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**OVERCOMING ISOLATION AS A WOMAN IN THE
MALE-DOMINATED SUPERINTENDENCY**

by

Melissa Ann McCooley

A Dissertation

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Services and Leadership
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Doctor of Education
at
Rowan University
February 15, 2017

Dissertation Chair: Ane Turner Johnson, Ph. D

Dedications

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, the strongest woman I have ever met. It is because of your love, your faith in me, and your ongoing support, that I am the woman I am today. Thank you for modeling for me the manner in which a woman should always hold her head high and never take no for an answer. I love you.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my three boys who sacrificed many hours with their mom allowing me time to accomplish this endeavor. To my husband Luke for always loving and having confidence in me. You truly make me believe that I am capable of doing anything in life. To my stepfather Andy, a phenomenal educator and wonderful man. Thank you for always being there for me. I love you all.

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Abstract

Melissa A. McCooley
OVERCOMING ISOLATION AS A WOMAN
IN THE MALE-DOMINATED SUPERINTENDENCY
2016-2017
Ane Turner Johnson Ph.D.
Doctor of Education

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to explore the attributes associated with the leadership of women superintendents and how they overcome isolation in a predominantly male-dominated field. Through a feminist lens, I explored the manner in which women serve as superintendents, particularly, the manner in which they overcome isolation in a male-dominated field. Eleven women, including myself as the researcher, currently serving as superintendents in New Jersey participated in this study. Through the use of graphic elicitation and interviews the participants revealed an array of instances that enhance the feeling of isolation as a woman in the male-dominated superintendency. Findings reveal that women in this field need to make a concerted effort to form deeper relationships with other women serving in this role. Social media and online forums can serve as a convenient platform for women in the superintendency to interact, share ideas, and vent when necessary.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In today's society, women are better educated than ever, are claiming coveted leadership roles, and are the primary breadwinners in a majority of households (Flynn, Heath, & Holt, 2013). It is evident that women's advancement in the workplace has taken significant strides in the last 50 years (Schwanke, 2013). However, mixed messages and uncomfortable realities complicate an arguably positive depiction of progress. On average, women are paid 12% less than men in leadership positions (Flynn et al., 2013). According a study done by the Pew Research Center (Watson, 2015), attitudes towards women in leadership are slowly changing but the barriers to parity, regarding gender stereotypes, still exists. The public perception is that major differences between men and women do not exist regarding key leadership qualities; however, men have an edge when it comes to risk taking and negotiations (Wallace, 2014). Women face an array of challenges in leadership roles.

Women are considered equal to men regarding the quality of their leadership (Wallace, 2014), yet gender stereotypes create an unfair disadvantage for men. Women in leadership are stereotypically seen as friendly, unselfish, concerned about others, and emotional (Crawford, 2001). Men, in contrast, are seen as independent, masterful, and assertive (Wilson, 2010). Indeed strong leadership is typically associated with assertiveness and competence, traits stereotypically associated with men (Wilson, 2010). According to Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky (1992), women generally lead in a more democratic and participative style, which leads to perceptions of women as weak when they do not conform to the stereotypical traits associated with leadership. Perhaps this is

the reason only 19% of elected representatives in our national legislature are women and the United States has never had a woman president (Wallace, 2014).

The underrepresentation of qualified women in leadership positions has created a gender gap that exists in the workplace and, more specifically, in education (Grove & Montgomery, 1999). Female attributes of being sensitive, empathetic, compromising, caring, and accommodating are increasingly associated with effective administration (Grove & Montgomery, 1999), yet women possessing these strong leadership qualities still face higher attrition and slower career advancement (Porat, 1991). Brunner & Grogan (2007) contend that this disparity is exacerbated as women take on the role of school superintendent. Females face more adversity in education the higher they climb the ladder.

Female Leaders in Education

From the colonial period through the mid-19th century, teacher and leaders of schools were primarily men (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). By the 1850s, women teachers were becoming more prevalent, however local and state officials were reserving the school administration domain for men only (Blount, 2003). Female superintendents can be traced back to the early 1900s in which they were elected to the position to replace dishonest males (Funk, 2004). At this point in time the superintendency was elected and women held almost 28% of all positions nationwide (Funk, 2004). Women were considered to be honest, credible, and successful in this role (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). In an attempt to regain control, male superintendency groups began a national effort to have school positions appointed and not elected (Blount, 1998). These groups were

successful in their quest and, due to the fact that it was men who were appointing superintendents, the amount of female superintendents rapidly declined (Funk, 2004).

Women are the foundation of K-12 education serving as teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff, however, they are vastly underrepresented in the leadership role (Dobie & Hummel, 2006). Seventy-six percent of all K-12 educators are women and 78.3% of superintendents are men (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Based on those statistics, there is a clear disparity among the percentage of female teachers and those that become superintendents. Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Women's Educational Equity Act of 1974 have equalized opportunities for women in educational administration (Brunner & Grogan, 2007), women still face an array of job-embedded challenges and do not have strength in numbers. Great leaders are made and not born (Northouse, 2010). Funk (2004) studied the characteristics of a small group of successful female superintendents and found eight recurring themes: being a visionary, acting professionally, being creative, communicating effectively, motivating, being committed to their job and the students, and possessing the stamina to sustain their role. It is evident that woman have the ability to be successful in the role of superintendent. Women need to be given the opportunity to lead.

The Superintendency

Effective leadership must have an explicit sense of purpose, use strategies that mobilize many people to tackle through problems, be held accountable by measured and debatable indicators of success, and be ultimately assessed by the extent to which it awakens people's intrinsic commitment (Fullan, 2001). As the district leader, the superintendent encompasses these traits into his or her daily practice. A school

superintendent is the chief executive officer of a school district. As the CEO, superintendents have general management responsibilities, including hiring of senior staff (Browne, nd). They typically oversee education standards and student achievement, plan budgets and allocate resources, and also act as the point person for interactions with government agencies (Meador, 2014).

School superintendents have a broad set of administrative and supervisory responsibilities that vary based on the size of the school district. Hiring and firing of senior staff, handling teacher and staff disciplinary matters, and managing the budget are the primary administrative responsibilities of most superintendents (Browne, nd.; Meador, 2014). In most districts, superintendents are also responsible for overseeing the implementation and enforcement of all state and federal statutes and programs relating to schools. School superintendents have a broad set of administrative and supervisory responsibilities that vary based on the size of the school district. Hiring and firing of senior staff, handling teacher and staff disciplinary matters, and managing the budget are the primary administrative responsibilities of most superintendents (Meador, 2104). In most districts, superintendents are also responsible for overseeing the implementation and enforcement of all state and federal statutes and programs relating to schools (Browne, nd.; Meador, 2014).

From historical perspective, by the nineteenth century student enrollment began to grow and the need for school administrator was prevalent (Blount, 2003). The need for a school superintendent arose when larger cities spawned complex educational organizations (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). Duties of a superintendent included coordinating educational programs among district schools, effectively managing

resources, and allocating funds appropriately (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993). By the mid 1980s, alternate leadership styles were being considered that questioned the top-down, managerial format that had become the norm (Bjork, 2000). In the wake of the effective schools movement a stronger emphasis was placed on transformational leadership, instructional leadership, and the notion of shared governance (Thomas, 2001).

The Contemporary Superintendent

The twenty-first century superintendent is faced with an array of challenges and must step into the role of change agent (Fullan, 2007). Expectations for today's superintendent focus on increase student achievement while at the same time balancing the diversification of their student and staff populations, integrating technology into daily practice, adhering to federal and state policy, dealing with the media, board and community relations, all in the context of an increasingly globalized educational system (Kowalski & Reitzug, 1993).

School leaders are faced with an array of challenges from raising student achievement to managing facilities with limited funding. Since the 1950s there has been a significant decline in the average tenure of a superintendent from 20 years plus to about five years (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Yet, research notes that longer superintendent tenure has a positive effect on student achievement (Pascopella, 2011). Succession to the top leadership positions in an organization is isolating in that it separates leaders from others and leaves them without peers (Rokach, 2014). Leaders are expected to fulfill the organization's strategic needs as well as meet the needs of all employees. In an isolated role, there is often nobody to adhere to the needs of the leader (Rokach, 2014). Fallon (2014) contends that organizations are not set up to support their leaders nor are

expectations for success clear. Furthermore, new leaders fail because they are overconfident, lack skill, and do not effectively build relationships (Rokach, 2014).

Becoming a new superintendent can be exciting and terrifying at the same time. Surrounded by staff, courted by the media, and highly visible in the community, new superintendents can still feel abandoned and isolated (Farrell, 2013). Being a superintendent means balancing intense and often competing pressures. In 2011, the ESEA (Elementary & Secondary Education Act) Waiver replaced No Child Left Behind requiring school districts to show an increased level of growth within all subgroups or face the possibility of financial sanctions (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In the current educational climate, chief administrators are expected to implement vast curriculum changes to adhere to Common Core standards and to revamp controversial teacher evaluation systems (Farrell, 2013). The vast challenges associated with the superintendency are magnified for those in the minority, such as women.

Women in the Superintendency

Over the past 75 years the extended scholarship on the superintendency relied on White, male participants. It is only during the past 20 years that research geared toward female superintendents exists (Brunner, 2000). Furthermore, the trend to minimize women in leadership roles in education is so prevalent that the U.S. Census Bureau has categorized the superintendency as the most male-dominated executive position of any profession in the United States (Bjork, 2000).

Whether or not discrimination in hiring women and minorities exists, the presence of so few women and minority superintendents presents a major challenge to the profession. The compositions of student bodies and teaching staffs, along with

community makeup, challenge the profession to improve its record in preparing and placing women and minority administrators as superintendents. (Bjork, Brunner, & Glass, 2000, p. 45)

Embarking into the field of education as teachers or support staff, women are working with primarily other women on a daily basis (Shakeshaft, 1999). As they begin to move up the ranks in education, the opportunity to collaborate and receive support from other women steadily diminishes (Brunner, 2000). Due to the fact that women represent such a small percentage of superintendents nationwide, it is essential that those currently in the role are studied, supported, and successful (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011).

Amidst all of the challenges superintendents face, those in the field that are women are presented with additional obstacles. School leaders rely on research to guide them accordingly; however, limited research is available to assist women in the role of superintendent. As of 2012, only 23% of all school superintendents were women (Wallace, 2014). The number of female superintendents is growing by only .7% annually (Wallace, 2014). Shakeshaft (1999) believes that the system of public education in the United States is a direct reflection of the society as a whole and there is a great deal of stratification in women in education. Robinson (2008) found that women leave the superintendency because they went into the position to make an instructional impact and they discover that their expectation is not the reality. While women were most interested in the instructional aspects of the position, this was often not what was viewed as the main purpose of their position (Robinson, 2008). The pressure of the school board

attempting to micromanage female superintendents was also a key factor to their demise (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).

Women reported that they felt they had to excel in all areas of their lives while serving as superintendent in essence, becoming a “superwoman” (Robinson, 2007).

Female superintendents report that it is very important to not only excel in their professional role, they put additional pressure on themselves to feel fulfilled in their home and personal life (Robinson, 2007). Dana and Bourisaw (2006) suggest that while the traditional expectations of women as the primary caregiver has weakened, the expectation has not entirely subsided. Loder (2005) found that women’s stress comes from the administrator’s struggle of having to be an instructional leader, wife, mother, caretaker, and so much more.

In an attempt to prove themselves as a female superintendents women often go above and beyond the average workload associated with the position (Robinson, 2007). The self-inflicted expectations arise from the need to be an expert in all areas, especially those perceived to be weaknesses for women such as the budget and school operations (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Women have reported that it was essential for them to be perfect in such a competitive environment in which it was assumed they had weaknesses (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). Brunner’s (2009) research has determined that women are leaving the superintendency prematurely due to gender. These capable women are disadvantaged as a result of various combinations of social and cultural isolation (Brunner, 2009, p. 173). Women are marginalized by their gender due to the fact there are very few of them in the field (Brunner, 2009; Funk, 2004). Female superintendents

have to work at networking and gaining acceptance from their predominantly male peers (Brunner, 2009).

Lonely at the Top

The concept of isolation and loneliness have been studied and analyzed by many social theorists. Rook (1984) contends that isolation is an enduring condition of emotional distress that takes place when a person feels estranged from, misunderstood, or rejected by others. Zavaleta, Samuel, & Mills (2014) simply define isolation as the deprivation of social connectedness. Entering into the field of education in most cases as a teacher, women have many peers to build social and emotional bonds with. Moving up the ranks into leadership positions leads to less peer interaction the higher up one gets. Because women are under-represented in the superintendency, they may lack the tendency to build relationships with peers. Furthermore, women are often excluded from male cliques as a result of gender differences (Shakeshaft, 1999). This coupled with the feeling of isolation that inherently comes with the superintendency; women are often entrenched in loneliness.

Women Superintendents in New Jersey

In 2013, Achieve NJ was enacted requiring all teachers to receive a minimum of three formal observations a year. School districts are required to observe teachers three times more than in previous years with no additional funding for additional administrative staff. Female superintendents view evaluation, curriculum, and instructional leadership as important, but other responsibilities, such as especially legal and political issues, consume the time they would like to devote to instructional leadership (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). Women in the superintendency have been

challenged to take on these larger responsibilities despite issues raised with the legitimacy and purpose of standards (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). They have been expected to create the district and school conditions to improve curricular, instructional, and assessment practices toward improved student learning and outcomes, which we define as instructional leadership (Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006). As Petersen (1999) reported there is an emerging new and somewhat different leadership role for the district superintendent in the core technologies of curriculum and instruction (p. 17). Greater demand for accountability coupled with the increasing politicization of the superintendent has posed major challenges for women (Cunningham & Carter, 1997; Glass, 1992; Jackson & Cibulka, 1992; Kowalski, 1995).

Financially, women superintendents in New Jersey are not being compensated equally in comparison to their male counterparts. Male superintendents earn more than women superintendents in New Jersey (NJDOE, 2015). For the 1996-1997 school year, the salary differential between genders is 6%. Furthermore, by 2010-2011 male superintendents are making 7% more than their female counterparts. Male salaries rose 17% more than inflation and female salaries rose 16% above than their salaries in 1996-1997, which were 6% less than their male counterparts (NJDOE, 2015). The changing policy environment, increased accountability, coupled with the financial disparity that exists among men and women has added pressure to an already stressful role (Cunningham & Carter, 1997; Glass, 1992; Jackson & Cibulka, 1992; Kowalski, 1995, NJDOE, 2015).

Problem Statement

Glass and Franceschini (2007) state that modern superintendency consists of tasks such as instructional leadership, fiscal management, community relations, board relations, personnel management, and operations management. No longer is the superintendent's primary responsibility one of compliance and control; it has shifted to one of innovation, data driven decision making and sustaining learning environments for both staff and students that will enhance the educational experience of both and improve student achievement (Schlechty, 2006).

Women are characterized as the foundation of K-12 education serving as teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff, however, they are vastly underrepresented in the superintendency (Dobie & Hummel, 2006). With seventy-six percent of all K-12 educators being female and 78.3% of superintendents being male (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) it is clear that a disparity exists among the percentage of female teachers and those that become superintendents.

The challenges women superintendents experience include the greater demand for accountability coupled with the increasing politicization of the role (Cunningham & Carter, 1997; Glass, 1992; Jackson & Cibulka, 1992; Kowalski, 1995). Compounded with these challenges, and being the minority in the field, women superintendents must also learn to overcome isolation. As women move up the ranks in education, they have less and less interaction with other women due to the fact that superintendents are primarily male (Dobie & Hummel, 2006). Performing in a role that is inherently associated with isolation, women are faced with the additional obstacle of overcoming loneliness in a male-dominated field (Shakeshaft, 1999). However, this work seeks to explore women

superintendent's social isolation and their attempts to remediate it.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the attributes associated with the leadership of women superintendents and how they overcome isolation in a predominantly male-dominated field. Through a feminist lens, I explored the manner in which women serve as superintendents, particularly, the manner in which they overcome isolation in a male-dominated field. A qualitative research design, specifically phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994), was used for this study. This type of research explores phenomenon through the meaning that participants give to the factors that contribute to the issue (Moustakas, 1994). Hermeneutical phenomenology was the approach used to incorporate my own lived experiences, as a woman superintendent, into my research (Moustakas, 1994). This approach enables the interpretation of the texts of my own life and those of the women participants from a feminist standpoint (Moustakas, 1994). The interpretive process allows meaning making of the lived experiences of the participants, including myself.

Participants were selected from the New Jersey public school districts where 28% of superintendents are women (NJDOE, 2015). Superintendents were emailed and asked to participate in a brief survey. Women superintendents who have experienced isolation and are willing to participate were selected for the qualitative portion of the study. I gathered data through interviews and graphic elicitations. I also reviewed documents such as Board minutes, field notes, and newspaper articles. In an attempt to assist women superintendents with their transition into the field and to enhance their current pedagogy, this research identified key attributes of women currently in the field. The results of the

qualitative study revealed data that can be used by women superintendents, in New Jersey and beyond, to assist with overcoming isolation and improve their craft.

Research Questions

The following research question guided the study:

1. What is the essence of women superintendents' leadership in a male-dominated profession?
2. How do women superintendents experience isolation in their profession?
3. How did women superintendents experience the impact of isolation on their daily leadership practice?
4. How do women superintendents remediate isolation in a male-dominated profession?

Definition of Terms

Leadership. Northouse (2010) defines leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. Leadership is defined as utilizing one's innate traits, developed abilities, and life lessons to cultivate a collaborative environment while empowering all stakeholders in a quest to reach a common goal (Northouse, 2010; Fullan, 2007).

Isolation. For the purposes of this study, isolation refers to the state in which a superintendent performs their daily practice. Rokach (2014) contends that succession to the top leadership position in an organization is necessarily isolating in that it separates leaders from others and leaves them without peers.

Feminist inquiry. A feminist is defined as woman who aims to interrogate gender inequalities and to effect change in areas where gender and sexuality politics create power imbalances. Feminist inquiry attempts to identify ways in which dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification systematically disadvantage women (Baker, P. & Yang, 2001).

Superintendent. The superintendent is the chief executive officer of a school district.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory attempts to develop a comprehensive account of the subordination of women including its supposed essence and origin, is a prerequisite for developing effective strategies to liberate women, and identifies the underlying causes of women's subordination (Gimenez, 2005). According to Flax (1987), feminist theory has several purposes: to understand the power differential between men and women; to understand women's oppression such as how it evolved, how it changes over time, how it is related to other forms of oppression; and how to overcome oppression. Bettina Aptheker (1989) suggested that feminist researchers search for meanings found in the daily activities of women. She suggests that feminists connect meanings to develop a map of reality or a standpoint. Aptheker (1989) contended that that patterns women create are a result of their labors and in the context of their subordinated status to men. Furthermore, listening to the stories of women helps to make meaning of their lives and the struggles they endure.

Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism refers to a set of theoretical frameworks that have emerged out of the intersection of Marxism and feminism. Marxism and feminism examine forms of systematic inequalities that lead to the experiences of oppression for marginalized individuals (Ehrenreich, 1976). Marxism deals with a form of inequality that arises from the class dynamics of capitalism (Gimenez, 2005; Holmstrom, 2002). It understands the class inequality as the primary axis of oppression in capitalist societies. The goal of the Marxist feminist framework is to liberate women by transforming the conditions of their oppression and exploitation (Ehrenreich, 1976). Marxist feminism is an emancipatory, critical framework that aims at understanding and explaining gender oppression in a systematic way (Holmstrom, 2002). The lens helps examine how gender is a factor. The main focus is how women are portrayed, how they function, behave, and are limited for being women (Gimenez, 2005).

Social Isolation

The social isolation framework focuses on the effect of being excluded as well as the inequity between the groups being excluded and those groups who are the excluders (Zavaleta, Samuel, & Mills, 2014). Biordi & Nicholson (2009) associate social isolation with loneliness, isolation, powerless, and self-estrangement. Utilizing the social isolation framework the quality and quantity of interactions female superintendents have with others can be studied, analyzed, and discussed.

Both the Marxist feminist framework and the social exclusion framework served as theoretical frameworks for this study and will be described in more depth in Chapter Two.

Delimitations

As with all research, this study has some initial delimitations. First, I am operating from the assumption that the participants are responding honestly to the questions being asked. Women may be reluctant to open up about their feelings of isolation due to the fact that it could be perceived as a weakness. To ameliorate this limitation, participants were told that their identity is confidential and the results of the study will be shared with them. Next, female superintendents' experience with isolation in the field varies based on time in the field, personality, and work environment. To overcome this limitation, every female superintendent in New Jersey was invited to participate.

Proximity and distance is a possible limitation of this study. Participants who are quite far in distance to the researcher will be asked to partake in a virtual interview via Skype or some other form of technology. This type of interaction can be impersonal and not as interactive as a face-to-face interview. In an attempt to avoid this limitation, every attempt to complete a personal interview will be made.

Another limitation of this study is the research design. Hermeneutical phenomenology is used to incorporate my lived experiences into the research (Moustakas, 1994). A bias exists regarding my feelings towards isolation as a female superintendent. Themes and patterns that are found could primarily reflect my personal choices and experiences. Another limitation of this method is that it focuses on experiences that are unique to the individuals and to their setting. Findings can therefore not be generalized to a different population such as male superintendents. To alleviate this limitation, generalizations will be avoided.

Finally, the research questions that are being used to guide this study may not thoroughly capture the information that is necessary for this study. To overcome this limitation, research questions will be adjusted and altered if needed.

Significance of the Study

Women are an integral part of the school community as both teachers and school leaders. This research will provide current or aspiring female superintendents with data and feedback that can assist with success and sustainability. Identifying and attending to the attributes that assist with overcoming isolation in a male dominated field can ultimately increase the amount of female superintendents. The following will consider the impact this study may have on policy, practice, and research.

Policy

An array of regulation exists in New Jersey regarding teacher and principal preparation including mentoring, and guidance (NJDOE, 2015). Minimal guidance is offered to new superintendents. According to the New Jersey Administrator and Superintendent Association (2015) new superintendents are required to register for the Superintendent Academy and attend six workshop sessions over the course of ten months. The content of the workshops focuses on current issues in education such as finance, curriculum, and standardized testing. New superintendents are also required to work with a mentor their first year (NJASA, 2015). A specific rubric is given by the NJDOE (New Jersey Department of Education) that the mentor and mentee must follow. Once again, the items addressed focus on the daily operation of a school district.

Seasoned superintendents are offered no support and are not required to meet

with other superintendents at a time. The results of this study provided a foundation of support for not only female superintendents but superintendents in general. Having the tools to overcome isolation positively impacts longevity and assist with daily practice. The NJDOE can use the results of this study to develop a policy requiring more ongoing support for superintendents.

Practice

Jones (1994) compared the superintendency to the lone ranger; a person riding into town with the hope and promise of effecting positive change. With this prestige, comes the responsibility of making decisions that affect an entire school district. Having the tools to overcome isolation can ensure resilience in a challenging role. Daily practice is enhanced with the elimination of the feeling of loneliness and isolation. Longevity in the position will increase resulting in more experienced superintendents in the field.

As a result of this study, superintendents will have information that can assist with overcoming isolation in their daily practice. Women superintendents will be able to clearly identify that gender inequities exist in the field and feeling isolated is not unique. On a more global level, leaders in an array of fields will have information regarding the challenges of isolation and the manner in which women attempt to overcome it.

Research

Emergent from the results of this study could be a mixed methods analysis determining if a relationship exists between longevity in the field and isolation. Are women superintendents leaving the field because they can't overcome isolation? If they had the tools to overcome the loneliness associated with the superintendency, would

they have stayed in the position? Additional qualitative studies may include women superintendents perceptions of other female administrators in contrast to their male peers.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study is designed to identify the attributes that womansuperintendents possess that assist with overcoming isolation in a male-dominated field. Chapter Two of this document will synthesize the scholarship about womansuperintendents in the field a well as the detrimental impact of isolation and loneliness and further explore the role of the theoretical framework. In addition, I will explain the context of the study in this chapter. Chapter Three will explain the methodology of the study. Chapter Four of this study will present the findings from the data gathered by the researcher. Finally, Chapter Five will discuss the implication of the findings as well as suggests next steps based on a synthesis of the findings.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to review literature related to isolation and the superintendency and better understand the relevance and importance of it. This chapter will cover the superintendency as a leadership role, women serving as superintendents, and the isolation that is innately associated with leadership. The chapter will also include a discussion of the Marxist feminist framework (Gimenez, 2005; Holmstrom, 2002) and how it aims at understanding and explaining gender oppression in a systematic way. Furthermore, the social exclusion framework (Zavaleta, Samuel, & Mills, 2014) will be used to understand women's isolation and the detrimental factors associated with it. It will also be used as a tool to assess both the quantity and quality of one's social relations. Upon conclusion of this chapter, it will be apparent that women in leadership roles face many challenges and research is needed to ensure women superintendents have the necessary skills to overcome isolation in the field.

Gender, The Workplace, and Education

According to Nadler and Stockdale (2012), women are significantly disadvantaged and mistreated in the workplace compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, the evidence regarding discrimination and prejudice is based on sex role stereotypes. Top positions, and the benefits that coincide with those top positions, bypass women and are often given to men (Nadler & Stockdale, 2012). Eagly (2007) contends that explicit gender bias favoring men leads to their hiring, promoting, and career opportunities over women. Nadler and Stockdale (2012) have determined that when

applying for a higher-level position, men are found to be competent and likable whereas women are just perceived as competent.

Gender and Education

In the field of education, parity has not yet been reached in regards to the hiring and representation of women in positions such as principal, assistant principal, and superintendent (Kerr, Miller, & Ritter, 2008). Women continue to be overrepresented in the classroom yet, lag in numbers in administrative roles. In an attempt to achieve equity in the field, Guy and McCandless (2012) suggest that studies based on gender-based distribution of high-level public education positions take precedent. Kerr, Miller, & Ritter (2008) admit that any improvements to the current numbers would be incremental. Kellough and Naff (2013) argue that in order for this change to surface more attention needs to be directed toward measuring the representation of women in administrative roles. Furthermore, the factors need to be identified that influence this gender-based inequity. Based on the information discussed, much of the research available regarding administrative roles in education is male-dominated.

The Superintendency

Current research pertaining to the superintendency relates to performance, challenges, turnover, and longevity. The bases for this research relies primarily on the experiences of men in the role of superintendent. The current research regarding the superintendency is beneficial in some aspects, however a gap exists specifically in the realm of gender and isolation within the field.

In an attempt to better understand the role and effectiveness of the superintendent, Devono and Price (2012) studied the manner in which principals and teachers perceive

their leader. The study found that the superintendent must wear several hats to successfully bring about change and must rely on the stakeholders within the district to effectively impact the learning environment and education within the classroom (Devono and Price, 2012). Superintendents cannot merely develop one model that works well in all contexts nor can they work in isolation. Halevy, Berson and Galinsky (2011) concur that current research studies have found that as a visionary leader a superintendent attracts more followers, especially in the midst of change.

Copeland (2013) found that superintendents serve many roles within their practice such as manager, planner, listener, communicator, and liaison to the community. Of all of the perceived roles associated with the superintendency, communicator was seen as the most vital (Copeland, 2013; Henry & Reidy, 2006). Successful superintendents can influence behavior and promote school reform with the use of effective communication (Kowalski, 2005). The role of the superintendent, although prestigious, comes with many challenges.

Challenges

A common complaint often heard when superintendents describe their work is that there is too much to be done, with new mandates and policies piling up on administrative plates that are already overloaded (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Superintendents are interested in curriculum and instruction and understand the importance of it however the daily realities of their jobs subvert even the most committed professional (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). Thomas (2001) believes that the predominant issues that superintendents face are instability, school board relations, and the politics of public school governance

Superintendents have been dealt with more responsibilities through both state and federal mandates instituted in the name of progress (Sharp & Walter, 1997). Once considered to be the instructional leader and teacher of teachers, more recently the discourse on the work of superintendents has shifted to politics and collaboration focused on excellence and educational (Thomas, 2001). The work of superintendents has increasingly become defined by their responses to the complexities and challenges of political pressures and conflicting interests, unpredictable school finances, standards-based reform, and greater demands for accountability of increased student performance through state and federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Foleno, 2001; Feuerstein & Dietrich, 2003; Lecker, 2002; Sherman & Grogan, 2003). Superintendents are expected to lead the charge in improving curricular, instructional, and assessment practices while ultimately improving student learning (Thomas, 2001; Sherman & Grogan, 2003). Murphy (1989) noted that superintendents spend the majority of time on issues not directly related to curriculum and instruction. He concluded that instructional leadership at the district level was managed more by default than by design. Bredeson (1996) and Bredeson & Johansson (1998) also reported that superintendents ranked curriculum development as a top priority, but then correspondingly ranked it low in terms of how they actually spent their time. More recently federal accountability measures, most notably in ESEA (No Child Left Behind, 2001), have intensified demands for superintendents to attend to assessment and student learning outcomes in their districts. Performance-based accountability defined as the direct measurement of student performance, disaggregated by school and by type of student, and the use of that data to make judgments about how well

schools perform, have created a big challenge for superintendents (Choy, 2003). Choy (2003) further explains that this problematic change directly alters the manner in which school leaders manage their school systems.

Turnover

An inevitable occurrence as a result of the challenges that superintendents face is turnover. In the early 1990's average tenure was reported at 2.5 years in large urban districts (Rist, 1991). Bjork (2000) found that the mean tenure of superintendents ranged from a low of 5.6 years to just less than seven years in the period between 1970 and 2000. Glass and Franceschiti (2007) agree that turnover rates traditionally average at six years. When examining the tenure figures for 2006, the mean tenure was 5.5 years with 42.2% of superintendents with tenures of three years or less (Glass and Franceschiti, 2007). The majority of studies concerning the impact of administrative turnover on student achievement center around school level administrators (Baker & Cooper, 2005, Bista & Glassman, 1998; Hallinger & Hect, 1998).

Researchers have been interested in determining why superintendents leave their school districts for at least four decades (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970). Superintendent turnover however, lacks a well-developed research base (Natkin, Cooper, Fusarelli, Alborano, Padilla, & Ghosh, 2002). In an ever-changing and complex academic environment, researchers have noted the need for studies of superintendent turnover using recent data that allow consideration of the roles and relationships of superintendents and school boards (Fusarelli, 2005; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2008). In an attempt to overcome the many challenges associated with the superintendency, effective leadership is essential.

Leadership and the Superintendency

The modern day school superintendent is expected to carry out a majority of the roles and duties of the office in a very public manner (Polka & Litchka, 2008). This presence is becoming increasingly more acute in communities across America as schools focus on implementing the key accountability provisions of state and federal legislative acts and reforming education (Brandt, 2000). The undeniable need for effective and inspired leadership has never been more pressing than it is today (Polka & Litchka, 2008). With the increasing needs in our society, and in the workplace, for knowledgeable, skilled and responsible citizens, the pressure on schools intensifies. The expectation that no child be left behind in a world and economy will require everyone's best is not likely to subside (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005, p. 123).

Leadership is about bringing the people of an organization together so they will be invested and take ownership in achieving the overall mission of that organization (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000). Northouse (2010) defines leadership as a process whereby an individual brings together a group of people to achieve a common goal. Grogan (1996), however, believes that the process by which one becomes a leader and the means by which one exercises leadership are very gender specific.

Women and the Superintendency

An array of current research places an emphasis on the significance of teachers' experiences however very little attention has been given to administrators' experiences. The typical career path, leading up to the superintendency, stems from the embarkation into education as a teacher (Glendinning, 2005). Glass (1992) found that a typical pathway for women to the superintendency is from the position of teacher, to principal, to

central office position, to superintendent. Teachers, primarily female, have the luxury of relying on research and past practice to improve their craft. Consequently, few individual accounts, biographies, histories, case studies, or ethnographies have centered on women superintendents (Brunner, 2000). Cruickshank and Haefele (2001) have found that the characteristic of effective teachers include component, reflective, respectful, and analytical. As these same female teachers move up the administrative ranks to superintendent, the qualities that deem them effective are unclear due to the lack of research.

Challenges to Women's Practice

Although, more women are entering into senior level leadership positions, the research on the actual experiences, challenges and barriers encountered while serving as district leaders focus on men. There is also limited knowledge from the voices from women leaders on the factors associated with their decisions to enter the superintendency and the challenges and barriers while serving in a senior level leadership position (Pascopella, 2011). An insight into this experience will be beneficial to women who aspire to enter any senior level leadership position (Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010). In summary, gender bias prevails in the field, silence is a coping mechanism, and women attempt to employ strategies to overcome the inequity that exists.

Brunner (2000) examined the discourse of twelve woman superintendents with the expressed aim of determining if patterns and talk about their superintendency experiences contained evidence of any inequality. The women in the study, in general, had difficulty speaking about the power that came with being a superintendent. The women were unclear as to why they were uncomfortable talking about power and

admitted that it was a word not in their regular vocabulary. Wolf (1994) contends that women struggle talking about power because they feel it is not culturally acceptable. Tannen (1994) believes that women often downplay authority and as a result are less valued and not recognized as accomplished. Brunner (2010) also found that woman superintendents experienced an unnatural silence in various ways. For example, board members would turn away when woman superintendent would speak and not give them the attention they deserved. Woman superintendents also experienced board members not paying attention when they were giving a presentation, something that would not happen if it were a male superintendent. Lastly, female superintendents reported being either ignored or interrupted often at meeting with colleagues and a male-dominated room.

Dobie & Hummel (2006) have found that educational leaders are deeply and unconsciously involved in perpetuating a paralyzing system designed to keep women out of the top leadership position. The U.S. public school superintendency continues to be the most gender-stratified executive position in the country with men forty times more likely to advance from teaching to the top leadership role in schools than are women (Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000). Brunner (2000) has determined that beliefs and actions quite natural for men superintendents were unnatural for the women because of the gender-specific expectations of our culture. Women reported unsettled experiences resulting from a social norm that it is not natural to have women in the role of superintendent, given the gendered cultural beliefs governing attitudes about whether a particular job is an acceptable position for a woman. Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones (2010) further contend that regardless of the growth that they experience, women still must learn to

function in a male-dominated leadership culture and it becomes difficult for many women to break through and succeed against the glass ceiling.

While serving in the role of superintendent, females encounter challenges solely based on gender bias and stereotypes. Wallace (2014) has found that board member perceptions of females were that they were not good managers and were unqualified to handle budget and finance. Females felt the good-ole-boy network still existed in the superintendency (Brunner, 2010; Wallace, 2014). Participants believed that board members needed experience with a female superintendent for her to prove her ability before a change in negative attitude took place (Wallace, 2014). According to feminist standpoint theory, women's lives differ systematically and structurally from men's lives. Each group engages in distinct activities and the two groups are accorded different rights and opportunities (Wallace, 2014). Brinia (2012) contends that women actually further enhance the bias due to their preconceived notions regarding leadership. Many women consider themselves not to have the right personality characteristics to perform the role of manager: they tend to be too sensitive; they become too involved in the problems they encounter in the decision-making sphere and very often they dislike the problems and conflicts of the workplace (Brunner, 2010; Wallace, 2014; Britwum & Ledwith, 2014). Furthermore, being in a profession in which men and masculinity set the standards for what is valued, women superintendents, visible and isolated members of an underrepresented minority group, are pressured to disaffiliate from other women, in order to prove themselves as professionals (Britwum & Ledwith, 2014).

Coping in the Superintendency

In an attempt to overcome the inequity that prevails in the role of superintendent, many women use silence as a coping mechanism. The feminist discourse of social change continues to receive a hostile hearing in the world of educational administration and women superintendents who want to succeed stay silent about systemic problems of inequality (Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000). Lessons women superintendents learn from the male-constructed culture of the superintendency are that they are out of place and should keep quiet. Women learn to downplay isolation and sexism and they must not make trouble. They learned to deny the differences and women administrators see their experiences as individual and fail to comprehend how gender serves as a segregating factor in the culture of public schools (Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Brunner, 2000). Choosing silence can further exacerbate the feeling of isolation in a pre-existing isolating role. Succession to the top leadership position in an organization is necessarily isolating in that it separates leaders from others and leaves them without peers (Rokach, 2014). A leader is expected to provide support to others however the support is not always available to them. Silence, leading to isolation, may lead to anxiety and affect the overall performance of the leader (Brunner, 2000; Rokach, 2014).

Dobie & Hummel (2006) studied women who have achieved the position of superintendent and examined their beliefs that they believed led them to a successful career. Five categories arose from their study: (1) awareness of a need for spirituality; (2) dependence on a trustworthy person; (3) cognizance of leadership styles and power; (4) an inclination to use metacognition; and (5) silence caused by denial or repression. Folta, Seguin, Ackerman, & Nelson (2012) studied the skills of female leaders that have

successfully created change. They found that those leaders favor a transformational style of leadership because it is consistent with the female gender role. The model of leadership provided a vision and inspired others. Contrary to their male counterparts, women often delegate or lean toward facilitative leadership (Kelsey, Allen, Coke, & Ballard, 2014). Lastly, mentors were found to be a tool for overcoming barriers and advice for career advancement (Garn & Brown, 2008; Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones, 2010).

Due to the fact that education is a female dominated field and the superintendency is a male-dominated position, research regarding women in the role of superintendent is essential. Brunner (1998) agrees that women can succeed in the superintendency, they reinforce the evidence that women see, value, and know as superintendents, and are role models for other women aspiring to be superintendents. It is believed that because of the lack of female superintendents that currently reside in the position, there is a lack of role models, mentors, and networks for women and that is why they are not aspiring to be superintendents (Campell, 1991; Edson, 1998; Lynch, 1990; Whitaker & Lane, 1990). Various ways that women see and know the world of educational administration are very important as education continues to transform. Brunner (1994) believes that research regarding women in the superintendency becomes vastly more important to anyone interested in educational administration. Women bring to their practice many of the necessary characteristics currently missing that are necessary for education reform. Using a systematic framework to analyze the conditions in which contemporary female superintendents serve under can help gain a more in-depth understanding of their strengths and the struggles they encounter. As with many leadership positions, isolation

can be a detrimental aspect of the superintendency.

Leadership and Isolation

Isolation

Tolson (2000) contends that the pursuit of personal vision contributes to isolation. Mercer (1996) believes that isolation is self-induced and leaders isolate themselves from colleagues because they cannot cope with implications for their authority if they were emotionally close to them. Guptill (2003) adds that isolation actually emerged from the bureaucratic structure of educational institutions and resulted in stress and isolation. Although the story of the leader as isolated has become well known, the story of the actual isolation has been far overlooked (Cook, Johnson, & Stager, 2016, p. 5). The feeling of isolation is a problem generic to anyone holding a senior management position in which the responsibility of the organization lies in the hands of that individual (Mercer, 1996). This notion of isolation in a top management position coincides with the role of school superintendent.

The Isolated Superintendent

The greatest challenge some superintendents face is professional isolation due to administrative demands, political challenges, and operational duties often detach them from the daily interaction with teachers and students (Hatch & Roegman, 2012; Jazzar & Kimball, 2004). The culture of isolation is inherent in education because the hierarchy lends itself to keeping members departmentalized and away from one another (Guptill, 2003). On a daily basis, superintendents are unable to share their triumphs and tribulations with like-minded peers due to the fact that they hold the sole position. Mercer (1996) contends that the feeling of isolation and loneliness is a problem generic to those

in top leadership positions in which responsibility for an organization relies predominantly in the hands of one person (p. 165). The transition into the superintendency for many is quite abrupt and even when warned about the danger of isolation, it is only after embarking into the role does the reality of loneliness occur. The further up one goes up the ladder in education, the more one is susceptible to scrutiny and criticism. Attacks on superintendents include failed proposals, terminated contracts, and budget planning (Jazzar & Kimball, 2004).

Cook, Johnson, and Stager (2016) interviewed school leaders and have found that common themes prevail; education is not a collaborative industry, school districts do not allocate enough time for collaboration, social media can further isolate leaders, and there is no physical space to connect with other leaders experiencing similar isolation. The aforementioned factors that contribute to isolation are exacerbated for women.

Isolated Female Superintendents

Serving as teachers, elementary administrators, and central office personnel, women dominate the field of education (Blount, 2003). However, in the office of superintendent, there is a great disparity between the number of men and women (Blount, 2003). Due to the fact that few women are at the apex of America's public school districts, it is assumed that women are entrenched with feeling of isolation (Gupton & Slick, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1999).

Shakeshaft (1999) found that even though female superintendents spent more time with their staff and students than their male counterparts, the female superintendents experienced a great deal of loneliness as the leader of the school. Furthermore, female superintendents reported that they are not included in all-male activities and do not

experience comradeship as much as men. Women working in such conditions can often experience feelings of social isolation.

Marxist Feminist Framework

Feminism

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the power of men over women impacted almost every facet of women's lives and women were openly critical of male dominance (Rhode, 2014; Sandberg, 2013). Feminists of the early 1970s expressed contempt related to the ongoing control of men over women in education, religion, government, and the economy (Flax, 1979). Marriage, family, and sexuality issues seemed to dominate the challenges for women during this time (Friedan, 1997; Rhode, 2014; Sandberg, 2013; Tong, 1998). Much of the debate related to feminism during this era excluded those issues associated with women and race, ethnicity, and social class (Wheat, 2012). As a result, theories also excluded these issues that, in fact, impacted large numbers of women (Flax, 1979; Tong, 1998; Wheat, 2012).

Flax (1979) discussed specific assumptions related to feminist theory. First, this theory assumes that women and men have unique and different background experiences, and one of the tasks of feminist theory is to explain these differences (Frye, 1990; Tong, 1998; Wood, 2009). Flax (1979) explains that feminist theory assumes that the oppression of women is part of the way the structure of the world is organized. Furthermore, the intent of feminist theory is to provide an explanation of the evolution of this structure and the reasons it resulted as such. Feminist theory also assumes the notion of patriarchy, a system in which men have power over women (Flax, 1979; Tong, 1998; Wood, 2009).

Feminism today must be understood a little differently from the past, when it was mainly considered an ideology that proposed equality between men and women (Batliwala & Friedman, 2010). Based on its evolution over the past fifty years, Batliwala & Friedman (2010) prefer to position feminism as an ideology, an analytical framework, and a strategic framework. Furthermore, the ideology of equality is central to feminism and has led to the creation of a framework for analyzing power in society. As an ideology, feminism today stands not only for gender equality but for the transformation of all social relations of power that oppress, exploit or marginalizes any set of people on the basis of their gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, race, religion, nationality, location, ability, class, caste or ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1991). Moreover, it recognizes the intersecting nature of people's identities and social locations and the fact that we experience discrimination, exclusion or oppression in intersecting and simultaneous ways (Crenshaw, 1991; Batliwala & Friedman, 2010).

As an analytical framework, feminism has transformed the concepts of patriarchy and gender such as socially constructed relations of power between men and women and other gender identities (Crenshaw, 1991). A range of analytical tools and methods for unpacking the power imbalances between men and women in various social institutions and structures have been created as a result of feminism (Crenshaw, 1991; Batliwala & Friedman, 2010). Lastly, feminist scholars have constructed radically new frameworks to analyze the way in which discrimination and exclusion operate together, rather than incrementally, in people's lives (Crenshaw, 1991). Everything we do in life is rooted in theory. Whether we consciously explore the reasons we have a particular perspective or take a particular action there is also an underlying system shaping thought and practice.

In its earliest inception feminist theory had as its primary goal explaining to women and men how sexist thinking worked and how we could challenge and change it (Crenshaw, 1991; Batliwala & Friedman, 2010; Rose, 1992). The aim of feminist theorizing is to deconstruct and redefine concepts previously defined from a male perspective and generally accepted as factual (Rose, 1992). The deconstruction and redefinition of concepts, as well as the creation of new ones, have emphasized the women's experiences and knowledge as well as the conduct of research for women (Rose, 1992).

Marxist Framework

Marxist feminism refers to a set of theoretical frameworks that have emerged out of the intersection of Marxism and feminism (Gimenez, 2005). Marxism and feminism examine forms of systematic inequalities that lead to the experiences of oppression for marginalized individuals (Ehrenreich, 1976). Marxism deals with a form of inequality that arises from the class dynamics of capitalism (Gimenez, 2005; Holmstrom, 2002). It understands the class inequality as the primary axis of oppression in capitalist societies. Capitalism perpetuates the subordination of women by enforcing their economic dependence on men (Crenshaw, 1991).

Modern Marxist feminism, launching in the late nineteen sixties, attempted to answer theoretical questions regarding how to best analyze women's oppression under capitalism (Gimenez & Vogel, 2005). Postmodernist feminist theory, explaining male domination, dismissed Marx work entirely (Gimenez & Vogel, 2005). They believed that Marxist scholars had little to say about women's oppression and only focused on the political economy. In contrast, Gimenez (2005) argued that Marx's work provided

powerful tools that offered ways to obtain a deep structural understanding of the observable phenomena of women's oppression.

The goal of the Marxist feminist framework is to liberate women by transforming the conditions of their oppression and exploitation (Ehrenreich, 1976). Marxist feminism is an emancipatory, critical framework that aims at understanding and explaining gender oppression in a systematic way (Holmstrom, 2002). The lens helps examine how gender is a factor. The main focus is how women are portrayed, how they function, behave, and are limited for being women (Gimenez, 2005). Marxists are opposed to any social or political action that perpetuates the enslavement and oppression of members of the work force (Jaggar, 2008). As researchers consider reasons why women are not reaching the pinnacle of their career as superintendent, findings include barriers such as family constraints, limited mobility, perceived lack of skills in finance and facilities (Sampson, Gresham, Applewhite, & Roberts, 2015). The oppression of women is exemplified by the manner in which they are limited in career advancement.

Initially, Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialist philosophy as a theoretical framework (Wallace, 2009) was considered for this study. It is argued that this feminist philosophy provides an appropriate theoretical lens for the study of women's careers (Wallace, 2009). de Beauvoir believed that women are free and autonomous human beings however they often find themselves in a world where men and compel them to assume the status other, not independent women (Wallace, 2009). After careful analysis, this framework was not selected because of its idealism and tendency to generalize from the experiences of European middle-class women resulting in an emphasis on women's historic effectiveness (Simons & Benjamin, 1979). This framework is not beneficial

when studying modern day women in the superintendency. It is not a consideration that women are assuming the role of any one else but themselves while serving in the role of superintendent.

Social Isolation Framework

According to Biordi and Nicholson (2009) social isolation can be voluntary, in which one seeks to disengage themselves from social intercourse for many reasons, or those who are isolated involuntary, in which it is imposed by others. Social and affective isolation are two distinct characteristics can be associated with social isolation (Zaveleta, Samuel, & Mills, 2014). A common characteristic of social isolation is the lack of meaningful social networks (Fine & Spencer, 2009). Biordi & Nicholson (2009) explain that social isolation is based on the number, frequency, and quality of contacts with others. Furthermore, the negativity attributed to the isolation that one feels is a factor as well. Drawing from research on loneliness, Hortulanus, Machielse, & Meeuwesen (2006) provide a conceptual understanding of isolation that combines objective aspects of social relations, drawing from network approaches, and the subjectively experienced quality of social contacts in a personal network. This type of framework assesses both the quantity and quality of one's social relations (Zaveleta, Samuel, & Mills, 2014).

Social isolation results in one's need for authentic intimacy not being met (Biordi and Nicholson (2009). This perceived alienation can lead to loneliness, depression, or other social impairment that can then exacerbate the isolation (Biordi and Nicholson, 2009). Elder & Retrum (2012) did a study regarding isolation and the impact of health and quality of life in aging adults. The conceptual framework developed for this project was based on understanding how isolation can occur and isolation's impact on

health and quality of life (Elder & Retrum, 2012). It was discovered that isolation posed such risk factors that included a diminishment of health. Furthermore, the same holds true for social connectedness and quality of life. When social connectedness diminishes and when health and quality of life diminishes, a person becomes isolated (Elder & Retrum, 2012). Contextual factors that are relevant to the occurrence of isolation include individual psychosocial states that play a role in isolation, as well as social factors such as social networks, social supports, social engagement and integration, income, mobility, societal factors, and the physical environment (Elder & Retrum, 2012, p. 3).

The social isolation framework can assist with the exploration of isolation and the manner in which it affects female superintendents. The alienation of being the chief school officer lends itself to the feeling of isolation. Being a female superintendent, a minority in the field, is a societal factor that is synonymous with isolation. Utilizing the social isolation framework the quality and quantity of interactions female superintendents have with others can be studied, analyzed, and discussed. According to Higgins and Kram (2001), a superintendent's success is based on how well relationships are built with others such as staff, school board members, and community members. In contrast, isolation can lead to poor job performance, depression, and being unsuccessful (Hatch & Roegman, 2012).

Marxist Feminist Framework and the Social Isolation Framework

This study uses Marxist feminist framework as well as the social isolation framework to guide the research regarding the manner in which female superintendents overcome isolation in a male-dominated field. The Marxist feminist framework guides this research due the fact that it an emancipatory, critical framework that assists with

understanding gender oppression in a systematic fashion (Holmstrom, 2002). This lens helps to examine how women function, behave, and are limited for merely being women (Gimenez, 2005). The mere fact that female superintendents are the vast minority in the field lends itself to oppression and limitations. The social isolation framework will also be used as a guide for this study. This framework guides the research in two ways. First, it offers an understanding of how isolation can occur and the impact it can have on a person's overall well-being (Biordi & Nicholson, 2009). Next, this framework serves as an empirical theory of social processes which can be applied to the understanding of the phenomenon relative to this research (Anafara & Mertz, 2006).

Conclusion

This literature review has affirmed the many challenges associated with the modern day role of school superintendent. Although the responsibilities of the chief school officer have evolved throughout time one thing remains constant, the isolation associated with the position is detrimental. Due to the fact that women are vastly underrepresented in the role of superintendent, they face additional challenges such as gender-bias and a lack of support from other superintendents. Isolation is magnified for female superintendents because they do not have strength in numbers. The research questions that were designed for this study will attempt to identify the manner in which superintendents cope with isolation in a field dominated by men.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the attributes associated with the leadership of women superintendents and how they overcome isolation in a predominantly male-dominated field. Through a feminist lens, I explored the manner in which women serve as superintendents, particularly, the manner in which they overcome isolation in a male-dominated field. A qualitative research design, specifically phenomenological research (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), was used for this study. This type of research explores phenomenon through the meaning that participants give to the factors that contribute to the issue (Moustakas, 1994). More specifically, hermeneutical phenomenology was the approach used that offered me, as the researcher and woman superintendent, the opportunity to interpret the texts of my own life from a Marxist feminist approach (Moustakas, 1994). The interpretive nature inherent to the process of hermeneutical phenomenology enabled the meaning-making of the lived experiences of the participants, including myself.

Women serving as superintendents in New Jersey, who have experienced isolation, and were willing to participate, were selected to participate in this study. Data were gathered through interviews, graphic elicitations, and field notes. The results of this hermeneutical phenomenological study can be used by women in the superintendency, in New Jersey and beyond, to assist with overcoming isolation and improve their leadership craft. The following research question guided the study:

1. What is the essence of women superintendents' leadership in a male-dominated profession?

2. How do women superintendents experience isolation in their profession?
3. How did women superintendents experience the impact of isolation on their daily leadership practice?
4. How do women superintendents remediate isolation in a male-dominated profession?

The sections to follow will provide an in depth description of the entire research process.

Figure 1 includes a graphical representation of the research process.

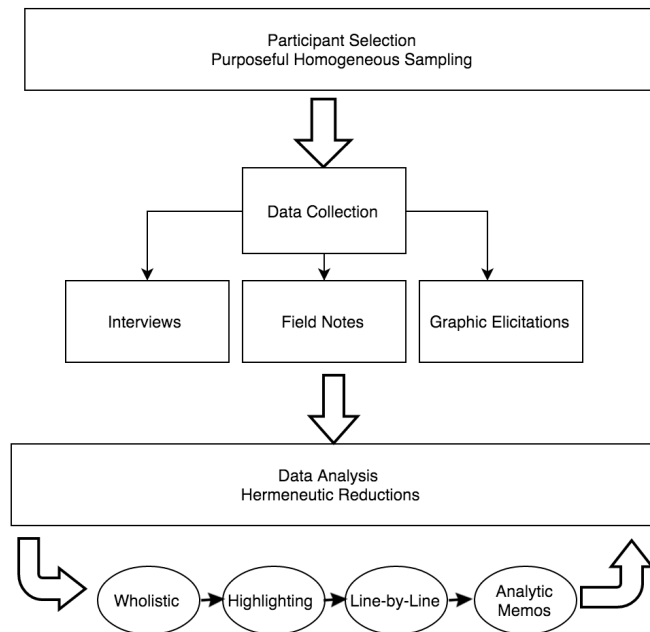


Figure 1. Research Process

Rationale for and Assumptions of a Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research is used to understand the meaning that groups or individuals may find in social phenomena (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). According to Maxwell (2013),

this type of research does not start from a predetermined point nor does it proceed through a fixed sequence of steps. In qualitative research, the researcher is the means through which the study is conducted and the purpose is to learn about some facet of the social world (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p.5). Furthermore, the knowledge acquired during the research process is used as a means to better the human condition (Maxwell, 2013). In qualitative studies, researchers are the key instrument interacting with those under study and actively work to minimize the distance between themselves and those being researched (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative studies take place in the participant's natural setting. Furthermore, this is the place where the participant experiences the issue under study (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is inductive due to the fact the researcher goes back and forth between the data gathered and themes discovered in an attempt to develop a conclusion. The goal of qualitative research is to uncover patterns or theories that help explain a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013).

Strategy of Inquiry

Phenomenological studies look at the person, seek to understand their lived experiences, and to learn about others' view of the world (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The basic purpose of phenomenology is to transfer individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description that grasps the universal essence of that phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology is inspired by the branch of philosophy that relates to the phenomenon of human consciousness and the reflective analysis of life-world experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Spiegelberg (1982, as cited in Creswell, 2006, p. 58) explains that Husserl, a German mathematician, criticized psychology as a science that had gone wrong by attempting to apply methods of the natural sciences to human issues. Husserl believed,

according to Lavery (2003), that researchers who attended only to the external, not only missed important variables but ignored context. Phenomenology is essentially the study of lived experience or the life world (van Manen, 1990). Furthermore, Moustakas (1994) explains that the descriptive essence of these experiences is what the researcher seeks to gather. Life can not be analyzed by studying the unconscious experiences of others (van Manen, 1990). Simply stated, we live our life by experiencing it, not by knowing it (Thompson, 1990).

Hermeneutical phenomenology. Hermeneutics is defined as the art and science of interpretation and consequently also of meaning (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012). Meaning is continuously open to new insight and interpretation and not a thing that is final and stable (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 1). Husserl (1970, as cited in Goble & Yin, 2014) believed that the experiences we have of our conscious world can serve as the foundation for all knowledge. As stated previously, phenomenology aims to study the lived experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology is therefore, the study of experience combined with its meaning.

In phenomenological studies, the language presented by participants in the research process, through interviews and other interactive data collection techniques, often provides the means for data. van Manen (1990) describes hermeneutic phenomenological research as geared toward the lived experiences along with interpreting the texts of life. Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990) agree that phenomenology is not approached with a standardized set of rules. van Manen (1990) does, however, believe that hermeneutic phenomenological research can appear as the dynamic interplay among six research activities (p. 30):

1. Turning to phenomenon which seriously interests us;
2. Investigating experience as we live it;
3. Reflecting on the themes which characterizes the phenomenon;
4. Describing the phenomenon through writing;
5. Maintaining a strong pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

Within this study, van Manen's (1990) six research activities were used to capture the essence of women's' lived experiences within the superintendency. Utilizing this approach, I was able to interpret the lived experiences of the women in this study while also reflecting on my own experiences regarding the phenomenon. "The insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflecting appropriately, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 77).

Participants

In both phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology, data can include the researcher's personal reflections on the topic as well as information gathered from research participants (Polkinghorne, as cited in Lavery, 2003). The aim in participant selection in phenomenological and hermeneutic phenomenological research is to select participants who have lived experience that is the focus of the study, who are willing to talk about their experience, and who are different enough from one another to enhance the possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience (van Manen, 1990). According to Sandelowski (1986, as cited in Lavery, 2003, p. 18), the researcher may engage in interviews with participants until they believe they have reached a point of

saturation, in which further discussion with participants will not produce a deeper understanding. Saturation was thus used as a method to determine when to conclude sampling.

Currently, there are 684 superintendents serving in New Jersey Public Schools (NJDOE, 2015). Two hundred and fourteen, or 31%, of those superintendents are women. Superintendents from New Jersey, who are women, were asked to complete a brief, Google survey (see Appendix A for a copy of this survey) to determine if they have experienced isolation in their profession and if they would be willing to participate in the study. Participants were selected based on the results of the survey.

Setting

The interview process in both phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology works within an environment of safety and trust, which needs to be established initially and maintained throughout the project (van Manen, 1990). All research took place in the participant's school setting. The school district is the natural setting, and a place of familiarity and control, for superintendents.

Data Collection

In a phenomenological study, data is gathered or collected in the form of the lived experiences of the participants (van Manen, 1990). In this study, hermeneutical phenomenological data was gathered through the use of in-depth interviews with women who have experienced isolation as superintendents. Other forms of data included graphic elicitations, and a reflective journal in which I was able to record field notes.

Phenomenological Interviewing

According to Cohen (2001, as cited in Kafle, 2011), hermeneutic phenomenology does not require a very specific set of guidelines in regards to interview protocols. The main purpose is to uncover the life experiences of the participants. Cohen (2001, as cited in Kafle, 2011, p. 191) further explains that the research activities must align with a concern, geared towards the question being asked, investigate the lived experience, describe the phenomenon through writing, and consider all of the parts of the whole. The research is aimed at producing rich textual descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the life world of individuals that are able to connect with the experience of all of us collectively (van Manen, 1990).

Utilizing a hermeneutical approach, the researcher first engages in a process of self-reflection. The biases and assumptions of the researcher are not bracketed or set aside, but rather are embedded and essential to interpretive process (van Manen, 1990). Drawing up personal descriptions of lived experiences, the phenomenologist knows that one's own experiences are also the possible experiences of others (van Manen, 1990, p. 54). Furthermore, prior to asking the participants to furnish the researcher with their lived experience descriptions about the phenomenon being examined, it is best to try such descriptions first, so we have a more precise sense of what is to be obtained is established. van Manen (1990) suggests describing an experience as it was lived through including the feelings, the mood, and emotions. The researcher is called, on an ongoing basis, to give considerable thought to his or her own experience and to explicitly claim the ways in which his or her position or experience relates to the issues being researched (Langdrige, as cited in Kafle, 2011).

Creswell (2007) describes in-depth interviews as the primary means of collecting information for a phenomenological study. van Manen (1990) suggests that there are many ways of gathering data for the analysis of lived experience but he seems to favor interviewing of individuals when gathering their reflective recollections. Furthermore, he states that reflective interview transcripts require interpretive analysis by the researcher to produce phenomenological description of the experiences of the participants. In hermeneutic phenomenological human science, the interview serves very specific purposes according to van Manen (1990). The interview is used as a means for exploring and gathering narrative material that can serve as a resource for developing a deeper and richer understanding of the human phenomenon. It is also used as a means to develop a conversational relationship with the interviewee about the meaning of their experience. van Manen (1990) also suggests the collection of personal experiences through recorded conversations. As the interviews took place, it was imperative to stay as close to the actual experience as it were lived.

Close Observation

A second way that data was collected in this study was from a method called close observation. Close observation, as coined by van Manen (1990), is exactly what the phrase suggests. Rather than observing a subject through a one-way mirror or with an observational checklist, the researcher enters into the participant's life world. In this study, anecdotes were gathered while observing the participants in their natural setting, their school district.

Researcher Journal

Another common interest in the human sciences are diaries, journals, and logs for the purposes that are of educational, research, or personal growth value (van Manen, 1990). Throughout this study, a reflective researcher journal was kept that contained reflective of human experiences that were of phenomenological value. The journal assisted with phenomenological reflection as I attempted to grasp the essential meaning of the study.

Graphic Elicitation

Lastly, a graphic elicitation activity was used as a visual and kinetic text to gather information (van Manen, 1990). Graphic elicitation methods typically involve the use of diagrams, either be produced by the researcher or by participants, and such provides a basis for communication prior to the interview (Bagnoli, 2009). This activity allowed the participants to transform their lived experiences into transcended configurations. It also assisted with stimulating the participants' minds for the interview process.

Instruments

Graphic Elicitation

Prior to the interview process, all participants completed a graphic elicitation. The goal of a graphic elicitation was to stimulate the thought process and to collect data through experience (Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006). The participants were handed a piece of paper containing a blank pyramid (see Appendix B for a copy of the activity). The participants were asked to reflect on their career in education and their relationships with colleagues along the way. The first thing the women were asked to do was list all of the positions they have held in education, up to and including being a superintendent. The women were then asked to label the largest section of the pyramid with the position in

education they held that included the most ongoing, daily interaction with colleagues. For example, the bottom of the pyramid represents the point in their educational career with the most interaction and the top of the pyramid indicates the position the women held with the least interaction with colleagues. Participants were instructed to be detailed and specific about with whom they interacted daily. The entire pyramid was filled in, comprised of the positions in education the women held, and each role correlated to the amount of support and interactions with colleagues. The women were encouraged to be as detailed as possible and take all of the time they needed.

Interviews

Interviews took place in the participant's natural setting, where they were most comfortable, and were done face-to-face. Each interview, although not timed, took approximately ninety minutes to complete. As suggested by Moustakas (1994), three broad, guiding, questions were asked first, and then follow-up questions were presented. The three broad question posed were: (a) can you speak about your journey in education and the manner in which you evolved into the role of superintendent as a woman? (b) what have you experienced in terms of isolation in the superintendency? and (c) what contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences with isolation? While answering these questions, as suggested by van Manen (1990), participants were asked to think of a specific instance, situation, person, or event that they could relate to the topic.

Follow-up interview questions were as follows: (a) can you describe a specific time that you felt isolated and your leadership was affected? (b) what are some specific strategies that you have found assist with overcoming isolation? (c) as you have grown

professionally, how has the impact of isolation changed? (d) do you believe isolation affects women who are superintendents differently than men? (e) how often and for what purpose do you interact with other women who are superintendents? (f) based on your experience what plan/measures could be put into place to assist women in the superintendency? (g) what do you consider your dominant leadership traits as a superintendent? Table 1 provides a correlation between the three primary research questions with the three main interview questions (M), the follow-up questions (F), and the graphic elicitation questions (E).

Table 1

Interview Protocol

Research Question	Part of Protocol: Interview
RQ1. What is the essence of women superintendents' leadership in a male- dominated profession?	1. (M) Can you speak about your journey in education and the manner in which you evolved into the role of superintendent as a woman? 2. (F) What do you consider your dominant leadership traits as a superintendent?
RQ2. How do women superintendents experience isolation in their profession?	3. (E) <i>Referring to your graphic elicitation:</i> Explain to me what is changing as we get to the top of the pyramid. 4. (M) How have you experienced isolation in the superintendency? 5. (F) As you have grown professionally, how has the impact of isolation changed? 6. (F) How often and for what purpose do you interact with other women who are superintendents? 7. (M) What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences with isolation?
RQ3. How did women describe the impact that isolation had their daily leadership as superintendents?	8. (F) Can you describe a specific time that you felt isolated and your leadership was affected? 9. (E) <i>Referring to your graphic elicitation:</i> How have you changed as a leader based on the changes presented within the pyramid?
RQ4. How do women superintendents remediate isolation in a male-dominated profession?	10. (F) Do you believe isolation affects women who are superintendents differently than men? 11. (F) What are some specific strategies that you have found assist with overcoming isolation? 12. (F) Based on your experience, what plan/measures could be put into place to assist women in the superintendency?

van Manen (1990) suggests recording all conversations therefore, all interviews were recorded using an application on my iPhone called Super Notes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim utilizing Microsoft Word. Field notes were composed using Google Voice. This program is convenient due to the fact that I can speak into a microphone and my words are transcribed into text. I used Google Drive to create folders that contained all relevant documents.

Observations

According to van Manen (1990), observations are used gather anecdotes of the participants' lived experience. While entrenched in the participants' environment, I gathered written descriptions of their daily lives. The notes, in text form, were recorded in a research journal. After the material was gathered, I reviewed my notes and looked for any emerging themes that were relevant to my study (van Manen, 1990).

As a participant observer, I took part in the activities while in the participants setting (Creswell, 2007). Protocols were established for recording descriptive and reflective notes. These notes were recorded in a table format as displayed in the sample below.

Table 2

Observation Protocol Sample

Location:	
Date:	
Time of Day:	
Descriptive Notes (describing the events, activities, & people)	Reflective Notes (personal reflections that relate to the insights, feelings, and broad themes that emerge)

Details were written that included what was directly observed and sensed while in the participants' environment. In some cases, diagrams were sketched within the table to ensure an accurate depiction of the setting if it related to the underlying theme.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts, graphic illustrations and researcher notes were collected from each participant in the study. Given the large amount of data, it was necessary to create a process and forum for organizing the data into meaningful themes. Using a data analysis software, MAXQDA, I was able to transcribe, discover themes, and make meaning of my research. As I moved between the description of the participant's lived experiences and my own personal reflections of these experiences, the journey the participants experienced evolved.

The purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological themes are known to be the structures of experience therefore, when we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what those themes are, the experiential structures that make up experience.

Hermeneutic Reductions

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological data analysis steps are generally consistent for all who discuss these methods. The data from the three main interview questions, as well as the other protocol data, are transcribed and are highlighted for significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of the participants lived experiences regarding the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) refers to this step as horizontalization. Next, the researcher develops clusters of meaning from the data

into themes. According to Laverly (2003), the hermeneutic cycle can be applied to this process which consists of reading, reflecting, and interpreting.

In order to attribute meaning to the data, van Manen (1990) suggests three methods for isolating thematic statements. These methods are the wholistic approach, the selective or highlighting approach, and the line-by-line approach. In the wholistic approach, van Manen (1990) van Manen suggests looking at the text as a whole and asking which notable phrase captures the fundamental meaning of the text? The selective or highlighting approach asks which statement is most revealing about the phenomenon in question. In the third approach, the line-by-line approach, van Manen proposes that the researcher looks at each sentence or group of sentences while asking, “What does this sentence, or sentence cluster, reveal about the phenomenon?” (p. 93). These themes are then used as a framework around which to create a text, which aims to capture the essential meanings of the phenomenon that have become evident within the data. All three approaches were employed during the data analysis of this research.

Naturalistic Generalizations

Transferring knowledge from what is learned in a study from one group to another population is what Mills (2010) describes as naturalistic generalization. A number of researchers have redefined the scope of the phenomena and have conceived it, not as a problem of research into practice, but as one of knowledge production and knowledge utilization (Stake & Trumbull, 1980). Research leads to knowledge, which leads to improved practice. The data from the study is not only essential to women serving in the role of superintendent, it is beneficial to all superintendents. As discussed in Chapter One of the study, isolation in the superintendency is a topic that has been

overlooked yet, can be extremely detrimental. Furthermore, this study can be applied to all superintendents experiencing isolation within their daily practice.

The outcome of this study provides superintendents with an array of information for overcoming isolation in the field. The data from this study was presented in its natural form, categorised into themes, and further summarized in greater detail. The richness, ambiguities, and conflicts that were part of the participants daily lives allows the reader to relate the data to their own experiences and form interpretations accordingly. The final product, or report that is generated from this study, offers the reader a sense of the experiences women in the superintendency have gone through regarding isolation and the impact it has had on their leadership. Those in the field can use the information presented, relate it to the challenges they face, and ultimately improve their daily practice.

Trustworthiness

Guba and Lincoln (1999) have identified four standards in which to measure the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Van Manen (1990) believes that these standards are not appropriate for hermeneutic phenomenological studies. Due to the fact that hermeneutic phenomenology is a pedagogic practice of textuality in which the research considers the texts that analyze the life stories of the participants, van Manen (1990) suggests orientation, strength, richness, and depth as the primary quality concerns.

van Manen (1990) explains that orientation in the involvement of the researcher in the participants' world. To address this concern, I did not allow myself to become sidetracked, lose sight of the topic, or become susceptible to my preconceived notions.

The convincing capacity of the text regarding the core intention of the participant is referred to as strength (van Manen, 1990). Gathering an abundant amount of data ensured an accurate depiction of the participant's intention. Furthermore, the aesthetic quality of the text that narrates the meanings as perceived by the participants is referred to as richness. To address this concern, I read through the participants texts numerous times to ensure I captured the essence of their lived world. Lastly, van Manen (1990) contends that depth is the ability of the research text to truly capture the intentions of the participants. By asking an array of interview questions and subquestions, as well as utilizing the graphic elicitation activity, I was able to capture the intention of the participants.

Regarding analytic rigor, Langdrige (2007, as cited in Kafle, 2011, p. 196) suggests persuasive account and participant feedback as the primary components that determine the quality of a hermeneutic phenomenological study. The researcher paying close attention to every case that either confirms or disconfirms the theme is referred to as analytic rigor. Participant feedback is essential in the study to ensure enough rich information is gathered.

From a hermeneutic point of view, I made every effort to become part of the lived experiences of the participants as well as truly capturing their stories and intentions. Collecting data from multiple sources such as interviews, graphic elicitation, and field notes allowed me to triangulate. Triangulation is a method used to support interpretations of the data through the inclusion of more than one source (Stringer, 2007).

Role of the Researcher

Moustakas (1994) describes the heuristic process in phenomenological analyses as being a process in which the researcher is immersed and involved in the world of experience. My personal experiences within this research play a role as a longtime educator who has moved up the ranks in education and is now a superintendent and consequently, a woman. Starting my career as a first grade teacher in Atlantic City, New Jersey I was surrounded by many supportive colleagues on a daily basis, all of which were women. Within a short period of time, I became an assistant principal and soon realized many of my immediate colleagues were now men. In that role, I still had a great deal of interaction with teachers, my support system (all women) was still strong. Taking on the role of assistant superintendent, it was clearly evident that my daily interactions were now with men. The circle of colleagues that I had for daily support and interaction became much smaller and consisted of very few women. Recently, embarking on the challenging role of superintendent, I soon discovered the feeling of isolation and realized that it can be lonely at the top.

As the researcher of this study I needed to employ reduction, which is the technical term that describes the phenomenological device that allows the researcher to discover the “spontaneous surge of the lifeworld” (van Manen, 1990, p. 185). To come to an understanding of the essence of something, it is essential to reflect on it by practicing a certain reduction. van Manen (1990) suggests that the researcher needs to overcome the subjective and private feelings that could impede on the understanding of the phenomenon or experience as it is lived through. Furthermore, in the reduction, the researcher needs to strip away the theories and thematizations which prevents the

researcher from seeing the phenomenon in a non-abstracting manner (van Manen, 1990, p.185).

Following a hermeneutic approach throughout the research process, I understood as the interviewer that I must play a maieutic role in which minimal interruptions occurred during an interview. I allowed the participant to speak about the topic while paying attention to verbal and nonverbal cues. As the researcher, I understood my research goals and I had a flexible interview guide that was adjusted based on the feedback of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics is the cornerstone of meaningful and significant research. My predominant concern while conducting this research was protecting the rights and privacy of the participants. Women in my study shared intimate details of their professional lives therefore I ensured that all names were kept confidential. Formal consent was obtained by requiring participants to complete the necessary forms. As the researcher, I ensured that all participants were fully aware of the purpose of my study prior to receiving consent. Any types of foreseeable risks or benefits were disclosed as well as any incentives to participate such as sharing the results of the study. Risks included power dynamics and potential problems.

The main goal of hermeneutic approach is to explore individual lifeworld, which is made by beliefs, prejudices, common sense, and other cognitive mechanisms of identity confirmation. In this approach the researcher is more interested in how these beliefs, perceptions, and opinions could shape the interviewees' lifeworld and influence

their behavior. In studies such as this, an ethical consideration is the truthfulness, or lack of, that the participant chooses to partake in.

Due to the fact that women were being interviewed by a fellow superintendent, it is perceivable that participants may be uncomfortable sharing stories of isolation and despair. To overcome this issue, I readily shared with the participants that I am also a part of the research and have experienced such isolation. Creswell (2013) identifies the importance of full disclosure with respect to the purpose of this study, gaining all the necessary permissions to conduct the research, and providing proof of compliance throughout all phases of the research process. IRB approval was obtained prior to beginning this research. I ensured that the participants were comfortable with the process and that the interview was convenient for them. I completely understand that superintendents have a very busy schedule therefore I made myself available when it was best for them. Finally, I ensured my participants that the results of the study would be shared with them and beneficial to their daily practice.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the methodology and strategy of inquiry for this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study. Topics reviewed included the manner in which participants were selected, data collection strategies, the method for data analysis, trustworthiness, my role as the researcher, and ethical considerations. Chapter Four of this study will review the findings of the research study. Chapter Five will conclude this study with a discussion of the findings and possible next steps.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the manner in which women in the superintendency overcome isolation in a male-dominated field. Women currently serving as superintendents in New Jersey were asked to participate in a brief survey to determine if they have experienced isolation within the field and if they were willing to participate in this study. Thirty-one women responded to the survey and 10 were selected to participate. The women that were selected to participate experienced the highest level of isolation in their daily practice.

The findings of the study are presented in this chapter. This chapter provides background information of the 10 participants, based on the initial survey and field notes, as well as an analysis of the interviews that took place. Furthermore, this chapter will describe the essence of the lived experiences of the participants. Thematic experiential accounts of the data will be offered in an attempt to make meaning of the women's lived experiences.

Description of the Participants

Ten women currently serving as superintendents participated in this study. Years of experience in the field, size of school district, and demographic location varied significantly amongst the participants. The following section offers a brief profile of each participant.

Christine

This participant serves as the superintendent and business administrator in a small elementary school district. Christine was an accountant for 12 years prior to entering into

the field of education. After moving up the ranks quickly, she is currently serving in her third year in the position.

Patty

Originally intending on becoming an attorney, Patty changed her path and embarked on a teaching career in a Catholic school. After staying home with her children for seven years, she went back into teaching in public school. Patty is now entering into her fifth year as superintendent in the same school district that she began teaching in. With just under 2,000 students, Patty is quite comfortable in this rural school setting.

Anna

Starting out in education as a paraprofessional, Anna progressed in education to a teacher, a business administrator, and now is the superintendent/principal of a school district with around 800 students. Anna spent most of her educational career being a business administrator and enjoyed the position very much. While serving as the business administrator, Anna was approached by the Board of Education to take on the role of superintendent /principal she could not turn it down.

Jackie

Serving in her 11th year as the superintendent of a small, rural school district, Jackie started out her educational career as a kindergarten teacher. Jackie was a kindergarten teacher for three years, became a second grade teacher for seven years, and then a third grade teacher for three years; all in the same school district. Attempting to venture onto something new, she decided to leave the district and become a middle school teacher. After only one short year, Jackie became an elementary science

coordinator. She held that position for three years, became an assistant superintendent, and now is the superintendent of about 1,200 students.

Erin

Erin became a teacher with a notion of teaching during the day and going to law school at night. While teaching, Erin realized she was very good at it and decided to stay in the field. Erin felt she could make more of an impact on students as an administrator so she became a curriculum supervisor prior to becoming the superintendent in the same school district. Just finishing up her first year in a district of about 500 students, Erin is happy with her career choices.

Madge

As a middle school and high school teacher, Madge believed she could better serve her colleagues and the student population if she were a supervisor. After serving as a supervisor for many years, she ventured on and became the principal of an alternative high school. Madge is now entering into her 11th year as superintendent of a Pre-K-12 school district consisting of about 2,500 students.

Laura

Laura claims she started out at “the bottom” in education as a paraprofessional. After gaining experience in education she became a teacher in a private school. Laura became a supervisor after teaching for seven years. Next in her career, she changed school districts to become a vice principal. In that same district she was promoted the principal, and now has spent two years as the superintendent. Her Pre-K-6 school district has just under 1,000 students and is located in an urban area.

Cindy

Situated in the center of a city, Cindy is serving in her sixth year as superintendent/principal of about 500 students. Embarking on her educational career as a teacher in an inner city, she quickly went into administration after only five short years of teaching. Cindy became a vice principal, then a principal, and now serves as both a principal and superintendent.

Sandy

Located in a suburban setting, Sandy has been the superintendent of around 600 students for six years. Starting out, and spending most of her career, in a Catholic school, Sandy was given the opportunity to obtain her administrative certificate due to a lack of availability of principals. After obtaining her administrative certificate, the school she worked for was forced to close. Sandy took her first job as a principal in a very rural, public school district. She stayed there for three years and then ventured on to become the superintendent in her current school district.

Mary

In 1987, Mary began her educational career as a high school special education teacher. During a conference, Mary became intrigued with literacy and the notion of teaching struggling students how to read. She then took a job as a middle school special education literacy teacher. Next, Mary became a district-wide literacy coach. Upon receiving her administrative certificate, Mary became the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for the entire district. Wanting to take the next step and advance her career, Mary became the superintendent of about 1,200 students in a suburban setting, four years ago.

Table 3

Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Race/Ethnicity	Region	Years as Superintendent	Size of District
Christine	White	Southeast	2	350
Patty	White	Southwest	5	1800
Anna	White	Northeast	4	300
Jackie	White	Central	11	1250
Erin	White	Southwest	1	450
Madge	White	Southeast	10	2200
Laura	White	Northeast	2	920
Cindy	White	Southwest	6	500
Sandy	Hispanic	Central	6	450
Mary	White	Central	4	1435

Findings

Through the process of the data analysis, and attempting to discover the essence of the lived experiences of the participants, themes were developed that captured the phenomenon being researched. The themes are presented separately and include (a) minimized, marginalized, monopolized, (b) leading as a woman, (c) shifting alliances, (d) leadership, and (e) survival. Detailed descriptions of each theme are provided through the use of interview data as well as a synthesis of the participants lived experiences.

Minimized, Marginalized, Monopolized

An array of commonalities arose from the lived experiences of the women superintendents. First, and most prevalent, each of the women spoke about their negative experiences during male-dominated meetings and the challenges of being there as a minority. The women superintendents were minimized, not valued, and were made to feel powerless by the men monopolizing these forums.

Collectively, the women in this study chose to mention County Roundtable Meetings when asked about an isolating aspect of the superintendency as a woman. Once a month, superintendents, per county, come together to hear information from the County Superintendent. As pointed out by each participant, the population of superintendents at these meetings is predominantly men and in most cases, led by men. Walking into these meetings as a woman can be extremely intimidating. The women explained that the divide was further exacerbated when the few other women at the meetings would shout out, “This is where the women sit”.

After I heard that the few women all sit together, I decided never to sit there again. I found the meetings to be very intimidating. There was a great deal of posturing going on by the men. Men act like they are in a fraternity. They go to games together, they drink together, and they developed that culture within the superintendency. I made a choice to start introducing myself to more men and break the cycle (Laura).

This participant, along with the other women in this study, felt intimidated by the men because of their overpowering behaviors and the bond they appear to have.

The women explained that they are often afraid to speak up during these meetings

due to the fact that the men tend to monopolize the conversation. “As a women, you wait until you have something really important to say, then you speak up” (Patty). A comradery tends to exist among the men that does not exist for women. The men network with ease.

Quite frankly, the network that is set up does not always necessarily include us, because a lot of decisions still get made on the golf course. I hate to say it, but a lot of them still do. All the golf tournaments that we have here at our school, our Board members go, our male administrators go; the women aren’t there (Patty).

The participants of this study concur that a gender-based inequity exists among men and women superintendents. Furthermore, the men have set the standard for what is valued and deemed acceptable practice. Moreover, the gender bias favors men in the superintendency because women are outnumbered and do not always fit in with the predetermined norms.

Ironically, two of the women had a similar experience at a roundtable meeting with the same male colleague. Both women described sitting in a large room full of men, trying to be professional, and attempting to be respected as a woman superintendent. In fact, both participants described how a Department of Education official propositioned them. According to the participants, this respect was immediately diminished when inappropriate and sexualized comments and gestures were made.

As a new superintendent, I walked into my first County Roundtable meeting very nervous. I looked around for somewhere to sit and immediately noticed that I was surrounded by men. One of the superintendents waived me over, told me he had a seat for me, and motioned for me to sit on his lap (Cindy).

The participants in the study found these meetings to be more of a hostile environment in which women are oppressed and disrespected. The women in this study represented counties from all over the State, yet a consistent message resonated regardless of the location. Not only do men dominate the meetings in numbers, they monopolize the conversation, the tone, and do not value the input of women.

The boys club. Along with the challenges of attending the monthly meeting dominated by men, women in the superintendency had to contend with the isolating ramifications of what the participants refer to as “the boys club”. The women in this study concurred that men have more of a bond due to the fact that they golf together, they form a strong network, and simply rely more on one another. In many cases, men do not have any intention of letting women in.

The good old boys club still exists. Women are not accepted or acknowledged to a degree. I remember sitting at a meeting, being ignored the entire time, and then at the end being patted on the head and told we are here for whatever you need. It was pretty off-putting (Mary).

Men will look out for other men in the superintendency creating an unfair disadvantage for women. Many favors and decisions are made on the golf course or over drinks.

Women in this study have admitted to learning how to play golf just to try and get an invitation into the club. Madge contends, “I hate going to meetings and hearing them all talk about football”. Laura argues, “You need to break the cycle. You need to fit in with them.” The participants in this study do not agree with the manner in which men have created this masculine-centered environment, yet they need to find a way to fit into it.

Superficiality. Collectively, the women acknowledge that being the minority is in fact a challenge that will not go away overnight. Furthermore, it is in a woman superintendents' best interest to try and form some type of relationship with their male colleagues. Although it may be a superficial relationship at best, women in the superintendency need to work more closely with their male counterparts.

A majority of the participants in this study mentioned learning how to “play the game” in an attempt to fit into this male-dominated profession. The participants discussed purposely sitting with certain men at meetings to gain acceptance or because those men knew all of the key players. “I will often reach out to the former superintendent here because he is still friendly with all of the key players here and I can bounce ideas off of him” (Erin). The women learned in time how to put on their “game face” when push came to shove and they needed to be strong.

As you become a superintendent, you have to know that there is a game. You need to be seen, and you need to be heard, and you need to toot your own horn, and you have to let them know that you are valuable (Patty).

It is evident from the participants' feedback that being a woman in the superintendency entails more than performing daily job responsibilities. Women need to develop the skills necessary to fit into a male-dominated field.

Marginalization occurs for women in this study when they are placed in situations, such as meetings, where men greatly outnumber them, their voice is not heard, and it is perceived that they do not belong in such as forum. Women superintendents are pressured to make a concerted effort to fit in with their male colleagues. Furthermore, as the women in this study contend, being heard is often a challenge.

Leading as a Woman

Based on participant responses, women in the superintendency have different experiences than that of men. Men have an array of support from other men in their network therefore, they have the ability to vent, obtain advice, and gain assistance with their daily practice. Furthermore, the women in this study believed that men have a hard time empathizing with the challenges that women experience just for being women.

Venting. The participants in the study often noted that men find it easier to vent to one another about challenges they are encountering in the superintendency. “Men seem to me to be able to vent in a negative manner more than women do. We may feel it, we don't say it” (Anna). Women will not vent out loud due to the fact they feel it will be perceived as a sign of weakness. The women agreed that they often will put up a shield and not allow themselves to voice their concerns that they are experiencing. Moreover, men have no issue with complaining about their Board, their job, or pretty much anything else. The participants of this study feel that isolation in the superintendency is exacerbated for women due to the fact that they are holding in thoughts that need to be shared with others. Furthermore, men have the ability to complain, gain support, and move forward. Women, not having this opportunity, must solve issues on their own without the feedback of their colleagues. “I enjoy working in a think tank where I can collaborate with others. I do not find that in the superintendency” (Mary). Cindy concurred, “I really have nobody to rub things off of. You are on this little island by yourself and you need to figure it out”. In these situations, isolation is self-induced due to the fact that the women do not feel comfortable sharing their concerns with others.

The women in this study do not feel that men in the superintendency can empathize with the challenges they experience for being women. In general, the women expressed that they are not looking for any type of special treatment or sympathy, they merely want the acknowledgement that it is different and more challenging because they are the numerical minority.

You know my male colleagues don't understand the dance that I have to do to pick my kids up at school and make sure the sitter is there, and oh my goodness the sitter is sick today and how am I going to get my daughter to music class and still get back for the Board meeting tonight. They don't recognize that because most of them have spouses to take care of all of that. My male colleagues might say, oh yeah that's tough. They recognize that it's real but they don't know what it's like, they have no idea what it is like, and some of them even say to me that they are so fortunate that their wife is able to deal with everything at home. I don't need anybody to advocate for me because I am a woman I just need people to understand (Jackie).

Laura contends, "I think many women stray away from the superintendency because they have a family and the balancing act is too difficult". By not empathizing with the challenges that women endure, the participants feel that men are contributing to a paralyzing system designed to marginalize women in the superintendency. The women in this study do not want sympathy they merely want empathy and acknowledgment that their lives differ significantly in this role.

Unfair comparisons. In many of the interviews the women discussed being a strong leader and being compared to a man. The women took offense to this, as they believe, they are performing as a strong leader as a woman, and should not be compared to a man. One of my male colleagues and I we're both teachers and then we were both administrators, you know we grew up in the ranks together. He was always described as a strong leader where I can do the exact same thing and be described as a bitch. I think we lead as we lead and then people say, you have no empathy, you are too strong you are like a man (Erin).

The women in the study took offense to being compared to a man and even went as far as to question whether or not they wanted to be categorized as a woman superintendent.

I think, just as superintendent, I probably have to sit and think a lot about, do I even want the label woman superintendent. I don't even know if I want to necessarily be judged on the fact that I am a woman. I want to be judged on the fact that I am a superintendent doing a good job (Erin).

The participants in this study do not want to be discriminated based on a sex-role stereotype. The women want to be judged on their merit and accomplishments as a superintendent.

Performance, not posturing. As mentioned previously men in the superintendency do not have difficulty venting to one another. Consequently, according to the women in this study, men in the superintendency tend to showcase and grandstand more about their accomplishments than women do. Many of the women discussed the fact that men are more concerned with getting their name in lights and their school district on the map then merely educating students.

I was just with a male superintendent this morning he says to me during a private conversation, since I've been here we have gone up every metric. He was just talking about test scores and things like that. He's a nice guy and all but I just found it interesting because I probably wouldn't say something like that (Laura). I think women care more about school climate and culture. I think that women really care about building that positive warm nurturing school climate and culture more than men do. I think men ignore this and think this is the way it just is (Sandy).

Although this participant poses a superficial generalization regarding men, her belief is that men in the superintendency tend to grandstand quite often about their accomplishments. Consequently, the participants believe that women do not emulate this trait.

The women in the study believed that they are judged on their merit and accomplishments. “Women get promoted because of their performance, not posturing” (Laura). In general, the participants feel that in some cases, men may not be as qualified as women, yet they become superintendents based on their confidence and positive perception of themselves. Furthermore, women in the superintendency do not receive as much public recognition as men merely because they are not looking for it. The women want to run their districts well and focus their attention on doing just that.

Shifting Alliances

Moving up the ranks into the superintendency poses an array of challenges. The participants in this study profess that as one takes on the role of superintendent, the relationship you have with others changes significantly. Staff members respond to you as

the superintendent and not based on the person you are. Moreover, relationships are important, must be cultivated, and should be honestly identified. The participants in this study were asked to partake in a graphic elicitation activity prior to the start of the interview process. The results of the activity confirmed the notion that as a woman progresses through her career to superintendent, the feeling of isolation increases. The position of superintendent entails less daily interaction with colleagues than other positions in the field. See sample below.

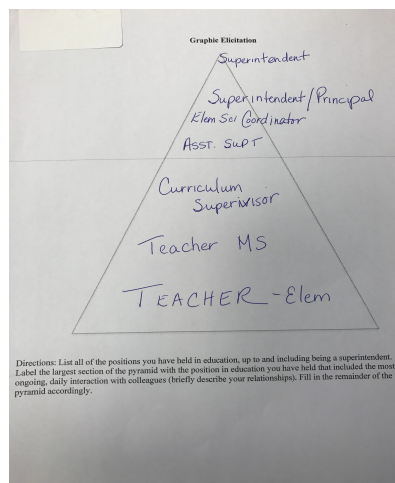


Figure 2. Graphic Elicitation

Jackie explained her rationale for completing the graphic elicitation activity as portrayed in Figure 1. In the largest area of the pyramid Jackie places herself as a teacher because she had numerous, ongoing daily interaction with peers. Jackie considered many of the people she interacted with as colleagues, alliances, and friends. At the apex of the pyramid Jackie places herself in the role of superintendent. Jackie contends that as a superintendent, your relationship with others changes. “Once you cross that line into the administrative role, it sets you apart from the bulk of the staff” (Jackie). The participant

experienced a change in her relationships with others, and an increased feeling of isolation, as she took on the role of superintendent. Of the 10 participants, nine of them placed the role of superintendent at the top of the pyramid exclaiming that it is the most isolating role in their educational career. One anomaly existed in the results (see Figure 2) in which a participant placed being teacher at the top. Cindy taught for a short period of time in an urban school district and did not have much daily interaction with others. “As a teacher, I was very isolated, I typically only ever interacted with my students” (Cindy). Furthermore, she currently serves at the principal/superintendent in a small district, wears many hats, and has a significant amount of daily interaction with others. “I know every single one of my 500 students’ names I know their brothers, I know where they go to college” (Cindy).

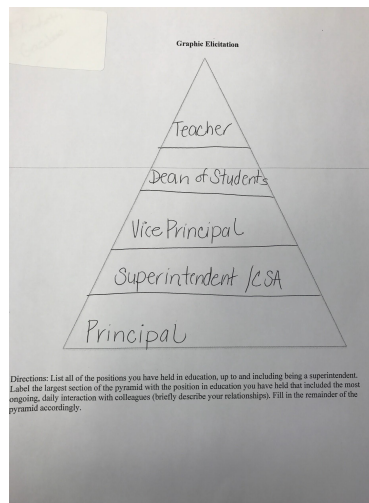


Figure 3. Anomaly

When considering all the roles she has served in, Cindy felt teaching was the most isolating due to the nature of the position. As listed in Figure 2, she believes that being a

principal is the least isolating position. The alliances Cindy formed with others varied from the other participants based on her personal experiences in education.

A consistent message that resonated amongst the women superintendents is that the people you work with on a daily basis may appear on the surface as friendly and trustworthy however, at the end of the day, they are not your friends. The women explained that although they have worked in a district for years, the moment they receive the title of superintendent previous relationships immediately shifted to one of an “us against them” relationship. There are many people that they work with that they are friendly with, however they do not categorize any of them as friends.

There are people here I started with and when I walk into their classroom I asked them why are you nervous it's just me. The label alone, the office alone, separates me from my close friends. I've learned that I don't really have friends here. There are people that are very friendly with me and then I have always felt close to but they are not my friends. I've learned this the hard way and I've said it just becomes a you against them mentality (Patty).

The women superintendents in this study agreed that on a daily basis nobody can really be your friend; that can be very isolating. “Because you evaluate everyone ultimately, you are limited even if you need to go in and vent to someone” (Erin). The women concurred that it is lonely at the top due to the fact that there is a clear separation between your staff and the position that you hold as superintendent. “You are the one making the tough choices and ruffling feathers and that is why it is difficult to consider your staff friends” (Mary). One of the women interviewed claimed that the isolation, due to the lack of friendships, had pushed her to retire early and get out of the field all together. The

isolation emerged from the bureaucratic structure of educational institutions had a significant impact on the participants. The challenges of being the sole decision maker along with the detachment from peers was very challenging to the women in this study.

A sounding “board”. An underlying message that resonated among all of the women interviewed in this study was the fact that the relationship they held with their Board of Education members was pivotal. A majority of the participants describe their relationship with their Board members as positive and key to their success as superintendent. “The Board can be your friend and can support you” (Anna). The consensus among the women in the study was at the Board of Education is a supportive ally and should be seen as such. Furthermore, it is essential to build a positive relationship with the Board Members and to continually be open and honest with them.

I feel like I am confident in my job and I am okay with making the decisions and living with the results of it, I also feel like part of it is the fact that I have a phenomenal Board. I recently adopted a child and have been dealing with managing work and home. I turn to my Board President during a recent meeting and said I need to get home so let's make this quick. He chuckled and said okay let's move along with this meeting she wants us to go fast. If I said to him every child in the school needs an alligator, he would say, okay let's buy them. I feel so lucky that I have this relationship with them (Cindy).

Another participant noted:

I have a very good Board President who is a woman and he was also an executive at a large corporation who, I think, has similar experiences as I do. She's more my sounding board than anybody else and I thank God that she is in the role of my

President (Mary). Many of the women in this study appreciate the positive and open relationship they have formed with their Board of Education. This relationship has served as a means of communication as well as positive support system.

As stated previously, most of the participants in this study have a good relationship with their Board of Education. Only one of the participants in the study referred to her Board President as her boss. She was also the same participant that felt the Board contributed to her isolation as a superintendent.

The expectation is high but yet I don't know, you know, I don't feel like there's necessarily collaboration there, it's more me trying to figure out what they need and then serve those needs and take care of them. The other part of it, I guess, would be my Board President who is a man and I appreciate working for him in the sense that he is not emotional, you know, and he's very cut and dry and he doesn't nitpick things or anything like that but I've always had, prior to this position, I've always had a relationship with my boss where I could just like swing in and sit down and talk about stuff and tease and it's not like that anymore. I mean just the function of a Board President, he's not in the building and he's not the type that we are chatting on the phone. If I sent him a text it's gotta be like to the point because otherwise you get the sense like what's the point. It's just the facts and I find that a bit isolating because I think maybe I depended on the relationship with my boss like in the past more than I realized (Laura).

The need for affirmation and ongoing support from her Board President caused stress and isolation for this participant. The relationship that Laura has with her Board President is

professional, not friendly, and is not serving as a sounding “board”.

The relationships that women encounter while serving as superintendents can either add to or minimize the level of isolation. Based on the participants’ feedback, those women that have become superintendents in the same districts that they were once teachers have a difficult time adjusting to the shift in dynamics. The relationship they once held with a colleague has now changed. The Board of Education members, consequently, can serve as a support system if the relationship with them is built and nurtured.

A Moral Compass

The women superintendents in this study lead in a collaborative manner ensuring the lines of communication are continually open. Collaboration and communication can become a challenge due to the isolating nature of the job. Furthermore, as leaders, the women will make the tough decisions if it is the right thing to do. As the participants in this study evolved into their leadership positions, one thing remained constant, each and every one of them stayed true to their moral compass and continually made the right decision; not necessarily the easy one. On more than one occasion, when the women were asked to recall a particularly isolating situation, they discussed a time in which their morals and values superseded an easy choice. Moreover, it was also clear that these were very trying times and the level of isolation experienced in the superintendency increased significantly.

I have a stronger moral compass than I have had in the past. In the past, I would have stifled a little bit just to not make waves. I do not do that anymore. I just know that I have to put my head on the pillow at night. If I can say, even if I

made a thousand enemies today but I did the right thing, it's amazing how freeing that is. What do you believe in? That should guide every choice, and I think that's a big difference between men and women in leadership (Patty).

Patty, along with many of the other participants, has stated that as you grow as a leader, sticking to your beliefs was less of a challenge. The women also believe that this attribute separates them from their male counterparts.

One of the participants spoke about a time in which she had to negate a parent's choice for academic placement of their child. The parent wanted an out-of-district placement because they believed their child was not capable of doing very much. The participant explained that she could not morally concede to the parent's wishes because it was not the best decision for the child. Many years later, the child is still a student in the participant's school and is thriving. "I knew it was the right decision but I think it's hard to always push through" (Anna). The participant added that it is these types of tough decisions that make you feel very isolated. Erin agreed, "There are certain times in your career where decisions have to be made, and you have to be making what you think are philosophically, morally, and ethically the right decisions; you can't wait for everybody else to catch up." Making the right choice has led to further isolation and despair for the participants when it is not the popular choice.

Yet another participant described:

It's a very isolated incident where are you now, we are one school, we don't have anyone else, and I had to put a teacher out on leave. Even the parents were not happy with me but it was a situation where I couldn't tell the parents really what was going on. In this situation, the staff member was sitting at a computer facing

the back of the room, facing the wall for hours at a time in a first grade classroom. So she was not looking at the class, she was giving them packets of worksheets and she was not watching them. Anything could have happened to those poor students and you want to tell the parents the truth, that their children were not safe. I had to do the right thing for the students. It was very isolating and I was looked at, by the staff and parents, as a pariah (Sandy).

Following one's moral compass and making the right choice can compound the isolation already experienced by women in the field.

The dual nature of collaboration. Collectively the women in his study mentioned collaboration as both a negative and positive aspect of their daily practice. It was discussed in a negative light in the context of not being able to collaborate with peers that you can and trust on a daily basis. The woman explained that they were accustomed to being part of a collaborative group as teachers, supervisors, and as principals yet, becoming the superintendent, collaboration becomes a challenge.

I think it's really hard. It's hard for me because I am, by nature, a collaborative person and I want to be part of a group, with this common goal, and vision. I find that it is human nature that my staff is resistant to it because I am the superintendent, so I'll have to figure out a way to deal with it. Sometimes it is hurtful (Patty).

The participants contend that leadership is about bringing people together to reach a common goal and it very difficult to accomplish with resistance.

The women explained that collaboration is difficult because it is often hard just to get out of the office. As a principal, you interact and work with people on a daily basis.

As the superintendent, you are stuck in your office and it is difficult to find the time and build relationships to effectively collaborate. “You are stuck in your office completing all of that paperwork” (Sandy). Mandates and deadlines do not allow the participants the time they would like to have interacting with others.

Some of the women explain that their administrative teams do not want to collaborate with them because there is a lack of trust. Mary stated, “My team undercuts each other and if they can they will undercut me too. There is no trust. You need to know who you have working for you” (Mary). The participants agree, collaboration will not be effective without trust.

No matter how collaborative you are, there is this perceived line between us and them. I remember being in my tiny little K-8 district where I was superintendent, and I knew everything about my staff and they knew everything about me. There were still conversations that I would have with people where they would refer to “the administration” and I use to call people out and say okay look administration is just a name so let's have a conversation just you and me. Once you cross that line into an administrative role I think that definitely set you apart from the bulk of the staff and I think that good leaders do everything they can to blur that line a bit, you know, and to try to get people over it but it's really hard. And I think to a certain extent that if the Union sort of feed this and encourages teachers to see that line (Jackie).

The contentious, imaginary line that is drawn between the superintendent and the staff can impede on the collaborative process according to the participants.

Collaboration was also mentioned on numerous occasions, in a positive light, as

an effective leadership strategy. The women explained that they do not want to be on an island all by themselves making unilateral decisions. They want to empower their administrative teams and teachers to make decisions collectively that will enhance student learning. Furthermore, the women superintendents want to give a voice to all stakeholders involved in their learning environment.

I think my dominant leadership trait is that I am collaborative but knowing at the end of the day if a decision has to be made or the hard call has to be made I have no problem doing it. However, I really believe in allowing people the opportunity to have input into decision-making, and all those things, because I can get them more invested in it. I really think empowered people come in with a problem and also a solution which ultimately makes my life easier as well (Christine).

Empowering others does not minimize the leadership of the superintendent as reflected by the participants' feedback. Furthermore, having others assist with problem-solving can assist the women in this role.

The women agreed that in a collaborative manner they gather the opinion and thoughts of their administrative team and their staff. Moreover, they stress the importance of being able to allow others to be open and honest and tell them things they may not want to hear. "Tell me the good and the bad, and then I can make a decision, usually in conjunction with the person" (Patty). It was found that, the difficulty with this type of leadership is that it is difficult to get staff members to be blatantly open and honest with you. The higher you go in leadership the last truth you often hear.

While speaking about collaboration, many of the women in this study discussed

the relationship they have with their administrative team. The participants spoke of the importance of shared decision-making and being able to rely on the strengths of those they work with. “If you walk into one of my meetings, you probably would not know who was running the meeting. We sit at a round table and all work together to problem solve and discuss issues” (Jackie). Many of the women in the study have attested to actually changing the tone of their school district simply by implementing a more collaborative approach.

Previously in my school district, there was never an administrative meeting where the team came together once a month to talk about common issues, problems, or where we're going to go from here. There was none of that. So when I started that, the administrative team meetings, that's all I know that you are supposed to do. It was really awkward. The team came into a meeting and sat down and looked at me as if I was going to dictate and tell them what to do. So, it took a while for them to understand that the purpose of these meetings is to talk about how we are going to do a rollout of technology and how we are going to solve problems. So, there is now collaboration but once we decide I expect them to follow through and hold them accountable (Madge).

Communication and lack of. As with collaboration, communication both has its positive and negative aspects for women in the superintendency. The participants in this study feel that communication is an essential aspect of leadership yet, it can often be difficult to find others to speak with that are trustworthy and available.

A consistent message that came forth from the interviews is that as women grow as leaders, and gain experience, they do not feel the need to give an immediate answer to

someone. As a new leader, many of the women felt compelled to solve a problem quickly. With experience in the superintendency, the women expressed that they feel more comfortable telling someone, I need to think about this and I will get back to you with an answer. “I think when I first became a leader, I thought I was suppose to know all of the answers and act accordingly; I think I am much more comfortable reaching out to a select group of people now” (Erin).

The participants felt it is necessary to have a network of colleagues to discuss issues with end vent if necessary. It is often difficult to find this network of colleagues and it is even more difficult to maintain the relationship due to the fact that the position of superintendent can tend to be very transient.

I think you have to make the effort to maintain contact with people that (pause) with women superintendents that you have networked with that may not be close to you. For instance, you and I have a relationship, you moved all the way down south, I have to make a better effort to stay in contact with you even though you are down south (Sandy).

Women in the study made mention of the fact that an essential part of communication is active listening. Collectively, they believed that women as superintendents are better listeners than men in this regard. One of the participants spoke about her experience in dealing with a student’s suicide in her district. She discussed the fact that she was able to listen and empathize with the parents and that she is not certain that a man in this role could have done the same.

Communication, or the lack of, can be an extreme challenge for women in the superintendency. The women commented that there is less of an opportunity

to communicate with people on a daily basis. Furthermore, those that are immediately available are not always honest, open, and trustworthy.

I think naturally most of us crave communication, and openness, and honesty.

That isn't, well, you know that isn't necessarily what we get in our role. We don't get communication. We don't get openness. We don't get honesty. We just have to figure things out. And I think because we're women we value those kind of traits (Patty).

The challenge of communication arises when difficult situations come about and there is no one to discuss the issue with or merely vent. Many of the women spoke of similar situations in which they had an issue with someone on their administrative team and they had no one to talk to about it. It was concluded that these types of situations can be extremely isolating because you realize that you are in the sole position of superintendent and your administrative team members have each other. For example, when there is a problem with an administrator and they need to be called in by the superintendent, they will be sitting across your desk with another administrator as their rep. You quickly realize that it is you against them.

If I'm stressed about another administrator or if I'm having trouble with another administrator, there is really no one that you get to talk to unless it's another superintendent from another district that you have a relationship with. It's hard being a new superintendent because you don't want to appear like you're an idiot you know, and if somebody comes in and files a grievance you're thinking, I did everything right but you've never been through it before so now you have to figure out who to reach out to for support. The lack of communication is very

isolating (Erin). Being the sole position in a school district, the superintendent is faced with the challenge of making tough choices and often not having anyone to discuss the matter with. Situations such as this can be extremely stressful and isolating.

The challenges of leading as a woman in the superintendency include finding others to effectively communicate and collaborate with that are trustworthy and readily available. Furthermore, staying true to one's moral compass can bring forth additional stress and isolation when tough decisions need to be made.

Survival

Despite the adversities that the participants encountered and the multitude of instances of isolation, the women all mentioned the need, and development of "thick skin" in the superintendency. In each interview, the women made mention of becoming stronger and more confident as they grew in the profession. An important aspect of having "thick skin" is never allowing those around you to see you cry. The women agreed it is only acceptable to shed tears behind a closed door when you're all alone.

As you grow professionally, your skin gets thicker. You learn to deal with not having anyone to talk to you, develop one or two really trusted people over time.

The more you experience you get through, the more you can say I've been through that before. So things do change over time, your skin gets thicker, you are more familiar with the issues (Jackie).

The participants agreed that facing adversity and dealing with isolation gets easier as they grow professionally. The women explained that they learn to deal with challenges by relying on trusted alliances and having confidence in their ability.

No tears shed. According to the participants' feedback, crying is associated with a sign of weakness as a woman in the superintendency. Women discussed the fact that men can shed a tear and they are seen as sensitive whereas women who cry are perceived as too emotional and weak.

I had a really bad day and I went home and just cried, because it was that bad of a day. It was just everything that could have gone wrong went wrong, and I just had to get out of there. I would never say that to my male colleagues. I wouldn't because they see it differently. If you want to cry shut the door, and cry, don't cry in front of anybody (Patty).

The women in this study battle with not being perceived as weak due to preconceived stereotypes associated with women in leadership. The participants have admitted to breaking down and crying occasionally, they just do it privately.

An intriguing consistency found was that the women superintendents will not leave women administrators in charge, in their absence, if they tend to cry in difficult situations.

I had to have surgery a year ago and I had to leave one of the women in charge because she's qualified to be in charge. Well oh my God! I was supposed to be out from surgery four to six weeks, two days after getting home from the hospital I was on the phone six hours a day solving issues, listening to tears, and carrying on

saying oh my God I can't do this. So now I tend to find one of my male administrators to leave in charge (Mary).

The participants were not pleased with the fact that they could not leave a woman in charge in their absence because they were too emotional. Unfortunately, leaving a man in charge was more effective because they could handle difficult situations without getting upset.

Supporting other women. In general, women in the superintendency need to find more effective and creative ways to interact and support other women in the field. The participants were asked to comment on a specific plan or measures that could help women in the superintendency and they all agreed that they are the mechanism that is needed to support one another. Collectively, it was also discovered that the minimal attempt that the New Jersey Superintendent Association has put forth to bring women together, has not been effective.

We need to reach out to each other with things like email and other forums like that. I think you are going to need, if the State were going to do anything at all, it should be led by women; by women, for women. I don't think you can come up with a pat answer I think it's something that would require something you are doing, or you would have to survey many women to see what the needs and what their schedules are (Mary).

The participants agreed that men should not be expected to assist women support other women. This grassroot effort should be developed and lead by women.

Another participant noted:

I think NJASA has, you know, the women's leadership initiative. I think we, as members, should be taking better advantage of it. You know, we touch base every once in awhile, when we see each other, but we don't make the effort to stay in contact because we are busy and we get sucked up in work, and I think we should make, as women, a better effort to stay in contact (Sandy).

NJASA has created a women's caucus that could serve as a foundation for women in the superintendency to collaborate with one another. The women agreed that this group would need to be refined and improved to increase participation and effectiveness.

Another participant noted:

I think it would be really helpful to have a cohort of women. I'm flabbergasted by the statistics of how few women are in the superintendent positions and actually stay in them. I think it's because all of the things you're dealing with, such as men, and it's very intimidating, and you need to get used to it. You can do it (meet) virtual or anywhere else, but just do something to get together (Cindy).

The participants discussed the fact that every opportunity they get to meet with other women superintendents is extremely valuable and enjoyable. Often times, the meeting opportunities are not geared towards women meeting other women however, the meeting quickly turns in that direction due to the fact it's so seldom occurs. Furthermore, the women in this study were quite perplexed that something as simple as a women's group has not been formulated at this point. The women mentioned that their experiences in the superintendency are much different than that of men therefore having a support group of women is it extremely necessary. "We all need a place to sit, network, talk, and support one another as women" (Madge). The women concur that a venue is needed to readily

and conveniently be there for one another. Furthermore, the participants agreed that men in the superintendency have strength in numbers and can readily support one another. Women, being the minority, need to seek more unique and creative ways to effectively make themselves available to one another.

The participants in this study contend, to survive in the superintendency women need to remain strong and suppress any weak emotions. Moreover, it is essential that women have a forum to interact with and support other women.

Summary

The women in this study describe many of the negative experiences they encountered because of being a minority in the superintendency. The women spoke of their daily experiences and the isolation that was readily associated with them. Collectively, the women explained that their challenges are much greater than men in the superintendency. Furthermore, men lead much differently. It was discovered that women have the need, ability, and desire to support one another however the manner in which this is accomplished has not yet been clearly defined.

Chapter 5

Discussion & Implications

As identified in the literature review, women serve as the foundation in K-12 education serving as teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff; however, they are vastly underrepresented in the superintendency (Dobie & Hummel, 2001). Performing in a role that is inherently associated with isolation (Rokach, 2014), women are faced with the additional obstacle of overcoming loneliness in a male-dominated field (Shakeshaft, 1989). Without further research regarding tools for women to overcome isolation in the superintendency, the number of women who enter and are sustained in this field will either remain stagnant or steadily decline.

The purpose of the hermeneutical phenomenological study was to explore the manner in which women in the superintendency overcome isolation in a male-dominated field. The work reported here was guided by four research questions:

1. What is the essence of women superintendents' leadership in a male-dominated profession?
2. How do women superintendents experience isolation in their profession?
3. How did women superintendents experience the impact of isolation on their daily leadership practice?
4. How do women superintendents remediate isolation in a male-dominated profession?

By employing van Manen's (1990) six research activities, the essence of women's lived experience within the superintendency was captured and encompassed the manner in which they experienced isolation as well as the strategies they developed to overcome

it. Eleven women, including myself as the researcher, currently serving as superintendent in New Jersey participated in the study. Data was obtained via interview questions, field notes, and the use of a graphic elicitation.

The goal of this research was to make meaning of the lived experiences of the participants. Data was transcribed and analyzed for each of the interviews. As a result of the analysis, five themes were identified: (1) minimized, marginalized, monopolized, (2) leading as a woman, (3) shifting alliances, (4) leadership, and (5) survival. The following chapter presents a discussion of the findings related to each research question with the aforementioned themes infused within relevant content. Furthermore, there is also a discussion regarding the relationship of the conceptual framework used in this study with the current findings. The chapter will conclude with a summary of findings and implications for practice, policy, and the need for additional research.

Discussion of the Findings

Leading as a Woman

The first research question asked about the essence of women superintendents' leadership in a male-dominated profession. It was discovered that the women in this study do not want their leadership style to be compared to that of a man. Furthermore, the participants found it is insulting and disheartening when women who are strong leaders are referred to as men. The participants spoke about situations in which they performed the same action as their male colleague and they are described as a bitch while the man is deemed a strong leader. One participant explained that she is often told she has no empathy and leads like a man. In Grogan's (2000) study of women in the superintendency she recommended that women resist the traditional images that have

been derived for them and attempt to reinvent the role on their own terms. She further states that many women leaders often resist the male images of domination, aggression, and being power-driven. Affirming Grogan's (2000) notion, the participants in this study agreed that empowering others does not minimize their leadership. In fact, the participants stated, having others to assist with problem-solving and sharing power can actually assist women in this role. Collectively, the women in this study explained that they welcome the truth from their staff, can empathize with the concerns of staff members, and prefer a shared-leadership approach. These findings directly coincide with the findings of Montz and Wanat's (2008) study in which they interviewed 36 women serving as superintendents and found that none of the participants selected power as an important characteristic within the superintendency. Furthermore, they believed that characteristics such as listening, collaborating, and brainstorming were essential (Montz & Wanat, 2008).

The participants in this study declared that women superintendents are referred to as men when they make tough decisions or they do not display a great deal of emotion. Furthermore, classifying them as a man or woman is shows bias and places a gender-related label stemming from a stereotype that proficient superintendents are typically men. In fact, research has shown that women who attempt to lead in the same manner as men are unsuccessful (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011). For example, one of the participants in this study suggested that women should be referred to as merely superintendents, and not women superintendents to alleviate any type of gender affiliation. In Wallace's (2014) study consisting of 63 women superintendents, 71% agreed that there should not be a consideration of gender when discussing the position of superintendent.

Furthermore, they believed that the most qualified person should be placed into the role of superintendent, regardless of gender. Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) believe that the subtle gender bias that persists in organizations disrupts the growth as a leader for women. They further state that this bias must be acknowledged and addressed. Ibarra et al. (2013) have found that when women recognize the pervasive effects of gender bias they feel empowered because they can take action to counter the effects. The participants in this study recognized the fact that gender bias existed within their organizations, did not appreciate being compared to a man, yet they continued to thrive as strong, confident leaders.

Leadership Traits

The women in this study stayed true to what they believed was morally and ethically correct regardless of a difficult situation. Collectively, the women agreed, it is more important to do the right thing than what is easy. A participant described a situation in which she had to suspend a teacher who was neglecting her students and creating an unsafe classroom environment. Due to the fact that she could not explain the details of the case with her staff, including her reasons for removing the teacher, the participant was misjudged and portrayed as a pariah. Reflecting on similar situations, the women in this study agreed that it is better to do the right thing and being able to sleep at night. These findings emulate the work done by Dobie & Hummel (2006) in which they discovered that successful women in the superintendency considered themselves honest and moral.

Developing what is known as “thick skin” has helped the participants of this study in their daily practice. Although many of them may close their office door and cry, the participants agree that doing it in front of others is a sign of weakness. The women in this

study agreed that an important aspect of thick skin is never allowing others to see you cry. One of the participants confessed that she was once having a bad day at work, was on the verge of tears, and left for the day rather than be exposed. Based on the feedback of the participants, crying, being seen as a sign of weakness, will have to continue to occur behind closed doors to alleviate unfair stereotypical misconceptions. The women in this study profess that men are not treated in a similar fashion. They have stated that men who cry are not seen as weak, they are seen as sensitive. Nadler (2012) agree with this notion that women are significantly disadvantaged and discriminated against based on sex role stereotypes. Also in agreement, Superville (2016) has stated that women in this role face scrutiny that men don't. To survive in this leadership role, the participants suggest that women need to be strong, confident, and rely on their past experiences in tough situations. For example, the participants discussed the fact that dealing with tough situations gets easier over time because you've been there before, and know how to get through it. Your skin gets thicker, and your confidence in the practice increases.

This study revealed, collaboration is often a challenge for women in the superintendency, yet a crucial aspect of the participants' leadership. It was discovered that the amount of work that is required of a superintendent, that takes place behind closed doors, deters the women from daily interaction with others. Sharp and Walter (1997) support the notion that superintendents have been dealt with more responsibilities through both state and federal mandates instituted in the name of progress. The women in this study have argued that being forced to sit behind a desk, and not collaborate with others, adds to the isolation for women in the superintendency. To alleviate this obstacle, it was suggested by the women in the study, that a superintendent should force herself to

get out of the office and into the schools. A participant suggested that women in the superintendency should allocate certain days of the week, month, or year and plant themselves in a school, faculty room, or classroom to ensure face-to-face communication with others. This study revealed that collaboration may occur more often and could be effective if it is purposefully implemented. Based on the findings of this study, women can create a collaborative environment by allowing others to share in decision-making and offer their input. Kelsey, Allen, Coke, and Ballard (2014) have stated that, contrary to their male counterparts, women often delegate or lean towards facilitative leadership. The participants in this study offered an array of feedback emulating this type of leadership. For example, the participants discussed the desire to work in a think tank with others to share ideas, collaborate, and solve issues.

Coinciding with collaboration, communication is its essential aspect of leadership, especially for women, based on the feedback of the participants. Furthermore, a lack of trust, and being the sole person in the role of superintendent, are two deterring factors associated with communication according to the women in this study. The participants contend the higher up a person travels in administration, the less trust there appears to be. For example, one of the participants explained that her administrative team is continually undercutting her and she does not trust them, nor do they trust her. The participant also mentioned that this type of relationship was not experienced prior to becoming a superintendent. Regardless of how collaborative the women in this study attempted to be, they agreed that there is a perceived line between the superintendent and the remaining staff. Collectively the women in this study agreed that being honest, open, and transparent assists with breaking down barriers and open the lines of communication.

The participants claimed that a challenge women face as leaders in the superintendency is not having anyone to communicate with when faced with difficult situations. Moreover, due to the fact that the superintendent evaluates everyone in the district, it is often difficult to find someone to speak to when an issue with a staff member arises. In times such as this, it is suggested that women need to have other superintendents, preferably women that they could reach out to for support. Brunner (1998) has suggested that women value, support, and serve as role models for other women in the superintendency to be successful. This can be very challenging due to the fact that there are not many women currently in this field or aspiring to be superintendents. Superville (2016) contends that female leaders have minimal opportunity to network and obtain support because there are so few women in the role. Collectively, the women in this study have discussed the necessity of having a network of colleagues to discuss issues and vent if necessary. Unfortunately, they have found that is it very challenging to find this type of network due to the lack of women in the field and the fact that the position of superintendent can be quite transient. Hoff and Mitchell's (2009) study, of both men and women in leadership roles, revealed that women have reported being isolated and without networks at a much higher rate than men. This finding coincides with the finding of this study, in that, the participants desire to be a part of a network however, finding one is a challenge. In direct contradiction of this study, Hoff and Mitchell's (2009) study also revealed that women often exclude other women from joining a network and that women can be undercutting and backstabbing. The participants in this study have a great desire to be part of a network consisting of women. Moreover, the women in this study have expressed that they value and benefit from the

minimal opportunities they encounter with other women in the superintendency.

Although challenging, based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that women make the concerted effort to form relationships and support other women in the field. The participants have discovered ways to interact and support other women. For example, sitting together during meetings, planning informal get-togethers, and calling one another in times of need were some of ways the women would interact to support their leadership in the superintendency.

Years of service. This study revealed that, as leaders, women in the superintendency gain more confidence in their decision-making abilities as they become more seasoned. The participants with less than three years in the superintendency sought reassurance and praise from a source that did not exist. Those with more years of experience were not as concerned about making the wrong decision. As stated in Chapter Four, the participants agreed that dealing with challenges and facing adversity gets easier as they grow professionally. In effect, as the participant's years of experienced increased, the amount of confidence they possessed regarding decision-making increased as well. This finding corresponds to Kanter (2006) who discovered a strong relationship between effective leadership and confidence. Kanter (2006) found that confidence was the bridge that connected high expectations and the actual performance in leadership. Referring back to the research question regarding the essence of women's leadership, this finding revealed that confidence may increase with experience and could assist with decision-making in this role.

Minimized, Marginalized, Monopolized

The second research question asked how women superintendents experience isolation in the profession. A consistent message that was heard throughout this research was, when placed in a situation in which women are forced to sit in meetings predominantly consisting of men, a feeling of insecurity arises. The women superintendents in this study explained that they often remain silent at these meetings or only speak when they have something important to share. Furthermore, the participants explained that they are afraid to speak up at these meetings because men monopolize the conversation and they are often too intimidated to interrupt. This finding is aligned with the research of Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich (2000) who found that women in the superintendency often feel out of place, downplay sexism, and do not want to make trouble. In situations such as this, it was found that, choosing silence could further exacerbate the feeling of isolation. Furthermore, women choosing to sit at these meetings with the small group of other women may be further adding to the isolation that currently exists. According to Bodi and Nicholson (2009), social isolation can be voluntary, in which one seeks to disengage themselves for many reasons. Furthermore, perceived alienation can lead to loneliness and depression that can exacerbate isolation in the superintendency (Bodi and Nicholson, 2009). Based on the feedback of the participants, women superintendents choosing to sit with only other women appear to be indirectly identifying themselves as the minority and thus are creating isolation.

Many of the participants in the study admitted that their minority status often intimidates them, making them reluctant to speak. Sandberg (2013) contends that women hold themselves back because of lack of self-confidence, not speaking up, and pulling

back when they should be leaning in. She further states that women internalize the negative message that it is wrong to be outspoken. Based on the interview data and analyses, it was discovered that women bring forth a new perspective in dealing with the many challenges of the superintendency and should be more than willing to share these ideas with a large group of their colleagues. Seguin, Ackerman, & Nelson (2012) declare that women in this role can provide a vision that inspires others. One of the participants in this study firmly believes that women need to speak up more often and let others know their value. Based on the feedback of the participants, as well as recent research data, it was found that not speaking up and being silenced at meetings monopolized by men may further enhance the feeling of isolation in the superintendency.

According to Higgins and Kram (2001) a superintendent's success is based on how well relationships are built with others. As reviewed in Chapter Four, the interview data suggested that men in the superintendency do not have difficulty networking and building relationships with other superintendents due to the mere fact that they have strength in numbers. Based on the feedback of the participants, the women in this study often identify and take umbrage with the fact that men form this type of "boys club". The women in this study have argued that a comradery exists among the men that does not exist for women and can be quite isolating. The participants have suggested that it is best to learn to "play the game" and become a part of their club. The participants discussed purposely sitting with certain, influential men at meetings to gain access to the key players. In agreement, McGrath (1992) found that women who were successful in navigating to top leadership positions often did so by gaining access to memberships in networks of influential men. Based on these findings, it is suggested that, until the

number of women in this field drastically increases, women learn to interact, on many levels, with their male colleagues.

Isolation, or not being part of the group, can lead to poor job performance, depression, and being unsuccessful (Hatch & Roegman, 2012). The results of this study have determined it is beneficial for women to interact with other women in the field. However, because women are the minority in the field, this can be very challenging. In an attempt to fill this void, it is suggested that women in the superintendency gain access to networks dominated by men in an attempt to lessen the effect of isolation. Not to be discounted, women also need to continually put forth the effort to build relationships with other women in the field to minimize the effect of isolation.

This study revealed that the size of a superintendent's school district impacts the level of isolation experienced by women. The participants from smaller districts with 500 or less students often serve in numerous roles such as principal, business administrator, or curriculum director along with being the superintendent. Serving in this dual capacity afforded the participants additional opportunities to interact with others thus, minimizing the level of isolation experienced. The remaining participants served in mid-size school districts with enrollment ranging from 900 to 2200. The women in the larger districts reported less daily interaction due to the fact that they are often delegating responsibilities that require direct interaction with others. It was found in this study that less daily interaction with others resulted in an increased level of isolation. Surprisingly, it was discovered that the larger the school district, the higher level of isolation was experienced by the participant. This finding coincides with a study done by Dunne (2000) in which it was found that smaller school districts create a sense of community.

Additionally, it was discovered that the sense of community, and having a relationship with staff, student, and parents, could often minimize the feeling of isolation associated with top leadership positions.

Race. The participants in this study were predominantly White with the exception of one participant who was of Hispanic decent. Most superintendents are married, white, male, of middle age, come from small towns, have advanced degrees in educational administration, and, for the most part, share common values and opinions (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999; Johnson, 1996; Kowalski, 1995). According to the New Jersey Department of Education Certificated Staff Report (2011) 93% of superintendents are White, while 7% are racial/ethnic minorities. However, the fact that 90% of the women in this study were White brings forth a broader issue. The level of isolation for women who were not White could possibly be exacerbated due to the fact that they are even greater of a minority in the field. According to Allen, Jacobson, and Lometey (1995), there is minimal research regarding African American women and the obstacles they confront as they pursue their goals. Research regarding the manner in which isolation affects African Americans, or other minority groups, in the superintendency cannot be referenced because it does not exist.

Shifting Alliances

The third research question asked how women superintendents experience the impact of isolation on their daily leadership practice. The social isolation framework was used as a guide in this study to analyze how isolation can occur and the impact it can have on a person's well-being (Biodi & Nicholson, 2009). Results of this study identified an array of instances in which women experience isolation in the superintendency. For

example, women discussed isolating instances such as making hard decisions, complying with State mandates, not having anyone to vent to. The impact on each participant's well being varied slightly, yet collectively was found to be negative. Some of the participants would cry behind closed doors while others became aloof. The impact of isolation was so severe for one of the participants that she had come to the conclusion that retiring early is in her best interest. The participant explained that the untrustworthy, unfriendly, and isolating environment that she experiences as a superintendent has made her very unhappy and she no longer has the desire to be in the position. This finding aligns with Grissom and Anderson's (2012) research that revealed 45% of the 215 superintendents they studied in California left the field within three years due to challenges that are inherently associated with the position. Furthermore, nationally, the mean tenure for a superintendent is five to six years and the annual turnover rate for superintendents is between 14 and 16 percent (Clark, 2016). Isolation, having such a significant impact on the participants in this study, could very well be a contributing factor to the demise of superintendents.

The participants in this study contend that staff members, and the people you interact with on a daily basis may appear friendly however they are not your friends. The women in the study appeared to have a very difficult time with this concept. The participants agreed that it is lonely at the top due to the fact that there is a clear separation between your staff and the position you hold as superintendent. Additionally, not having friends to interact with on a daily basis is very isolating. As stated previously, the lack of friendships was a contributing factor that caused one of the participants to plan for retirement ahead of schedule. Mercer (1996) believes that isolation is self-induced and

that leaders purposefully isolate themselves because they do not want to deal with the implications of their authority if they were emotionally close to their staff. The findings of this study directly contradict Mercer's (1996) notion in that the women in this study crave the emotional connection with staff members and have been negatively affected by the lack of it.

To minimize the impact of isolation, based on the research and results of this study, it is proposed that women in the superintendency initially identify that this lack of friendships is an issue. Furthermore, it is suggested that women form relationships with other women superintendents to fill the void of intimate relationships that exists within their daily environment. In essence, women in this role should reach out and broaden their support system with other women serving in the same leadership capacity.

Men vs women. The participants of this study believe that gender-based inequities exist among men and women superintendents. Furthermore, the men have set the standard for what is valued and deemed acceptable practice. Wallace (2014) agrees with this finding as has stated that women entering the superintendency should be warned that gender-bias exists, they will have to work harder to prove themselves, and survive more scrutiny while serving in the role. Based on the findings of this study, women have to learn to fit into a man's world in an attempt to gain acceptance and alleviate isolation. Lane-Washington & Wilson-Jones (2010) contend that women must learn to function in a male-dominated leadership culture. Furthermore, the women in this study believe that men will look out for other men in the superintendency creating an unfair disadvantage for women. As revealed in Chapter Four, within the superintendency, men on a golf course or at a local bar make many important deals and decisions after work and will exclude

women from this practice.. The participants in this study have argued that it is best to “break the cycle” and “just try and fit in” with their male colleagues. Although the relationships formed with men are merely superficial, the women in this study believe they are minimizing the level of isolation by collaborating with others in the field.

The Marxist feminist framework assists with understanding gender oppression in a systematic fashion while examining how women function and are being limited for merely being women (Holmstrom, 2002; Gimenez, 2005). This study revealed that women, being the minority in the superintendency, are continually faced with additional challenges and obstacles than that of their male counterparts. The participants articulated that they believe women in the superintendency face a higher level of isolation than men because of the limited number of women in the field to reach out to for support.

Additionally, the study revealed that men are not always welcoming and often will not allow women to join into their “boys club”. Lastly, the study revealed that women have a difficult time with managing the challenges of having a family with the strenuous responsibilities of being a superintendent. One of the participants explained that men do not understand the dance women have to perform to manage their job and their home life. She believes that men can rely on their wives to take care the responsibilities at home whereas women in the superintendency do not have that luxury. Based on the feedback of the participants, it is believed that women in the superintendency are being limited for merely being women.

Survival

The final research question asked how women superintendents remediate isolation in a male-dominated field. Wallace (2014) found that Board member perception of

women was that they were not good managers and were not qualified to handle budget and finance issues as superintendents. Furthermore, Board members needed experience with women in the superintendency for them to prove their ability before they changed their negative attitude towards them. Thomas (2001) stated a predominant issue that superintendents face is school board relations. The feedback provided by the participants in this study contradicted Wallace's (2014) and Thomas' (2001) findings. The women in this study discussed their Board members in a positive light and as a supportive entity. Moreover, it was found that the Board of Education, when kept informed, could serve as a support system, a sounding board, and a mechanism for success. While speaking about her Board President, one participant mentioned that she is more of a sounding board than anyone else and she thanks God for her. This study revealed that it is essential to form a relationship with Board members, and to continually be open and honest. The participants in this study explained that the Board could be the key to success for a superintendent. It was found that the relationship formed with Board members could alleviate some of the isolation that occurs from being a superintendent.

Women support women. One of the most significant findings derived from this study is that women need to make more of a concerted effort to support other women in the superintendency. It must be stated however, this can be a great challenge due to the fact that there are not many women in the field therefore it can be very difficult to form a supportive network. It is evident from this study that women in the superintendency have the pressing desire to be a part of some type of network that they could turn to others for advice and support. The participants in this study often mentioned the need to bounce ideas off of a colleague or to just have someone to vent to. Unfortunately, based on the

feedback of the participants, this type of network does not currently exist. Furthermore, women in this leadership role are in need of a platform or venue that is applicable and readily available.

Social Media. Based on the results of this study, women in the superintendency may benefit from a venue in which they can interact on a daily basis with other women. It was discovered in this study that due to an increased workload, working long hours, and being the minority in a field, it is difficult to interact with other women. It is suggested that modern technology, specifically social media, serve as an effective and convenient platform for women to interact with one another. With the utilization of this online platform, women can post pictures of themselves in the field, share ideas, reach out for advice, and most importantly they can support one another. The benefits of meeting in person should not be discounted, however this platform can assist with setting up those encounters. In an attempt to remediate isolation, the participants have stated that women in the superintendency need to make the conscious effort to form relationships with other women and to support one another.

Support frameworks. Findings of this study reveal that women need a forum where they can interact, share ideas, and support one another. There is significant gap in current research regarding the manner in which women in the superintendency can interact via social media or using online tools. Guta and Karolak (2015) have discovered that women in Saudi Arabia utilize social media as a safe place to converse with one another and express themselves. Moreover, living in a society where women are subservient to men, social media served as a place for women to speak their mind without this threat of being reprimanded. Although the needs of women in the superintendency

are not as tyrannous, the premise behind social media being used as supportive venue is consistent with the gap that needs to be filled.

Loiseau and Nowacka (2015) have found that social media is a powerful tool for bringing women's rights issues to the attention of many it also serves as a vehicle to increase gender equality. Furthermore, recent cases in Turkey and India reflect the manner in which social media can be used to expose key issues that women are facing in a global capacity. Women are using social media to make policymakers aware of the gender inequality that exists in the world (Loiseau and Nowacka, 2015). The format in which these women are using social media can easily be emulated by women in the superintendency to readily interact with each other, share ideas, and support one another. These findings, as well as the needs of the women in this study, directly contradict the claim of Cook, Johnson, and Stager (2016) that social media can further isolate leaders. Based on current research, it has been found that social media can serve as a viable tool for women in the superintendency to interact with one another.

According to McPherson (2014) women rule on social media. They dominate Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest. Moreover, women are beginning to use social networks to empower other women by bringing issues of social justice to the forefront. McPherson (2014) has highlighted the numerous Facebook and Twitter campaigns that have spread throughout the world and empowered women by giving them a voice. This finding coincides with the notion discussed in this study that women in the superintendency should not be silenced. Based on the findings of this study, women in the superintendency need a forum to have their voices heard. In 2010, Goudreau discovered that Facebook, the largest social networking tool in the world, was dominated

by women. Furthermore, it was found that women use social media as a way to talk and connect with one another. Women are interested and using online platforms to learn about real people experiencing similar conflicts (Goudreau, 2010). In an attempt to fill a void in the current research and in response to the findings of this study, it is suggested that women in the superintendency use social media to interact with one another, share their viewpoints, lend support, and fill the interactive void that currently exists.

Implications

Policy

Currently in New Jersey, there is a requirement that new superintendents attend an academy consisting of six workshop sessions throughout one school year (NJASA, 2016). The workshops cover topics such as school finance and how to effectively working with a Board of Education. Based on the results of this study, it is suggested that The New Jersey Department of Education recognizes the fact that women in the superintendency are a minority group facing additional challenges than and thus need additional support to ensure success and sustainability. Although the workshops that are currently offered are relevant, this study revealed that women might not thrive in the superintendency if they cannot overcome the challenge of isolation. Cook, Johnson, and Stager (2016) have stated that the details regarding the impact of isolation are not well known and need to be addressed. Additionally, they contend that women must be taught to recognize and acknowledge that barriers exist because they are a minority in the field. Furthermore, women must be equipped with the necessary tools to overcome barriers such as isolation. Pascopella (2011) agrees that there is limited knowledge regarding the challenges and barriers associated with women in the role of superintendent. Armed with

knowledge of the depth of negative implications women could suffer from isolation in this role, I am advocating for acknowledgment from State officials that change must occur within the current policy. It is my suggestion that workshops offered by the State are revamped and tailored to meet the needs of women entering into the field.

Utilizing the results of this study, while working in collaboration with secondary education institutions, superintendents can support future leaders by creating courses that specifically address the negative impact of isolation and the manner in which to overcome it. In a proactive capacity, preparing future leaders for the challenges that arise and offering them the tools to overcome despair may in turn decrease the level of women leaving the field. Nelli (2014) and Rusch (2004) agree that gender consciousness serves as a critical role in the preparation of future leaders. Based on the results of this study, future leaders should be provided multiple opportunities to research and discuss current issues related to gender inequity such as the disparity in amount of women in comparison to men in the superintendency. Failure to acknowledge the significance of this issue may only exacerbate it. The issue of gender inequity not only needs to be discussed, more women need to be encouraged to become school leaders. Brunner (2000) claims that society has deemed it unnatural for women to serve as superintendents. In an attempt to contradict this stereotype, it is proposed that more women need to enter, remain, and thrive in this role. Accomplishing this, however, is not an easy task. Local Boards of Education, the policy makers, need to find a way to encourage more women to strive for the position of superintendent. The participants in this study discussed the difficulty of managing their job responsibilities compounded with family obligations. Boards of Education are encouraged to create family friendly policies that make the role of

superintendent less overwhelming when having a family to care for. Lastly, to sustain women in this role, policy needs to ensure that women mentor women. This study has discussed the benefit of women mentoring women in leadership roles; yet not specific to the superintendency. A policy ensuring that women are paired with women, when possible, could assist with sustainability once in the field.

Research

Based on the results of this study, it is suggested that, in an attempt to recruit and sustain women into the superintendency, measures must be put into place that alleviate isolation and increase the level of support. One of the participants in the study confessed that she has decided to retire early due to the effects of isolation in the superintendency. It is recommended that additional research needs to take place regarding the daily implications of being a woman in the superintendency. According to Grogan (2008), men and women experience the superintendency differently. As mentioned previously, the vast majority of research regarding the superintendency is based on men in this role. Women in the field, or aspiring to be a superintendent, may benefit from relevant data that can be used to improve their practice and assist with daily challenges. In agreement, Brunner (1994) believes that research regarding women in the superintendency becomes vastly more important to anyone interested in educational administration because women bring to their practice many of the necessary characteristics currently missing that are necessary for education reform.

Additional challenges exist for women of color aspiring to enter into the superintendency. As reflected in this study, those of White decent primarily represent the superintendency. Women of color are faced with the challenge of not only being a

woman in this field; they are faced with the challenge of racial disparity. Research needs to be conducted regarding the additional challenges women of color face as well as how to encourage women of color to enter into the field.

The number of women in the superintendency remains low in contrast to that of their male counterparts. Why are women not entering into the superintendency? A qualitative study could offer insight regarding the reasons women administrators do not have the desire to become superintendents. As an extension of this research, a mixed-methods study could determine the turnover rate of women in the superintendency due to the level of isolation in the field. As found by Funk, Pankake, and Schroth (2002) women can be and will be outstanding superintendents if studied properly and supported in their role.

The feedback provided by the participants in this study contradicted Wallace's (2014) and Thomas' (2001) findings that Board perceptions of women in the superintendency are typically negative. Additional research regarding the relationship the Board of Education has with women in this field is necessary to determine why this contradiction exists. As found in this study, the Board can serve as a supportive outlet for women in this field. Research regarding the details of this relationship could serve as a resource for women.

Practice

As stated previously, life in the superintendency is comprised of an array of daily decision-making, working long hours, complying with state and federal mandates, managing staff, working with parents, forming relationships with the community,

balancing budgets, and ensuring academic success for all students. Research notes that longer superintendent tenure has a positive effect on student achievement (Pascopella, 2011). Sustainability can be difficult in a position associated with great responsibilities and yet, a low level of support. As found in this study, the many challenges that are associated with being a superintendent are magnified for women due to the fact that they are a minority. Women are not only faced with the obstacles inherently associated with the role of superintendent, they are faced with being a minority, not having an immediate support system, and the challenge of balancing a time consuming career with balancing a family at home.

Funk (2004) has found that women are successful in this role when they are communicate often with others, stay true to their moral and ethical convictions, and display a strong work ethic. A strategy for women either in this field or aspiring to enter into this role is to study and emulate the qualities of those who have been successful as superintendents. Those that have been successful are encouraged to share the specific tools they have employed in the field. This information can be shared via lectures, digital communications, newsletters, and at national conventions. Women aspiring to become superintendents could benefit from having a successful mentor to discuss relevant topics and prepare for the challenges ahead. It is suggested that women superintendents hold periodic lectures, within their geographic location, to those women aspiring to become school leaders. These women superintendents can also serve as a mentor to those women entering into the field. Essentially, women currently in the field need to encourage women to enter into the superintendency, mentor them once they are in the role, and increase the number of women in this role.

Based on the results of this study, it is essential that women support other women in the superintendency. Copeland and Calhoun (2014) found that women in the superintendency who were mentored by another women had a positive experience because they had ongoing assistance. Wallace (2014) affirmed this notion in her study in which she women mentoring other women in the superintendency is of paramount importance. This study clearly revealed that women in the superintendency should find a way to be available to one another for support, to share ideas, and to merely vent. However, the constraints of lack of time and proximity, having face-to-face meetings on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis may be unrealistic. It is suggested that creating a network of women that can interact virtually is much more realistic and attainable. Furthermore, developing a forum such as Facebook, or something similar, is quite feasible and a first step. As stated previously, women must be willing to participate in this type of forum and must find the time to dedicate to one another.

Leadership

The findings of this study reveal that women in the superintendency should not be expected to lead like men. The participants in this study stated that they, as women, lead differently than men. Furthermore, the women in this study are pleased with their leadership styles. There is a clear indication, based on the results of this study, that women not only need to support other women currently in the field, they need to encourage more women to become superintendents. Furthermore, the increase of women in this male-dominated field could directly increase the amount of support available that women may obtain from other women. Moreover, sustainability in the superintendency could increase for women as a result of this change. It is essential that leadership

programs focus specifically on the additional challenges that women will face in this field. Higher education programs need to offer courses geared toward the disparity of women in the superintendency as well as offer the tools to overcome related obstacles.

Currently serving as a woman superintendent in New Jersey, I plan on sharing the findings of this study with other women currently serving in this role. The findings will be shared through seminars, workshops, and hosting small gatherings. In addition, I have created an online forum that women in the superintendency can utilize to interact, share ideas, and form relationships with one another. The website will be launched at the conclusion of this study.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the fact that most of the participants were White. Findings were not representative of racial minorities due to the fact that those selected to participate were predominantly White. Gender was also a limitation of this study. This study focused on the manner in which women overcome isolation and the results may not be applicable to men in the field.

Conclusion

The purpose of the hermeneutical phenomenological study was to explore the manner in which women in the superintendency overcome isolation in a male-dominated field. The eleven participants, including myself as the researcher, involved in this research offered an array of insight regarding the level of isolation experienced in their daily practice. This study also determined that experiences in the superintendency differ greatly for men and women. It was discovered that women lead as women in the superintendency and are greatly offended when their leadership style is compared to that

of a man. Furthermore, there are challenges inherently associated with being a superintendent when identified as a woman in this role. Challenges included being perceived as weak, being silenced, and not being respected as a leader. In an attempt to alleviate the level of isolation experienced as a woman superintendent, this study revealed key findings. A key finding of this study is that women need to make the conscious effort to allow their voice to be heard. Being silenced is not an option. Furthermore, women need to identify the fact that men currently monopolize the superintendency, yet they need to find a way to fit in with the masses.

Lastly, it was discovered that women should find a way to form relationships with other women in the field. Due to the fact that number of women in the superintendency is low, and the role of superintendent readily comes with time constraints, it was suggested that the most conducive manner to interact with one another is virtually. This study revealed that social media can serve as an effective tool for women to interact, support, and share ideas with one another. Ultimately, the success and sustainability for women in the superintendency depends on the efforts put forth by women.

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Appendix A

Survey

Isolation in the Superintendency

In an attempt to gather participants for a study regarding isolation in the superintendency, as a woman in a male-dominated field, I am requesting your input within following short survey:

* Required

Isolation is defined as an enduring condition of emotional distress that takes place when a person feels estranged from, misunderstood, or rejected by others. Furthermore, isolation is defined as the deprivation of social connectedness.

Please answer the following questions based on your experience with isolation within the role of superintendent.

1. Name:

.....

2. Email Address:

.....

3. District:

.....

4. Size of District:

.....

5. How long have you been a superintendent:

.....

6. What level of isolation do you experience within your daily practice as a woman superintendent:

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
NONE	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	A LARGE AMOUNT

7. What level of isolation did you experience within your daily practice as a principal/supervisor:

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5		
NONE	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	A LARGE AMOUNT

8. What level of isolation did you experience within your daily practice as a teacher:

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5		
NONE	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	A LARGE AMOUNT

9. What amount has isolation impeded on your leadership abilities as a superintendent:

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5		
NONE	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	A LARGE AMOUNT

10. How often do you collaborate with other women superintendents:

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5		
NEVER	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	OFTEN

11. How often do you collaborate with other male superintendents:

Mark only one oval.

1	2	3	4	5		
NEVER	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	OFTEN

12. Are you willing to participate in a face-to-face interview that would take about 60-90 minutes: *

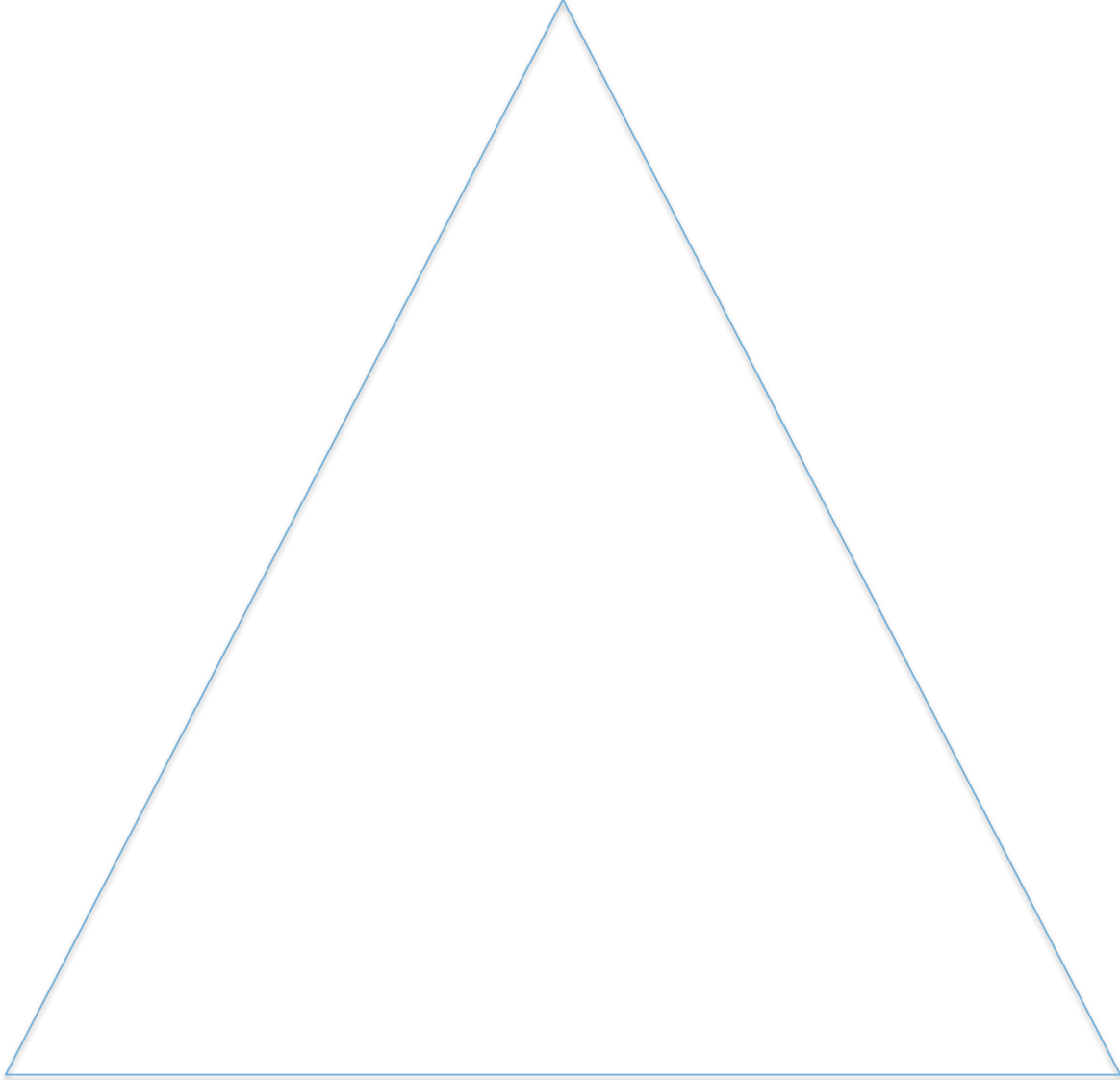
Mark only one oval.

YES

NO

Appendix B

Graphic Elicitation



Directions: List all of the positions you have held in education, up to and including being a superintendent. Label the largest section of the pyramid with the position in education you have held that included the most ongoing, daily interaction with colleagues (briefly describe your relationships). Fill in the remainder of the pyramid accordingly.