

Winne shared how she feels like she has to behave differently in her current role as a superintendent by code-switching in order to navigate the room dynamics. “I think there’s still this belief that you have to carry yourself in certain ways, but at home, I can be very, very silly.” When Felicia finds herself in a room that is predominantly male, she finds she has to pay careful attention to what she says and how she dresses.

> Being able to teach people they have to be able to code switch and be authentic at the same time is something that we all could use support with. Even in my current job, I'd say, “Well, I'm gonna just say it how I think.” Then I have to remind myself of the room and say, “You may not like what I have to say, but that's okay.” When I show up in that space, I always think about who my audience is. How do I dress? Do I look like them? Do I think about where they are in terms of language?

Felicia was not alone in her concerns about navigating a male dominated space; S’Alisa had a similar experience: “I have been told by my former superintendent that I’m too aggressive or I don’t show emotions. How can I when I also get told that when I cry I’m too emotional or when I’m passionate about something I’m too angry or aggressive? It’s exhausting, it’s really exhausting.”

For these women, navigating the role of a woman in a highly public role requires a trained skill set. Having mentors who can support them in this career development is critically important.

Mentoring Others

The last research question led me to understand how these women mentor other women into leadership positions. I asked them to describe their current networking and mentoring relationships with other female leaders. The feedback was interesting. Early-career mentors have a unique responsibility of elevating and advocating for women who do not have agency to advocate for themselves; however, when I initially asked who they mentor currently, all of these women had to consider the question. That led me to wonder how they first see themselves as a leader. I asked these women to share how others would define them as a leader (Table 3).

Table 3:

Self-Identified Leadership Attributes

Participant	Leadership Attributes
S'Alisa	Quiet, driven, persistent, caring, good listener
Kiva	Soft spoken, caring, good listener, hard worker
Felicia	Fearless, driven, hard worker, caring, likes to win, sees the big picture
Maria	Good listener, fair, transparent, collaborative, enjoys challenges
Winnie	Quiet, courageous, intentional, passionate, driven, visionary

S'Alisa shared, "I've had people say you have a caring nature, your heart is your superpower. That's been a really wonderful compliment." Winnie was proud of her evaluation by her board president, "She wrote that when I think about educational equity, I'm intentional." When I asked Winnie what that meant to her, she responded,

> That I am courageous, I'm not afraid to see the big picture and I am not afraid to make decisions that may be unpopular. But I will listen; and if I think that it is in the best interest of the students in the organization, I will make those decisions and I will have the courage to explain my rationale.

According to the Pew Research Center study on the public views on character traits most closely associated with successful public leaders, women outranked men in honesty, intelligence, compassion, and visionary leadership (Pew Research Center, 2020). Overall, the public believes the skills and character traits of women are stronger than those of men. So why is there still a gender gap in the superintendency?

As I discovered in my interviews with participants, and as confirmed in the extensive literature review about women in leadership roles, there are certain benefits to women mentoring other women. When women mentor other women, there is a unique unspoken heritage these mentors are able to hand down to their mentees as learned during their own rise to leadership (Gardiner et al., 2000). Mentoring allows women to display their inherent and developed leadership skills with other future leaders. Many women feel a burden of responsibility to mentor other women because they often feel that no one was there for them (Gardiner et al., 2000). Other reasons for mentoring is a certain "call-to-action" by these women who had endured experiences in their own journey that they felt were unjust or unfair. Winnie explains, "There are so many men at the table, and not just in education and leadership. I think that we, as female leaders, just need to be very aggressive in promoting other women and modeling in whatever way possible".

Mentoring aspiring leaders allows these women to help future aspiring leaders overcome these barriers. Felicia shared her inspiration for becoming a mentor:

> I knew I was the highest paid woman and the highest positioned woman in the organization, so if I wasn't willing to fight it [gender discrimination], then I was inadvertently telling every woman under me, “There's no place for you at this table.” I had spent my whole life that way and was not going to allow that to happen to other women.

Felicia admits that her desire to mentor comes from a sense of correcting the false narrative that women buy into.

> I had two women contact me about applying for superintendent jobs, and both of them wanted to. They met with recruiters who told them they weren't qualified to apply for a superintendent position because they didn’t have certain experiences that other applicants had. I was able to tell them, I heard all of that and I applied anyway.

The character traits of these women encompass the need or desire to do right, be compassionate, and not be afraid to do hard work. S’Alisa feels compelled to mentor others even though her work is demanding:

> You know, you get so busy and sometimes you don't know if you're helping that person or not. I do have people that later on will tell me. “Yeah, I saw you here, I saw you there”; and to hear how they have followed my career, it’s empowering. But I do reach out to connect with others, and I encourage them to consider leadership positions. If I see a scholarship come through, I make sure they know about it, and I write scholarship letters for them. I also mentor a former teacher, who worked under me, who I hired who's now in the doctoral and superintendent program.

For Winnie, she likes to empower those with whom she works, including her students:

I think that mentoring is so empowering, and we need to all do a better job as female leaders, myself included. We need to help others internalize their leadership potential. When you internalize this, it almost oozes out of you. So, when you're talking to young students, they see that you're in those roles, there's hope in that. But it's not easy, though. There are definitely times when you're still rocked with doubt. But, with internalization, you can overcome it. If I could share one piece of advice with aspiring future female superintendents, it would be this: believe and know that you can lead just as well as anybody else. I think it starts with this mindset. I was just crippled at times in my younger days with a lack of self-confidence and this impostor syndrome. You need to believe it and then internalize it. That's what I do to support others.

For Maria, most of her mentoring experiences are structured. She works with a local university to align her skills and expertise with students in the program who have leadership potential.

I'm excited there because number one, some of the people that I have had more of a mentoring relationship I am now meeting with and saying, "Okay, what's your next step? Let's talk about different options. Academically, where are you headed? Is there another program that you need to complete?" Being able to have those conversations is critical. I follow up with them and ask them, "What are you learning? What's feeling good? What's not feeling so good?" I think we need to continue to have conversations, and we just need to continue to connect with other women. It's so important. I have appreciated the women who have reached out to me and kept me from not just being stagnant but being happy with where I am in my professional life; because I think without them, I wouldn't be

where I am. I need to do that and return that favor to others who are younger than I am and should be sitting in our chairs, hopefully soon.

While not all mentor-mentee relationships need to be like-gender, these women feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility to mentor younger women, over men. In their work, they continue to find and cultivate leaders throughout their organization and provide the tools and skills they acquired in their own mentor-mentee journey, for men and women alike.

Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory, not found in the literature review, emerged in the research data in this qualitative study. Sociologists Glaser and Strauss introduced grounded theory as a method in which the researcher builds a theory grounded in the research that was not established through the literature review (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this particular case, the theoretical frameworks that were identified through the literature review were the theory of self-efficacy and feminism. However, after conducting the interviews of this study, the data that emerged was not found in the literature review, rather this data was found and grounded in the research. “The overall object of the analysis is to identify patterns in the data, these patterns are arranged in relationships to each other in the building of grounded theory” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 32). In this particular research study, the grounded theory that emerged from the data was the idea of code-switching as a mechanism used by these women to acquire and maintain their role as a superintendent. Code-switching was originally coined by linguist Einar Haugen in the 1950s and used to describe how multilanguage people move between multiple languages and dialects (Hutton, 2022).

Code Switching

The language we use in the presence of our close acquaintances, such as our family and friends, is often different from what we use at work. As noted in the research findings of the women in this study, code-switching was used to define how these women consciously altered their language and even appearance as a means of fitting in and in some cases, advancing professionally. Early identification of code-switching first appeared in the 1950s, the term has been applied across different sub-groups and classifications of people through age, culture, gender, and even economic and social status.

I met with Linguistics professor, Dr. Anne Lobeck, of Western Washington University to share my research findings. She provided the following insight to her work and the impact of this study:

> People often assume that code switching is simply changing how you speak in different social situations; that it is easy, natural, and as low stakes as changing out of the sweatshirt you wear at home into more formal attire for a job interview. This study makes clear, however, that women who aspire to leadership positions within a gender-biased education system face a high stakes burden that is not shared by non-minorities, namely the burden of adapting their discourse to the (often unfamiliar and arbitrary) discourse of power. This study also shows that mentors who model and support women's diverse identities and discourses in leadership roles empower those women to advance in their careers. Successful mentoring therefore may lead not only to more and more women and minorities in leadership positions in education, but also to a more equitable model of discourse within that system, one which embraces rather than marginalizes diverse voices.

Summary

These remarkable women defied the odds by learning how to navigate the treacherous journey to becoming a successful superintendent. These women overcame internal and external challenges by engaging in successful mentorship experiences, starting with early childhood. The powerful stories of these women helped to unpack the levels of mentoring from structured and defined, to unstructured and organic.

Throughout this chapter, examples of both forms of mentorship were credited to shaping the participants' formative years from childhood to adulthood, as well as in their professional career. These women helped to identify positive examples of mentorship, as well as examples of mentorship experience that were not beneficial to their ascendency into the superintendent role.

Attributes of leadership styles helped me to understand how the inner "drive" became a strong factor in their success and was nurtured and developed with their mentoring experiences. Strong elements of self-doubt and imposter syndrome were overcome by the support of a mentor. Unstructured mentors were a defining element of support for overcoming self-doubt and supporting the development of gaining self-confidence. As reflected here by these women, Winne recalls the affirming messages she received from her colleagues: "I really do see you and I believe in you." Maria similarly recollects,

> I had a group of women who became my "tribe". I would call and say, "Do you think I have what it takes to work through this?" I wanted to just have those really honest conversations where you're asking the questions and feel safe and supported, and they would build my confidence and say, "Yes, you can do this!"

Common characteristics of successful mentors were unpacked throughout this chapter with specific examples of how these key attributes contributed to the development and success of

these women. We see these same attributes used to describe their mentor's duplicated in their own current mentorship relationships.

This chapter outlined the impact that mentoring had on these women in their journey into the superintendent role as well as mentorship in their current role. We see from the data that early mentoring opportunities are broad in nature and adaptable depending on the need and situation. However, mentoring structures for current female leaders are not optimally supportive or impactful.

Chapter V

Findings and Implications

Background and Research

When I began this research study, I found the most challenging aspect of the work was narrowing my focus and research questions. I decided upon the title *"The Impact of Mentorship on Attracting and Sustaining Female Superintendents in the State of Washington."* Originally, I sought to uncover the difference between "mentor" and "sponsor." However, after a thorough research of the existing literature and conducting the initial questionnaire, I found the terms to be synonymous. This allowed me to narrow my focus and use four guiding research questions to deepen my understanding of the impact that mentorship had on successful female superintendents.

The four research questions implemented in this qualitative study were:

1. What kinds of mentoring do female school superintendents experience on their pathway to becoming chief executive of a school district?
2. Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably positive or beneficial?
3. Of the mentoring experiences female superintendents identify, which were demonstrably negative or not beneficial?
4. To what extent, or in what ways, do current female superintendents seek opportunities to develop mentoring relationships with other female school leaders?

These guiding questions were carefully crafted to get to the root cause of the data identified in the gender gap of the superintendency. As a female superintendent myself, I selected to focus on this topic for the following reasons: a) I had witnessed the positive impact that mentors had on

my life and career, people whom I believed were instrumental in my ability to obtain a superintendent position; b) I experienced how detrimental was a negative mentoring experience on my own career; c) I believed that women who were currently in the role of a superintendent had common attributes and strengths of character that were consistent with their success in ascending to and maintaining the superintendent chair; and d) for years, researchers have studied and admired this problem, yet we continue to see a large disparity in women to men when it comes to the superintendency. I became tenacious and passionate about this research and became hopeful that my dissertation could, in some small fashion, contribute to a systematic process that would increase females in the superintendent role, eliminating the gender gap once and for all.

I knew that the best way to get to the root cause of this gender gap was to interview women superintendents. I combed through study after study on the same issue and decided upon a narrative inquiry approach as the best method for my research study. I admit that my role as a current female superintendent and serving that role in my fourth year, caused me initial concern about conducting these interviews.

At first, I assumed that my own experience and ideas would interfere in the interview process. I worried that my bias and beliefs would sway or alter the process of the interviews with these women. I also worried that, due to my current role as a superintendent in the state, these women would either agree with me as a result of my status and experience, or not trust me with their stories and become guarded in the interview process. As a result, I made sure that I stuck to a questioning framework of carefully crafted questions. I also used Google meet not only to archive and help support the transcription process, but the video recording on Google meet also allowed me to check my facial responses as candidates responded to the questions. If I found myself too agreeable, I made sure to recalibrate and remain a thoughtful and impartial listener,

not allowing my facial responses to sway the line of questioning. I also made sure that my bias did not interfere with the authentic listening process. To do this, whenever I had an "ah ha" moment in the interview process, I made a side note to capture my ah-ha wonderings and give time to allow this wonder to sort itself out within the four guiding research questions, and not resonate with my own bias or personal experiences. After the first interview, I found myself letting go and allowing myself to be authentic in the listening process without bias or the innate need to agree at a point that was closely aligned with my own experiences.

I was highly impressed with these women for the following reasons: they opened up to me as the researcher in a way that I never thought possible. I was taken aback at the raw, emotional, and heartfelt stories that these women shared with me. Moreover, I felt humbled by their experiences, to a point of sadness and, at times, wanting to reach out and comfort them. These women trusted me with their stories, and, for that, I will be eternally grateful.

Through my research, I uncovered an abundance of ideas around gender barriers and obstacles. While these obstacles evolved over time, they continue to be loud and present in the lives of the women I interviewed. For this particular study, there were two categories of barriers that seemed to be evident in the journeys of these women. The first barrier was more prevalent in mentorship experiences. One woman recalled,

> I was offered the position but first told to go home and ask your husband before you decide. When I asked my other Assistant Superintendent colleagues [male] if they were asked the same question, they responded "Who would have asked you that?" They were dumbfounded that I got asked that question.

Another woman shared, "I was asked if I would be able to handle the job because I smiled too much." These stories were undertones throughout my interviews with all five of these women,

indicating that barriers do exist in the workplace, especially when it comes to positions of superiority or authority over these women. Another woman talked about experiencing sexual harassment and intimidation as the cost of career advancement. For this particular woman, she was forced to leave her position and take another position in a neighboring district, taking a significant reduction in salary. For these women, barriers of sexual undertones and stereotyping are still present in the workplace.

The second telling piece of data that emerged as a barrier was that of the search process. Many of these women indicated that gender discrimination remains an issue in the recruitment and selection process for female superintendents. When I asked these women, "What makes you think it is a gender issue?", these women were able to point to each job that they were passed over for by a male, who often had less experience or time in the principalship than they did.

The research data described how these external barriers remain a challenge for women to gain a seat at the superintendent table.

Methodology

I used the narrative approach to my qualitative study to elevate the voices of women. This study embraced the notion of women as the engineers of their journey, designing bridges and tunnels in an effort to navigate the challenges and barriers they had to endure throughout their careers. I was particularly interested in raw and emotional stories that may not be accessed through the means of a quantitative survey or first-person account in an identifiable fashion. I was able to engage fully in their stories: laughing, crying, and admiring their courage and determination. Because the nature of these stories was very personal and emotional, I made sure to set aside my own bias and experience so that I could be attentive to the words, phrases, and

nuances of these stories. I am and will continue to be indebted to these brave women for trusting me with their stories.

One of the struggles with collecting the data was the limiting factor of eligible participants. The original design of this research study was to interview enough participants where I could sub-divide them into categories: age, ethnicity, and district enrollment. I particularly wanted to see how women who had younger children were able to navigate the role of superintendent and was curious to know how they handled juggling parenting of young children in their ascent into the superintendent's chair. However, none of the 21 eligible participants were below the age of 45. Furthermore, due to the limitation of the participants in this study, I was not able to identify the school district size or ethnicity, for fear of rendering data identifiable and so risking a breach of confidentiality.

Application of the Theoretical Frameworks

Through the research of literature, I was able to apply two distinct frameworks to my research study: feminism and self-efficacy. I began to understand how the feminist framework was attributed to these particular women when it came to the hurdles and barriers they face with gender discrimination. The feminism framework allows us to look into structural barriers and apply these "beliefs" when unpacking the stories of women in their ascendency into the superintendent role. In particular, I listened to how these women navigated these barriers in the boardroom, in the interview and application process, as well as interactions within the school community and broader community. Kiva expressed how she experienced these ideas and beliefs within her own community.

> I had a harder time when it came to dealing with the mothers in the community. They didn't think I should be in this [man's] role of the superintendent; they were stay-at-home mothers who believed the woman's job was to take care of the household.

Kiva also shared her experience when addressing a vocal and argumentative community member:

> When I was having a hard time with this extremely rude and pushy gentleman in our community, my school board chair thought I was not able to handle him, so he said he would take care of it. I told him, "I got this, don't worry." I felt like he didn't think I could handle the situation because I was a woman.

The feminism framework situated these stories in terms of positional stereotyping and ideations about a woman's role. I was not surprised to learn through the stories of my research participants that these beliefs are alive and well today.

The second and more pronounced framework that I used to ground my research was Bandura's self-efficacy framework. Every single one of these women shared multiple experiences of self-doubt and the feeling of imposter syndrome, even though all of these women were highly decorated and educated. S'Alisa shared her moments of self-doubt in her experience with multiple failures of seeking a superintendent position, "I remember thinking, nobody wants me. I applied for so many jobs that I was qualified for and never got one, not one. I told my husband that one day, 'But there's got to be somebody that's gonna want me, right?'" Felicia shared her first time being invited to a space that was largely occupied by male colleagues, all assistant superintendents and executives, in which she shared an observation:

> They all sat there, quiet and just looked at me and I thought, "What did I just say?" I didn't feel like I had anything of value to put into that space, or that "they" would value.

> That's not a safe space for me and I'm not my genuine self on the outside. I have to keep the genuine me to myself on the inside.

Winnie expressed that within the context of her role as the superintendent, there are moments when her self-doubt can take over, so she has had to learn coping mechanisms for dealing with her internal messaging about self-doubt and the imposter syndrome:

> But it's not easy though. There are definitely times when you're still rocked with doubt. But, with the internalization, you can overcome it, I think a little bit more quickly. You don't wallow, you don't live in that self-doubt for a very, very long time and can bounce back.

All these women shared their experiences in a male-dominated space where they experience the highest levels of self-doubt. However, when they learn how to address their self-doubt, they can navigate these uncomfortable spaces successfully. Observing with and working through a mentor illuminated this concept of self-efficacy with a coping mechanism called code-switching. Code-switching emerged in my data findings as a frame in which these women deal with both feminism and self-efficacy.

Through grounded theory, I was able to discover that code-switching was a learned skill that allowed these women successfully to navigate access to the superintendency. These women learned to sharpen and adapt their code-switching skills depending on the audience with which they engaged. For example, Kiva had to code switch for a group of mothers in her community because of the belief system that was deeply rooted in that community: women stayed home, men worked. This concept was found more pervasively in the early literature review in the roles that women played over time. Due to the location of this particular community, and the source of income upon which many of these families relied, this institutional practice of feminism was

deeply rooted. Kiva learned how to code switch in a group or women, even though she, too, was a woman and a mother.

The frameworks that I selected for this study allowed me to situate the literature review and my study in a frame for understanding better this dilemma. I never suspected that my data would reveal another theme outside of the two pre-selected frameworks. As such, I found myself stumbling into grounded theory in my data findings and was fascinated to find code-switching emerging from the data. While code-switching rests in-between the two frameworks I selected for my study, I can't help but wonder if code-switching is a framework of its own.

Summary of Results

Without a doubt, every single one of these women could point to multiple mentors who helped shape their career paths. From the stories told by these women of their mentorship experiences, two distinct categories of mentorship structures emerged: structured (organized) mentorships and unstructured (organic) mentorships.

Most notable for overcoming self-efficacy and self-doubt were the unstructured mentors. These mentorship experiences helped these women develop the confidence and knowledge about how to navigate a male-dominated culture of administration and the superintendency. These mentors were the support crew that helped these women overcome hurdles, obstacles, and barriers along their career path. In particular, there were three areas of unstructured mentorship that were most beneficial.

Organic Mentorship

The first attribute of mentorship was based on vulnerability. These mentors created a space where the women felt they could be their authentic self. They were able to share challenging situations that were often sensitive and personal. The mentors were then able to help

their mentee unload their baggage, and then provide a space for closure or help the mentee develop a process for next steps in problem solving. This was very important to establishing a trusted thought partner who these women felt was needed, especially within their search process for the role of the superintendent as well as within their first year in the role.

The second notable attribute was that these mentors served as sponsors and cheerleaders, creating a space where these mentees could network and grow in their leadership and confidence. These mentors provided a gentle push or nudge to challenge their status quo—forwarding a job posting, sharing application material, or even placing a call to someone on their mentee's behalf. This type of mentorship was pivotal in these women attaining a position as a superintendent. These mentors may not have had positional status over them, but these mentors seemed always to be there to encourage and support these women to consider challenging their own status quo.

The last pronounced attribute of unstructured mentorship was availability. These women attribute their ability to navigate some of the toughest in-the-moment challenges to their mentors. "I know I can always count on her to answer the phone, or shoot me a quick text. She is my go-to when I am in a pinch or just need advice," Maria reflected. These women shared the importance of "sisterhood" with these mentors. One shared, "[Our] weekly zoom dinner parties were our way of just staying connected," and Maria added, "I have my "tribe" I can always count on." For all of these women, having someone readily available, knowing they would be there to lift them up, was the biggest attribute of this form of mentorship, one that they highly appreciated and valued.

Organized Mentorship

The second category of mentorship was structured mentorship. These mentors are work mentors or association mentors. These types of mentors were most beneficial when it came time

to “learn the role of the superintendent.” For some of these women, these mentors also encouraged them to consider leadership positions. While these nudges into superintendent and other leadership positions came from mentors, it was not actualized for these women until consistent affirmation and guidance from their unstructured mentors. These types of mentors seemed to have more influence on self-affirmation for these women than any “work” mentors did when it came to finally believing in their abilities to actually become and envision themselves as a true leader.

When paired correctly, these women admitted that the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA) mentorship program works at a basic level. However, where this style of mentorship seemed to most benefit these women was when the mentor provided on-the-job support, which included coaching and professional development. For a few of these women, their superintendents served as a position of authority, a gatekeeper, interfering with their ability to learn the technical skills of the profession. Yet, when in the presence of superintendent mentors who truly embraced the idea of mentorship, these mentees found their experience most effective and beneficial to their readiness and development for their ascendency into a superintendent role.

However, through the research, I found evidence to suggest multiple examples of hegemony—the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group over others. Not absent from the data was a nuance that some of these women encountered sexual harassment and intimidation which they attributed as the hidden cost of job advancement. One person, in particular, shared this kind of experience. These unsuccessful mentorship experiences caused some of these women to navigate the waters of positional authority on their own. One woman shared a traumatic experience with her superintendent-supervisor that almost sank her career: “If I didn’t leave, I felt I would have had my entire career I worked so hard for

sabotaged, and I couldn't afford that." One woman shared in a moment of true vulnerability during the interview, "I experienced microaggression, discrimination, and prejudice; and that's saying something because I try not to go there if I can." Another woman shared her experience when she was the only woman promoted to a top cabinet-level position,

> He [the superintendent] surrounded himself with all white men in suits and ties. I witnessed everyday mistreatment in how he treated me compared to the other men. The day after I got the executive director job, there was a box on my desk from a female leader in the organization, a director. [All the executives were men and all the directors were women]. I opened it up and there was a keychain with a pair of purple balls and the card read: "You're gonna need these." Women know. So, there's this kind of unspoken, "I got you" behind the scenes.

For the successful mentorship relationships, these women felt prepared and supported to step into the superintendent role. Their mentors supported them, gave them multiple opportunities to access the work of a superintendent, gave them credit for their work, and elevated them in that role. For these women, several of their successful experiences of this form of mentorship were with men. However, women who endured unsuccessful mentorship experiences suffered traumatic, and even humiliating experiences that have left a mark on them personally and professionally.

My last finding on mentorship resulted in a reverse dynamic of interview questioning when I asked these women to share their current experiences with mentoring others. These women had a hard time pinpointing a structure or system for mentorship, but they could agree that it was part of their role as a superintendent to mentor others. When pressed, they were able to share a semi-structured format of mentorship in their current role by means of mentoring their

administrators and administrative team. Several of these women admitted to the grueling work demands in their current role and admit that their time to seek mentorship experience outside of their scope of work is challenging. As a superintendent myself, I understand the internal struggle with knowing the right thing to do and the demands of the job. Any additional time outside of the demands of your role as a superintendent is limited; and, therefore, you have to prioritize your work, leaving little time for structured mentorship opportunities outside of your organization.

While pressed for time, these women felt compelled to provide mentorship for other women because they felt it was their duty to begin collectively to strip away at the structural barriers that were limiting other women from entering the superintendency. Maria reflected, "I need to do that in return, what was done for me. I need to return that favor to others who are younger than I am and should be sitting in our chairs hopefully sooner than we realized." Winnie averred.

> I think there still is this idea, that a leader has to look a certain way and that's not, you know, the corporate world. There are so many men at the table, and not just in education and leadership. I think that we as female leaders just need to be very aggressive in promoting other women and modeling in whatever way possible. We need to all do a better job as female leaders, myself included, to continue to help other women internalize and say, "It's true, we *can* lead."

Felicia offered, "There's a false narrative out there and we've [all women] bought into it."

Mentorship works when the mentor-mentee duties and expectations are clearly spelled out in a structured mentorship experience. The women in this study indicated that the gender of the mentors is not as important as the quality of the mentorship experience. In particular, having a structured mentorship relationship was most important in navigating the technical skills and

experience needed for the superintendency. While this study focused on the experience of only five women, these women attributed their technical structured mentorship more to men than women. Perhaps that is because all five of these women had men as superintendents prior to becoming a superintendent themselves, leaving limited opportunities to experience female superintendents as mentors.

Women who have benefitted from these positive mentorship experiences are grateful for their mentors and consider these mentors dear friends and colleagues to this day. The bonds formed by female mentors and mentees can be powerful and lifelong connections that provide mentees the competence and confidence they need to access these positions of leadership and power (Arriga, 2020). It is essential for these women to find their "tribe" and join forces on their journey together. For women who experienced a successful mentorship experience, being intentional in the selection of that mentor is a powerful ingredient for the success of the overall experience. If the mentee respects the mentor and vice versa, these mentor-mentee relationships grow exponentially, with the mentor and mentee learning from one another in a trusted, confidential, and vulnerable manner. A high-functioning mentor-mentee relationship is measured by the reciprocal accountability in the mutual and trusting relationship. If the mentor can learn from the mentee and vice versa, this relationship becomes powerful.

None of the women in this study found unstructured mentorship ineffective. On the contrary. Many of these women found that the informal, organic, unstructured mentors were self-selected. Their ""tribe"" often resulted from prior experience that was grown organically: friends from former college cohorts, former colleagues who had moved to another district or position, and friends discovered by taking classes or workshops together. These unstructured mentorships

grew over time and, as a result, deepened their ability to have safe, confidential, and powerful relationships with one another.

Discussion and Findings

Perhaps the most salient finding in my research study not found in the literature review was the concept of code switching. This concept emerged from questions about self-doubt and efficacy. In this series of questions focused on the imposter syndrome, these women shared experiences starting in early childhood through adulthood where mentors helped support and develop their belief in their own identity, skills, and attributes. Specifically, these women credited early mentors for providing them with hope and confidence. Several of the women recognized that their early mentors helped them to believe in themselves and as they continued to progress through their career. These mentors helped them to see their potential as a leader, whereas they did not necessarily see themselves as a leader or in a leadership position prior to that experience. Once these women found themselves in the role of power and influence, they still experienced self-doubt and, for some, the imposter syndrome. The ability to lean on a mentor contributed to these women being able to navigate and overcome internal self-doubt and develop the confidence they needed to do the work. In fact, these women spoke about their awareness of code-switching in spaces of oppression, as a result of their situational awareness.

Women found that through mentorship, they were able to observe other women navigate spaces of oppression. The same was true for Felicia, who worked with a male colleague who was from a racial minority.

> I was able to watch him code-switch in spaces where, yes, he was with all men but he was with all white men. I watched him enter into those spaces differently in order to be accepted. He had my back, and I had his. We helped each other that way.

We see this confirmed in Albert Bandura's research on self-efficacy: "Developing personal and collective efficacy by social modeling. Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by perseverant effort raises observers' beliefs in their own abilities" (Bandura, 1995, p. 185).

Code switching can be a powerful tool when attempting to navigate spaces where people find themselves in the minority: gender, sexual preference, economic and social status, and cultural differences. This idea of code switching was a surprise to me in the data, as it was not reflected in any aspect of the literature review. However, I found myself reflecting on all the different experiences in my own past as well as my current role in which I code switch. For these women, code switching was not only a survival technique, but a skill that they perfected over time. These women admitted to the toll that code-switching takes on them. Emotions used to describe this skill were "exhausting," "frustrating," "necessary," and "endless." Although code switching allows these women to enter these spaces, it continues to put extra pressure and stress on a position that is already stressful and filled with high pressure, high anxiety, and high expectations.

Regardless of the skills these women acquired in their journey, self-doubt is persuasive and will continue to be something these women will have to navigate. Self-doubt is not unique to women; however, self-doubt is more prevalent in women, especially women who are marginalized by their ethnicity and gender.

Another notable finding in this study was the unique set of attributes the participants used to describe how others viewed them as a leader. As I encountered these self-descriptors, I found it interesting how these same attributes were developed in their early childhood. In particular, I observed subjectively that all of these women had an intensity about them. For example, while

these women had overcome many hurdles and barriers throughout their career path, their appetite for challenges developed early in their lives.

As I noted in Chapter IV, with the exception one participant, these women overcame abject and situational poverty. They developed "drive" and grit because life challenged them in ways that many people with privilege and power do not encounter. For example, three of these women experienced corruption, crime, and discrimination in their community. They developed a sense of the power of education as a tool for survival and a means to overcome poverty. This sense of empowerment and survival was nurtured early on by their early-career mentors: a coach, neighbor, family friend, and teachers. These women could point to moments in their childhood where they were able to observe injustice around them, as well as see, firsthand, the power of a good education. They leaned on these mentors to feed their self-affirming qualities and give them a taste of what life could be outside of their community. For these women, survival led to grit and determination, which became a powerful weapon in their artillery for fighting doubters, systems of oppression, and structures of injustice throughout their career journey. They did not give up. They dug in and proved that they deserved a seat at the table.

When these women described how others viewed them, they did not call out words such as "fighter," "strong-willed," or "determined." Instead, they described themselves as hard workers, driven, passionate, and visionary. This seemed contrary to how I would describe them based on our time together in the interview process. My observations from the stories and examples of mentor-mentee relationships that they had throughout their careers indicated these women had personal drive and determination; they were not afraid to fight for what they believed.

Implications of Findings

This study contributes to and expands upon to existing literature on the quest for more females to acquire the superintendency. The data are staggering. When we compare the number of female teachers to the number of female superintendents, women are still grossly underrepresented in the superintendency. The current study points to many barriers, internal and external. The information gleaned from this study suggests that mentors play a pivotal role for women who aspire to and attain the superintendent role. Mentors are seen as structured, usually a colleague within the work site or through an organization who provides tactical tutoring on how to do the job; and unstructured, mentors who are found organically and serve as advocates, confidants, and "cheerleaders."

Intentionality in establishing the desired outcome is essential with any paired mentor-mentee relationship. If the mentor sees potential in the mentee, the mentor is able to share, coach, develop, and support the mentee as a protégé. A highly successful mentor-mentee experience goes one step further, wherein the mentor and mentee both gain knowledge and support of one another through mutual respect and reciprocal accountability. While self-doubt and the impostor syndrome will continue to be a factor for these aspiring and seated superintendents, a mentor can serve to support the mentee by providing them with the affirmation and encouragement they need to be successful in their ascendancy into the superintendency as well as in maintaining their position as a successful female superintendent. I also found notable in the mentor assignment, gender of the mentor and mentee was not of particular significance. The most beneficial aspect of the mentoring is to be intentional and thoughtful when assigning mentors, regardless of gender.

Limitations

The stories of these five women were inspiring, revealing, and uplifting. I admire their courage and perseverance to achieve their goals, overcoming incredible obstacles along the way. While my aspiration for learning about my participants through the lenses of age, ethnicity, and district size shaped the original intent of this research study, my participant sampling did not permit me to use these subcategories. In part, the limited sampling size was indicative of the very nature of this study. The gender gap for female superintendents in the state of Washington echoes the gender disparity across our country. Furthermore, by the very nature of the age of these women, the data also suggest that women enter the superintendency at a later age, a time when the guilt and other factors associated with parenting becomes less of a struggle to navigate. Out of the potential 23 participants, only three respondents were below the age of 45. The remaining participants were above the age of 45. I was particularly interested in school demographics due to my own bias and understanding of how women are recruited and encouraged to apply to a "small school district" for their first superintendency, regardless of their background and experiences. While I heard this from two of the women, an example of advice provided to them by their structured mentor as well as recruiters, I was not able to use this data or further study this data source.

Race and ethnicity were other areas that I was not able to explore. This was particularly challenging because the stories of some of my participants were extremely powerful. I struggled with these gems of information shared in the interview process because I felt these moments in the stories to be extremely beneficial to this study, particularly for the research around barriers and stereotypes. While a larger sample size would have provided more insights into the intersectionality, age, and school demographics of the superintendency, it is also important to

remember that research studies that share potentially identifiable data often have limitations. These ethical considerations played a crucial role in determining the scope and design of this study. Unfortunately, I was not able to share the intersectionality of this research due to my professional and personal commitment to scrupulous confidentiality and the responsibility to maintain that confidentiality. It was important for me to consider the potential risks and benefits of my research study, and to ensure that participants were not exposed to any harm or negative consequences as a result of their participation. It is important to acknowledge these limitations of this qualitative research study and to be transparent about them to ensure that these findings are appropriately interpreted and applied. It may be useful to consider future research studies that could build on the findings of this study and explore the intersectionality, age, and school demographics of the superintendency in more depth, through a larger sampling size.

Recommendations for Future Research and Implementation

The greatest moment of surprise in my research study was the concept of code-switching. As mentioned earlier, I did not encounter code-switching in the literature review. Code-switching was an acquired skill that all of these women had with varying degrees of application. It seemed that the women who came from backgrounds where they encountered survival issues, including overcoming poverty, had acquired a more advanced "gift" of code-switching and leaned on this skill more than women who had less impacted childhoods. Coupled with the code-switching phenomenon was the grit attribute.

The women who came from abject and situational poverty had more "fight" in them. They seemed to be intrigued by, and even welcomed, complex and challenging situations. One woman asserted,

> People say this job is hard, but I like hard things; and when I go to bed at night, I sleep like a baby. I am not up all night rethinking my decisions because when I make a decision, I do it with confidence, knowing that I am doing the right thing. I like hard work.

As I entered the end of my second year of my doctoral studies, I took a class on quantitative research. From the onset, I was perplexed about the overwhelming gap in female superintendents, especially considering the rate of women educators. In particular, I was curious about the background and experience of seated female superintendents and wanted to establish a mixed methods study to find out if secondary principalship and teaching experience were potential barriers for females ascending into the superintendent role. When researching the literature review, there were multiple hints to this idea; however, I found nothing significant to note in the findings from other studies. However, as I continued to look into this question, in order to get a more comprehensive look into potential barriers, I spoke to a few women colleagues of mine who were seated superintendents. That is when I realized that mentoring and the stories of these women were rich with opportunities to explore at a much deeper level. However, I believe there is a need to explore further the educational background in primary versus secondary experiences for leadership as a prerequisite for females on their path into the superintendency.

My last recommendation for future research is aligned with earlier literature on the age of the superintendency. Two of the women in my study never had children and admitted that they had watched their colleagues struggle with the guilt associated with the hours they spent away from their children. One woman shared,

> When I kept applying for jobs and not getting anything, I became desperate and was trying to be creative. I put on a good face for the family. But I was very worried because I was the family breadwinner. My husband's retired, and we decided that he would stay home. There is still this expectation that if you're a woman and you have a family, you take care of the children; and if you're a career woman, you have a family and your husband also has a career as you are both raising a family, but the woman takes care of the kids still and tries to balance a career. I think it's the wife that takes a backseat most of the time. I was lucky to have my husband be able to be home with our son so I could do this [superintendent].

Further research will provide a look into the age of the superintendent and perhaps help create more supportive systems for women who are shepherding the responsibility of childrearing and career.

Match Matters

Most notable in this qualitative research study was the simple fact that when done well and with intentionality, mentoring works. When I mention intentionality, I am referring to the experiences where these women found that the assigned mentor was not just assigned by gender, woman to woman, but with careful thought and planning in what that paired mentorship would best support. In the work environment, women are not always kind to women out of fear of competition. There are only a few seats at the table for women, and often, this scarcity has caused women to become territorial (Arringa, 2020).

Like-gender mentor-mentee relationships are not always beneficial. For example, if it is a first-year superintendent with no central office experience, matching a mentor with central office experience is highly valuable, regardless of the gender. I found that this is true if, and only if, this

mentorship is with a structured mentor who helps the mentee learn the basics of the job, sharing institutional and professional knowledge. However, the most critical value of a mentor-mentee relationship is when the relationship is not one of heroic rescue, especially by men. The mentee is not just seeking someone with expertise, but someone who is readily available and humble, and the learning is reciprocal.

There is considerable research surrounding attribute differences between men and women. Men tend to lead as transactional and women as transformational (Eagly, et al., 2003). Therefore, a mixed-gender mentor-mentee relationship can prove to be beneficial if matched well and with intentionality, allowing both the male and female mentor-mentee to learn from one another. Many of the women in this study mentioned the need to have a hand in selecting their assigned WASA mentor. There are plenty of proven and effective dating-match apps. If these are effective, I cannot-imagine a mentor-mentee match to be more complex. The same should be true for pairing mentors with mentees.

Winnie shared how having proximity and availability to her mentor was beneficial, especially since her mentor was in the same Educational Service District region. This allows the mentor and mentee to connect on a professional and personal level. The mentor and mentee should mutually benefit from the relationship. Filling out a questionnaire in advance allows the organization, such as WASA, to sort through the information in a confidential manner and then create a best-fit match based upon the information received.

Another important aspect is a “kick-off” or event where the matches can mingle and meet. This can be done virtually or in person, depending on region and location. The women in this study preferred to meet their mentor in advance of an email. In particular, women in this group mentioned an incentive for the mentor as a way to engage throughout the course of the

year with the mentee. If assigned by the ESD, the ESD superintendent or WASA representative could join the ESD meetings and make the mentor-mentee situation part of the structured meetings held each month. At mid-year, there must be a check and connect with the mentor-mentee organization. These mid-year check-ins allow the organization to find out if the pairing is successful and beneficial to the mentee. If not, then this allows the organization to make adjustments or, if necessary, to find an alternative mentor, letting the mentor know that they are no longer needed for the mentoring program. Kiva shared, "I never met my mentor, even after two years. She was just too busy. A check-in would have been nice." In order to support first year superintendents, especially women who are in the minority, it is critical to ensure that they have support systems at every step of the way. Waiting until the end of the year to see if their mentor was supportive is far too late. This is when most women decide if they want to remain in their position or step out of the superintendency role completely.

Men as Disrupters

There is a moral and professional obligation for men to help combat this perpetual gender disparity in the superintendency. If the male mentor allows himself to lean in and begin to truly understand the experiences that women encounter on their journey to becoming a superintendent, then and only then can men begin to eliminate gender inequality in educational leadership and become our allies (Arriaga, 2020). Listening to the experiences of women in the workplace can be a powerful tool for male leaders who are often blind to the stereotypes, bias, structural barriers, and balance that women have to break through in order to be in the room with male superintendents. As one woman commented:

> I was told to go home and discuss it with my husband before I could give my answer of accepting the promotion to Assistant Superintendent. I couldn't believe it. When I told my

> husband, he said, "Why do you have to ask me what you want to do at work?" I asked my male colleagues if they were asked the same question, and they all looked at me like I was crazy. They were not asked that, like go home and ask your wife.

Another woman shared her experience when it came to titles and double standards,

> We were all at a meeting and the superintendent, he made everyone call him "Dr." And he would call the other men who had doctorate degrees, "Dr.", but the women in the room, who had earned their Doctorate degrees were never addressed by "Dr."; funny how that works.

Another woman shared a comment made by her male supervisor, "I was told I smile too much and laugh too much, like I couldn't be taken seriously. My boss told me I needed to stop smiling." And later, she shared an early experience being new to the superintendent role, "We were all in a room where there were all male superintendents and only four of us women. The men were all high fiving each other and fist bumping. It felt like I was in Middle School locker room."

These common observations from women may go unnoticed by men, but men have an equal responsibility, if not a greater responsibility, than women to right the wrong when it comes to gender inequities. Interrupting gender and cultural bias will not happen in isolation nor by neglect. Men must be a part of this journey. We have long admired the problem of gender disparity in the superintendency. Felicia gave commentary on how we can begin to break the system:

> I see all these token things we do, where we bring women together [at conferences] and we talk about how to hold each other up as women. They serve salad and I want to say, "Stop stereotyping and just serve some damn meat." Let's not do crafts for the women

> and the men all go golfing. We continue to focus on the wrong group. Why don't they have a Woman in a Leadership conference for the men?"

The time has come—and is overdue—for men and women alike to reframe the narrative. In doing so, offering more cultural and gender-bias courses for male *and* female leaders will begin to sharpen our collective focus because "Male leaders at every level have the opportunity and responsibility to counter and disrupt biases. The advancement of gender equality requires awareness, advocacy, and actions to confront gender inequalities" (Arringa, 2020, p. 90).

Mentor matches are critical to recruiting and sustaining female superintendents. If the mentor is not well respected in their profession and work, the women I interviewed were not impressed with their mentor match. Since most administrators and superintendents are male, men are the gatekeepers in the gender gap of the superintendency.

Recently I was at a meeting with a teacher, female, who had stepped in as the Dean of Students to help offset as an internal move. When we met, I leaned in and said, "Have you ever thought of going back to school for your administrative credentials?" She immediately broke down and started to cry. What I learned was two things: One, another woman saw potential in her. Two, she did not take it seriously when her male counterpart encouraged her, but she knew that I had two daughters and was able to navigate the role when my children were young. My words had more power for her. When I shared with her male principal supervisor that encounter, I realized that she had been so actively and intentionally code-switching to fit into the male administrative role that it wasn't until my conversation with her that she could finally let her guard down and be authentic with her emotions. Providing a safe space for women to let their guard down without fear of consequences is equally important in understanding how we can begin to shift the narrative and invite other women into leadership roles.

Final Reflections

Fighting for a foot in the door and a seat at the table can be emotionally and professionally exhausting for women. This doctoral journey has proven to me that the fight is far from over. Men need to become allies in this journey and help shatter the stereotypes, break down the barriers, and agitate the gender disparities that we, women, face every day.

When I first began my Doctorate program, I was two years out from a very emotional and negative mentoring experience. As I was healing from that experience in my first year of being a school superintendent, COVID-19 hit. I started to see many of my colleagues across the state of Washington attempt to navigate the political anger and frustration within their communities. As school boards experienced significant turn over, many women stepped down and away from the superintendency, as well as other leadership roles within their organizations. The slight gain in gender equity attained in the previous few years started to slip. Women were stepping away from leadership roles to avoid the stress of political pressure and desperately trying to navigate their family obligations. I knew that we, as women, could not afford to lose our stronghold in this battle for gender justice.

The women I have encountered in my research journey have humbled me in a way that I never expected. They allowed me to know that I was not alone in my journey. My own experience mirrored many of their experiences. With each story they shared, I started to gain confidence in my call for gender equity. This work has allowed me to heal with dignity, peace, and courage. Their stories became my mantra and my strength.

Through this work, I have encountered many strong mentors of my own, men and women alike. Mentors who have inspired me. And unknowingly, these five mighty and powerful women gave me courage and strength to keep fighting for gender justice.

> We desperately need more leaders who are committed to courageous, wholehearted leadership and who are self-aware enough to lead from their hearts, rather than unevolved leaders who lead from hurt and fear. Write a new ending for yourself, for the people you're meant to serve and support, and for your culture. (Brown, 2019, p. 4)

We can no longer afford to sit back and admire the problem. We can no longer afford to be blind to gender and cultural bias. The time is now to confront social injustices in public education, especially in the superintendency. If we do not intentionally act, the gender gap will continue to grow. Our daughters, nieces, and female colleagues are depending on us to change the trajectory for them today, and tomorrow.

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Appendix

Appendix A
Overview of the Study

Research Study:

The Impact of Mentorship on Attracting and Sustaining Female Superintendents in the State of Washington

Supported by:
WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

We invite you to take part in a research study. The purpose of the study is to research the impacts of mentorship for attracting and sustaining female superintendents in the state of Washington. The intent of this form is to provide you with the information you will need in order to decide if you would like to voluntarily participate in this study.

Eligibility and Participation:
Participants must be a current female superintendent in the state of Washington and within their first three years as superintendent. You will be asked to answer questions about your personal experience, which will be audio recorded. These tapes will then be transcribed and later written into a document describing your experience. You will have the opportunity to review this document to see if it accurately describes your beliefs. The tapes and transcriptions will be destroyed one year from the completion of the study, unless you give specific written consent for them to be released to Western Washington University's College of Education Graduate School.

Risks and Benefits:
While identified risks are minimal, you may recall or tell about a situation that was traumatic or painful for you. Your identity will remain anonymous and will be done by changing your name and disguising any details of your interview. Disguised extracts from your interview will be used in the research study. However, if you feel that your statements may put you at risk, please inform the researcher immediately. All information from the interview will be treated with confidentiality by the researcher.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you will not directly benefit from participating in this research. However, the benefits which are expected to result from this study are centered around helping future female leaders acquire the mentorship and support they need to become a school superintendent based on the information gathered from you and other participants.

Participation Requirements:

1. Age 18+
2. Identify as a current female superintendent in the first three years of their career as a superintendent.
3. Employed in Washington State

Time Involvement: Your participation in this study will take approximately six hours. In this time you will be interviewed one or more times and asked to verify written results of your interviews.

Participant's Rights: Your participation in this study is voluntary and you will not directly benefit from participating in this research. You have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time and the right to refuse to answer questions at will. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study. Washington State law provides that private conversations may not be recorded, intercepted, or divulged without permission of the individual(s) involved.

Contact Information:
For questions about the study, contact the Principal Investigator:
Michelle Kuss-Cybula, kusscym@wwu.edu, (360) 202-3846

Western Washington University Advisor, Tim Bruce, Brucet2@wwu.edu, (360) 650-3090

For questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Western Washington University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at (360) 650-2146 or compliance@wwu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration in this important research study.

Appendix B
Consent Form Letter

WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
FEBRUARY 2023

Description:
You are invited to participate in a research study to investigate the impacts of mentorship for attracting and sustaining female superintendents in the state of Washington. The intent of this form is to provide you with the information you will need in order to decide if you would like to voluntarily participate in this study. Please read this information carefully and ask questions that will help you make an informed decision. Once you feel that all of your questions have been answered and you would like to participate in this study, please fill out the bottom portion of this consent form.

Research Study: The Impact of Mentorship on Attracting and Sustaining Female Superintendents in the State of Washington

Purpose of the Study:
The purpose of this study is to gather information from current female superintendents in the state of Washington, WA within their first three years of their first superintendency to identify the varying degrees in which mentoring impacted them in their journey to becoming and sustaining a superintendent role. This is a qualitative study that will focus on four essential questions: (a) Describe your mentoring experience on your path to becoming a superintendent (b) What characteristics or attributes of these experiences were beneficial? (c) What characteristics or attributes of these experiences were not beneficial? (d) Describe your current networking and mentoring relationships with other female leaders

Participation Requirements:

4. Age 18+
5. Identify as a current female superintendent in the first three years of their career as a superintendent.
6. Employed in Washington State

Procedures:
Participation involves completing an interview, either in person or over Zoom, that will take approximately 2 hours. The researcher may also contact you to participate in a follow-up interview that will take no more than 1 hour.

You will be asked to answer questions about your personal experience, which will be audio or video recorded, transcribed, and later written into a document describing your experiences. The recordings will be destroyed at the completion of the study.

Storage of Data:
Identifiable data will be stored on an encrypted hard drive. Your data, with identifying information removed, may be used or distributed for future research without your additional informed consent.

Risks and Benefits:
There is a potential for a loss of privacy in the event of a data breach, but we believe the chances are low due to the protections we have in place for your data. Your identity will remain anonymous, which means that we will change or disguise any identifying details of your interview. Disguised extracts from your interview will be used in the research study. However, if you feel that your statements may put you at risk, please inform the researcher immediately.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you will not directly benefit from participating in this research. However, the benefits which are expected to result from this study are centered around helping future female leaders acquire the mentorship and support they need to become a school superintendent based on the information gathered from you and other participants.

Contact Information:
For questions about the study, contact the Principal Investigator:
Michelle Kuss-Cybula, kusscym@wwu.edu, (360) 202-3846

Western Washington University Advisor, Tim Bruce, Brucet2@wwu.edu, (360) 650-3090

For questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Western Washington University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at (360) 650-2146 or compliance@wwu.edu.

Participant's Rights:
Please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time. You have the right to refuse to answer questions at will. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

Consent:
By saying "yes, I agree to participate," you are saying that you have read the description of the project, you meet the inclusion criteria listed above, all your questions have been answered, you understand the tasks involved, and that you consent to participate.

Appendix C
Initial Recruitment Letter

Dear Superintendent Colleagues,

My name is Michelle Kuss-Cybula, and I am a superintendent with the Oak Harbor School District and a current doctoral student at Western Washington University. As part of my dissertation, I have focused on studying the impact of mentorship for aspiring and current female superintendents in the state of Washington who are within their first three years of their superintendent role. You can find out more about my study here.

I am asking that you consider taking a quick voluntary survey found here. This Google survey should take no more than ten minutes to complete. At the end of this survey, there is an opportunity for you to consider further participating in my research by agreeing to a personal interview on the impact of mentorship in your journey to the Superintendent seat. Participation

involves completing an interview in person or over Google Meet/ Zoom that will take approximately 2 hours.

Participation in this study is voluntary. However, the benefits expected from this study are centered around helping future female leaders acquire the mentorship and support they need to become a school superintendent based on the information gathered from you and other participants.

I hope that you will consider participating in this critical research study.

We can create a smoother path for future female leaders with your support!

Appendix D
Initial Survey Questions

The Impact of Mentoring for Female Superintendents Survey

1. Name

2. Email and Phone Number

3. Current School District

4. Check the box that best describes your school district size by student enrollment:
   Under 2,000 students
   Between 2,000 – 4,000 students
   Over 4,000 students

5. Check the box that best describes your age:
   Between the age of 20-45
   Over 45

6. How many years have you been employed in your current role in the state of Washington:
   0-1 year
   1-2 years
   2-3 years
   More than 3 years

7. Which group below most accurately describes your race?
   American Indian/Alaska Native
   Latino(a)
   Asian
   Pacific Islander
   Black or African American
   White

8. How do you identify?
   She/Her
   They/Them
   Other
9. Describe your mentoring experience on your path to becoming a superintendent.
10. What characteristics or attributes of these experiences were beneficial?
11. How did mentoring support you in obtaining your current position?
12. What does mentoring look like for you in your current role as a mentor or mentee?
13. If you would like to be contacted by the researcher for a follow up personal interview, please check the box below.

Interviews

For more information, please see this link: [Link to interview consent form]

- Yes, I am willing to be contacted by the researcher
- Perhaps, may I have more information?
- No, not at this time. Thank you.

Appendix E
Interview Questions

Background:

A. Younger Years:

1. Before we begin the interview for this research study, I would like to get to know a bit about you and your background.

2. Where did you grow up?

3. Tell me about your parents; their background and how they shaped who you are today.

4. How many siblings do you have and where are you in the family order?

5. Is there one defining moment in your early life that you feel best describes your family culture?

6. Can you please share with me your current family situation?

7. How did you become interested in education? Was there someone or some experience that inspired you to become an educator?

8. Please share how you went from teacher to administrator? How many years did you teach before becoming an administrator?

9. What made you decide to become an administrator? Was there someone who encouraged you or mentored you to become an administrator?

10. What were your challenges or barriers as a school administrator or central office administrator? Are these different from what you face today as a superintendent?

11. For the purpose of this study, I will be referring to the term "mentor". Can you describe in your own words what a mentor means to you?

B. Superintendent:

1. Was there a mentor or someone who inspired or encouraged you to become a superintendent?

2. After you completed your superintendent credential, what was your path to obtaining your current position?

3. How many years from your credentials did it take for you to apply and then become a superintendent?

    - How many jobs did you apply for?

- How many interviews were you invited to?

- Can you share how you prepared for the interviews and what criteria you used to apply for these positions?

4. What particular skills or a level of expertise/experience did you possess that you believe set you apart from other female colleagues who were also applying for superintendent positions?

5. Research shows that more females struggle with the self- imposter syndrome than their male colleagues. Is this phenomenon something you find yourself dealing with and if so, how do you overcome it?

    - Can you provide an example of where the self-imposter syndrome is the loudest for you?

6. What were the internal and external barriers you faced in preparing for and receiving your first superintendent position?

7. Did you have someone who supported you along the way- from applying to interviewing?

8. Can you remember any questions during your interview where you felt were biased due to your race/gender?

9. Can you please describe how you felt when you first offered the position?

10. What was the hardest part of your first few weeks on the job as a superintendent?

11. What were the similarities and differences in terms of challenges that you faced as a superintendent compared to your male colleagues?

C. Mentoring:

1. What attributes do you think female superintendents need to have in order to be successful?

2. When you need support in a challenging situation, where do you turn for advice or ideas?

3. WASA provides new superintendents with a mentor, please describe the impact or experience you had with this mentoring program. What was helpful? What was not helpful?

4. The superintendent job is not easy; it requires late nights and weekends, managing budgets, negotiations, and school boards, and sustaining a vision where every child is successful- among other responsibilities. What do you think is the hardest part of your position as a woman?

5. The position of the superintendent can be lonely, please describe your networking experiences. How is networking different from mentoring?

6. If you could design a mentoring experience for female leaders who are aspiring to be a superintendent, what are three elements that you feel are essential to have?

7. What advice would you give your younger self?

8. What advice would you give other future female superintendents?

9. How do you currently mentor or support other female leaders who are not currently in a superintendent role?

D. Closing:

1. How long do you see yourself remaining in this or another superintendent role? What's next for you?

2. What do you do for fun or to relieve stress?

3. In thinking about this research study, is there something I did not ask you that you feel is important for me to know?