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## Women in the Superintendency: A Phenomenological Study of Women Superintendents' Perceptions of Social Capital

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Women in the Superintendency:

A Phenomenological Study of Women Superintendents' Perceptions of Social Capital

Victoria Catalano

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

Molloy University

2022

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**MOLLOY  
UNIVERSITY**

**SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES**

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Date: November 9, 2022

## **Abstract**

### Women in the Superintendency: A Phenomenological Study of Women Superintendents' Perceptions of Social Capital

Victoria Catalano

Public schools are faced with a shortage of women superintendents in the United States. Although women dominate the teaching profession and outnumber men in educational leadership and doctoral programs in education, there is a disproportionate number of men compared to women leading the nation's public schools. Using feminist theory and social capital theory, this qualitative phenomenological study examined how nine women superintendents perceived gender-based obstacles, as well as the support of social capital during their ascent to the superintendency. The findings revealed that women in the study faced sex-role stereotyping and gender bias from men and women as they aspired to leadership. They also revealed that social capital career supports of mentoring, formal and informal networks, and relationship building were necessary to advance to the superintendency. There was also evidence that professional preparedness through their expertise in curriculum and instruction, additional skill development, and transformational leadership styles were additional factors that supported their ascent into district leadership. Women of color in the study displayed resiliency, despite the image of the superintendent being stereotypically that of a White male. The findings of this study can lead to professional--development opportunities for women by highlighting the voices of women superintendents who successfully navigated the pathway to district leadership. The findings have implications for increased gender-based sensitivity training for school boards, hiring committees, and leadership--preparation programs. In addition, a reimagined university leadership program

should include additional skills-based instruction, partnerships with school districts, and sponsorships for women aspiring to the superintendency. Representation matters: only when people share leadership equally will women be able to achieve equitable access to the superintendent position.

## Dedication

The study is dedicated to my late mom, Lena, who was always very proud of my accomplishments; my daughter, Jessica, who always supports my accomplishments; and my granddaughter, Jillian, who may live in a bit better world because of these accomplishments.

*To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived—that is to have succeeded.” ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## Acknowledgments

*If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is “thank you,” that would suffice.*

~Meister Eckhart

There are so many people that have influenced and assisted me with this dissertation. Above all, I thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Allison Roda, whose qualitative research course set me on this journey into social justice and women leadership and ultimately my dissertation on women superintendents. Through her kind words, her untiring encouragement, trust, and countless edits, she guided and shaped my work each and every step of the way. I will be forever grateful. I also thank Dr. Joanne O’Brien who provided valuable feedback, insightful contributions, and encouragement throughout my study, and Dr. Shari Camhi who supported my work and offered great insight into my dissertation in addition to her own responsibilities as a woman leading a school district—a million thanks. I also offer heartfelt thanks to Dr. Eve Dieringer who served as my mentor, role model, confidante, and ultimately became a friend throughout my challenging journey. I simply could not ask for a better committee.

To the nine women superintendents, I thank them profusely for being willing, able, and ready participants. I will forever be grateful for their honesty, bravery, and generosity. Their voices were heard, and their words truly gave life to my study. Finally, I thank my family, my husband Bob, my children and grandchildren, and my professors, and dear friends. I am truly blessed to have your love, support, and understanding. I have said on more than one occasion, it takes a village. My heartfelt thanks to all the villagers who took this journey and supported me along the way.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“I have long been curious what it takes to get powerful positions in education. Seventeen years in and around schools...prompted me to reflect on this question” (Grogan, 1996, p. 1).

Much like the words captured in the above quote by Margaret Grogan (1996) in her seminal book, *Voices of Women Aspiring to the Superintendency*, educational leaders have always fascinated me. Early on in my career in education, I had an interest in these positions because they were commanding individuals who shaped an organization’s goals and objectives and ultimately determined the education that children receive. But who has access to these positions, and how does one go about getting a powerful position in education? These are the questions that prompted my fascination with and inquiry into educational leadership.

I do not doubt that both my teaching experience and journey into educational leadership have led to my curiosity about what it takes for women to gain access to educational leadership. I came to know, respect, and admire many women who held high-level positions in education through my role as a former principal in the New York City Department of Education. The leaders that I admired and respected the most empowered me as a leader by pushing me beyond my expectations to work on collective goals and by empowering my followers to follow a collective vision (Bass, 1985).

As I began to read and understand more about leadership, I uncovered a term that applied to these leaders: the *transformational leader*. These leaders continue to make their schools better by inspiring their staff to take ownership of a common vision and take risks to explore problems and solutions (Northouse, 2015). A transformational leader is usually aware of the potential and needs of those who follow them (Northouse, 2015). Bass (1985) named four factors that impact transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual

stimulation, and individualized consideration. Northouse (2015) elaborated on the four factors of transformational leadership. Idealized influence or charisma is when the followers strive to be like the leader. Inspirational motivation involves inspiring followers to take ownership of a common vision. Intellectual stimulation empowers followers to take risks and explore problems and their solutions. Northouse added that individualized consideration allows leaders to become intimate with the needs of individual followers. The transformational leaders who inspired me throughout my career journey were women principals and women superintendents who led their schools and districts with a style of leadership that empowered others. As a principal, I was continually encouraged by my former superintendent, Madeline Chan, to practice and embody a style of leadership that was transformative and develop goals that was intimate with the needs of my teachers, students, and the community.

After several years as New York City principal, I had ambitions to follow the career trajectory of my transformational superintendent at that time. As Northouse suggested, the followers of transformative leaders strive to be like them. Since my journey was comparable to hers—first as a teacher, then as an assistant principal, and then as a principal—I began to have my own aspirations of the school superintendency and applied to several districts on Long Island, New York.

Brunner and Grogan (2005) revealed that many women superintendents are found to pursue the following career path: teaching, assistant principal, or principal, and then central office. An extensive study (Tienken, 2021) showed that most women superintendents begin their administrative careers in elementary education, which paralleled my career path and ambitions.

As an aspiring superintendent, I did notice the relevance of gender in climbing the proverbial career ladder when I began to pursue my aspirations as a district school leader. My journey into leadership from New York City to Long Island was difficult from the start, and after



completing several interviews for superintendent, I found that it was a very different pathway and process to the superintendent's position. Although feeling like a strong, accomplished principal during my tenure in the Department of Education and coupled with eight years of exemplary evaluations, I felt both underprepared and like an outsider during the interviews. I did not have an understanding of the interview process and found it difficult to speak specifically about district programs or about the surrounding community. In addition, although I was a New York City principal and prepared for a New York City superintendency, it became obvious I lacked the district-level experience required for Long Island superintendents. It soon became evident that it would be a challenging move from a New York City principal to leading a school district on Long Island. It was not until I began my research into women school superintendents that I uncovered additional obstacles that were faced by women aspiring to the superintendency.

The first statistics that I came across were sobering. Although women make up 75% of the teaching force, they are far from being equally represented in the school superintendency and only 26.68% of superintendents are women (Tienken, 2021). The sheer power of this blatant inequity, coupled with the fact that my career aspiration was not realized, engaged my curiosity and prompted my inquiry into the reasons for this gender discrepancy in the superintendent's position.

From the literature, I began to understand and uncover the potential gender-based constraints that aspiring women leaders face. As I began to read and understand the work of feminist scholars, I uncovered the gender-based barriers and stereotypes that can serve as obstacles for women. Research has indicated that for women who aspire to a school superintendency, the invisible barrier of the glass ceilings, concrete walls, and labyrinth can contribute to gender-based discrimination and damage their hope and motivation (Knopik & Moerer, 2014; Munoz et al., 2014, p. 767). Additional barriers noted in research include the "lack

of role models, fewer opportunities to find mentors, difficulties in networking with peers, and the difficulties inherent for women due to male domination” (Katz, 2006, p. 7). Other researchers have specifically pointed to the internalization of negative stereotypes and the subsequent impact on female performance and have called this phenomenon a stereotype threat (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Stereotype threat theory has evolved from its inception and has been applied to women in leadership since the seminal work by Steele and Aronson (1995). The term *stereotype threat* was first used by Steele and Aronson (1995) who showed in several experiments that Black college students performed more poorly on standardized tests than White students when their race was emphasized. The results showed that performance can be harnessed by the awareness that one’s behavior might be viewed through the lens of gender or racial stereotypes. In general, the conditions that produce stereotype threat implicate the self through the association with a relevant social category (Marx & Stapel, 2006). When an individual views oneself in terms of salient group membership (e.g., “I am a woman” or “I am a Black woman”), performance can be undermined because of concerns about possibly confirming negative stereotypes about one’s group. Thus, situations that increase the salience of the stereotyped group identity can increase vulnerability to stereotype threat or sex-role stereotyping.

The literature has described stereotype threat, gender bias, and incongruity role theory as barriers that women face when securing leadership positions (DiCanio et al., 2016; Katz, 2006; Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012; Skrla, 2000). Knowing these barriers is significant and being aware of the research citing such concepts as “glass ceilings” and “old boys’ networks” can allow the reader to understand the constraints that could be a part of the leadership journey that women may face.

As I continued my deep dive into the literature on the superintendency, I began to understand the obstacles that aspiring women faced and began to examine those conditions that

were supportive to their careers—specifically the use of mentoring—that may create pathways to career success. The topics of networks and networking also appear in the literature but were less connected to women superintendents. Luthans et al. (2004) found that the most successful managers in their study spend 70% more time engaged in networking activities and 10% more time spent in routine communication activities than their less successful counterparts. Although Tallerico (2000) has also described networks as an advantage for women superintendents who use informal interconnections to gain entrance to the superintendency, research on other types of informal connections such as relationships with role models, confidantes, and sponsors was lacking.

Although my aspiration to become a school superintendent had grown less important, my research on the gender-based barriers women face and the significance of social capital provided insight into the obstacles that I faced and those that aspiring women leaders faced in their ascent. I am now passionate about those aspiring women who are preparing for high-level leadership positions by obtaining credentials for school building and school district certifications and those women in doctoral leadership programs. According to Allred et al. (2017), women express their aspirations for leadership positions through their preparation. In 2012, women earned 60% of all master's degrees (up from 46% in 1977) and 51% of all doctorates (up from 21% in 1977; Pew Research Center, 2015).

Through this research, I understand how aspiring women leaders can benefit from other women by gaining social support, role modeling, and information about overcoming discriminatory practices (McGee, 2010). There is a need to identify strategies to acquire social capital for aspiring women superintendents, and these strategies are addressed in my study. Brunner (1998) has argued that although there is an abundance of literature on the topic of career success for men, there is little for women.

## **Significance of the Study**

Additional studies are needed to highlight supplementary ways that aspiring women can use social capital to reach the ranks of the superintendency, since women are still underrepresented. Copeland and Calhoun (2014) stated that an “aging population of baby boomers plans to retire; a crisis looms in the K-12 leadership ranks” (p. 29). Kinsella and Richards (2004) reported there would be a shortage of school leaders soon. This is a significant problem. Although research cites that the disproportionate number of women in the superintendency is linked to the gender barriers they face (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014), there is limited research on the actual experiences, challenges, and barriers women encounter while seeking and serving as women leaders.

The voices of women leaders who occupy the positions must be heard. Grogan (1996) found, “The traditional literature on the superintendency might provide only a partial understanding of what it is all about” (p.18). It becomes crucial to understand the experiences of women superintendents who have succeeded. The importance of understanding factors contributing to these successes is especially relevant to those women presently in the position, those who aspire to this position, and colleges and universities that are preparing them for leadership. The results of the study can enable public school districts to have a qualified group of leaders and provide aspiring women leaders the means to overcome the perceived factors that may impede their aspirations for the superintendent’s position.

Several reasons show the need for this study. Much of the literature has focused on the use of mentoring as a formal way for aspiring women superintendents to obtain access to leadership positions. There is less research on additional ways aspiring women superintendents can leverage social capital—specifically the informal ways of using social capital. Although I examined the use of mentoring, I further researched the women superintendents’ use of informal

interpersonal relationships such as the importance of women confidants, role models, and critical friends as they aspired to the superintendency. Relationships such as these may be more readily available to aspiring women and may be just as supportive and necessary as mentorships, networking, and sponsorships as ways to enhance social capital.

Second, studies concerning women in the superintendency investigate the superintendent's experience using large numbers of women participants completing quantitative surveys on leadership (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009; Sperandio, 2015; Wallace, 2015). Although numbers are important in research, they “tell us nothing about the work lives of the relatively few women who inhabit the superintendency role and unfortunately research in educational administration about women superintendents has failed meaningfully to identify the problems that women face” (Skrla, 2000, p. 613). My study used a qualitative method to understand women in the superintendency. By using this method, I was able to examine “what women's perspectives are and how women perceive and experience their work” (Bell, 1988, p. 35).

Finally, I hope to further the knowledge of aspiring women leaders as well as the institutions that prepare them. Women aspiring to leadership through preparation programs can benefit from gaining the knowledge needed about how to overcome barriers, obstacles, and challenges that can affect their career aspirations (McGee, 2010). There is also a crucial need to identify those strategies—specifically the acquisition of social capital that may support career success.

The following sections outline the theoretical frameworks used as lenses in my research. I highlighted my research questions, methods, and design. I then described the study's limitations and how I mitigated these issues. Then, I defined the terms used in the dissertation and concluded with a summary.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings for the Study**

Both feminist theory and the theory of social capital are used to explain the experiences of women superintendents and their perceptions of how they attained top-level administration positions. Although Bourdieu (1986) has defined four forms of capital that can exist—economic, cultural, educational, and social—he “did not consider the gendered forms of capital” (Ross-Smith & Huppatz, 2010, p. 555). McCall (1992) extended Bourdieu’s interpretation of capital by proposing that a gender is a potential form of capital. Several researchers have viewed the significance of gender capital as a valuable form of capital available to women (Allen et al., 1995; Katz, 2006; Howard et al., 2017).

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist theory is founded on the concept that gender and gender-racial inequality shape all aspects of social and economic life (Bell et al., 2019). This theory attempts to understand the pervasive and persistent gender inequality and women’s oppression in society (hooks, 2000; Lorber, 2001). I rooted the study’s framework in feminism. Feminist theory explained the barriers that women in the superintendency have faced as they aspired to their positions. It serves as the lens to understand the gender-based obstacles that women face, since they clearly had to face several deterrents that men do not; otherwise, there will be a more gender-equitable distribution of women in the superintendency (Grogan, 1996).

To further explain and understand the feminist idea of oppression toward women aspiring to leadership, the seminal works of Dana and Bourisaw’s (2006) *Women in the Superintendency*, *Discarded Leadership* and *Voices of Women Aspiring to the Superintendency* by Margaret Grogan (1996) are significant. Regarding the oppression of women, Dana and Bourisaw (2006) stated that the problem of gender inequality is part of a larger picture. They further stated that social justice does not exist for women but is rooted in society’s ideology that does not ensure

equitable freedom, rights, and responsibilities for women. As women are underrepresented in the superintendency, the problem is not only an equity issue but a social justice issue as well.

### **Social Capital Theory**

Social capital theory was used to examine the conditions of opportunities that allowed women to break gender barriers in the superintendent field. Interview questions examined the ways in which women superintendents were able to break through these invisible barriers of male-dominated networks and glass ceilings to better position themselves for career advancement. Questions concerning the usage of mentoring, networking, and relationship building served to specifically understand the experiences of women superintendents. The study used social capital theory to explain the experiences of women who, despite the odds, gained entrance into the most gender-stratified executive position in the United States, with men 20 times more likely to advance from the level of a teacher to the top leadership role in a school district (Skrla, 2000).

The study drew from the works of Bourdieu and Coleman's understanding of social capital as one of the most influential and popular theories to emerge in the social sciences over the past several decades (Coleman, 1988). Bourdieu (1986) defined four forms of capital in society: economic, cultural, educational, and social. These concepts of capital were invaluable for looking at the distribution of advantages and disadvantages for members of that society. According to Bourdieu, social capital is the gaining of valuable relationships that can contribute to professional success. Coleman (1988) defined social capital as any aspect of social structure that creates value and facilitates the actions of individuals within the social structure. The popularity of the concept of social capital focuses on the value of social relationships in terms of resources. Since social capital theory views *capital* as the resources contained in social relationships, networking, building relationships, and mentorships can play a significant role in

the lives of female superintendents. Social scientists have also explained the idea of capital as a resource used to better position individuals for career success (Lin, 2000). Social capital acts to acquire resources, ideas, and information beyond the community (Lovell, 2000). These resources can grow into valuable relationships that may have professional benefits on careers and career aspirations (Knopik & Moerer, 2014).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the role that social capital has played in women's ascent into the superintendency. Drawing on feminist theory and social capital theory, I examined how social capital might have mitigated gender bias and stereotype threat in women superintendents' experiences, many of whom moved up to these high-level leadership positions despite barriers they faced in a male-dominated field.

### **Research Questions**

Two questions framed this study to understand the role of social capital in the lived experiences of women superintendents. According to Lin (1999), "The premise behind the notion of social capital is rather simple and straightforward: investment in social relations with expected return" (p. 30). Knopik and Moerer (2014) extended this idea and has stated that social capital increases people's capacities to manage their lives, from getting paid employment, surviving crises, and living well.

The framing questions encompass how women superintendents can use social capital to break barriers and mitigate gender bias. The conditions of opportunities are also examined, including relationship building, sponsorship, networking, and mentoring.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do women superintendents describe how social capital contributed to their ascent to the highest level of leadership in public education?



- a. How, if at all, has social capital mitigated gender bias and stereotype threats for women in the superintendency?
  - b. What unique challenges do superintendents of color face in their ascent?
2. How has relationship-building, networking, and mentoring assisted women superintendents in overcoming barriers and challenges?

## **Design and Methods**

The study's research questions were answered using a qualitative, interpretive, hermeneutic, and phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology is the process of interpreting experiences through the first-person narrative (Moustakas, 1994). My study used this approach to understand the superintendents' lived experiences. The interpretive-oriented style captured participants' views best by making sense of their experiences. The narrative approach uncovered common themes embedded in the individual stories of the participants (Creswell, 2013). The study is naturalistic in that it was able to construct shared meaning from multiple perspectives and examine the real world of the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Since the questions were being posed to a marginalized population (females) that are not studied adequately in the research, a naturalistic study was appropriate (Allred et al., 2017). It is important to hear the voices of current sitting women superintendents working as leaders in the field. Grogan (1996) stated, "The traditional literature of the superintendency might provide only a partial understanding of what it is all about" (p. 18). It then became critical to hear the voices of those traditionally marginalized and examine their usage of networking, relationship building, and mentoring as conditions of opportunity that positively affected their career.

The study participants were nine women superintendents currently leading school districts on Long Island, New York. According to the most recent estimates, there are currently 121 public school districts on Long Island, and 38% are led by women (Ike et al., 2020)

Although this percentage is above the national average of women superintendents, it is still an underrepresentation. Of the superintendents in the United States, African Americans accounted for only 5.3% and Latinx accounted for 2.7% (Quilantan & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004). The challenges for women of color are even more significant than those facing women who identify as White. In fact, Latinx and African Americans are twice the minority, barred not only as females but also by their race (Quilantan & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004). According to a 2020 decennial study for American superintendents, the average superintendent was a married White male (91.38%) (Tienken, 2021) and statewide, 6.0% of superintendents were people of color (Ike et al., 2020).

As the demographics of Long Island have shifted and expanded with Blacks, Latinx, and Asians continuing to increase their share in the population (Long Island Index, 2021) the need to obtain a racially diverse sample of participants was vital to this study.

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants. The semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions aligned with the research questions. The interview consisted of three phases. The first phase focused on building rapport and on the superintendent's background. The next topic focused on the use of social capital in gaining access to their positions. The third topic focused on mitigating gender bias and stereotype threats through social capital. I also asked for the opportunity to send follow-up emails or schedule a brief 30-minute interview for specific points to be clarified (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and organized for analysis. Since I used a hermeneutic phenomenology design, I practiced the hermeneutic circle during analysis by reflexive journaling to ensure a constant practice of renewed understanding. With the use of phenomenological data, the researcher interprets data, and the journal entries played a critical role in ensuring validity. My entries about decisions concerning data collection and analysis

reflected on any personal biases and considered how they may have shaped the interpretation of results.

The triangulation methods included feminist and social capital theory to explain the data. I ensured trustworthiness and credibility by cross-referencing and comparing data within and across interviews. To further ensure validity and reliability, I used my co-primary investigator and women superintendent, as well as a member of my dissertation committee, to review all codes and themes for accuracy. Four participants participated in a focus group following the individual interviews. During the focus group, emerging themes were shared and discussed, and additional data and feedback were given to the researcher.

The steps for data analysis were to read each interview transcript in its entirety and then to organize specifics and experiences thematically under specific interview questions (Peoples, 2021). The meanings of each participant's experience were highlighted thematically through direct quotes from the interviews. Next, narratives were unified from a general description of all participants' narratives. The final step in the analysis produced a general description. The themes that were implicit in all or most of the participant's accounts of their experience were noted, with the aim to unite the major phenomenological themes into a cohesive general analysis.

### **Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Control**

A limitation of the study was the educational context of the participants. The study was confined to interviewing women superintendents working on Long Island. Although using only this population may affect the transferability of the study, I provided proficient information for the readers to make connections. Although studying superintendents in both urban as well as suburban districts could give the study a broader scope and perspective, I mediated the concern by ensuring that participants led school districts that were diverse in demographics. Furthermore, the results of the study could provide potential policy and practice recommendations for

organizations that serve Long Island districts, boards of education, and future aspiring Long Island superintendents.

Another factor to consider was the smaller scope of participants. Although the study included only nine superintendents, the nature of qualitative research design with in-depth interviews allowed me to obtain rich and valuable data on experience of each women superintendent, and it is believed that the benefits outweighed the limitations.

Initially, a limitation of the study was the access to women superintendents on Long Island, but this was not the case. While the superintendency is a high-profile position and requiring their time might have been difficult, the nine women in the superintendent's position were extremely generous with their time. They were honest and forthcoming when interviewed and also took additional time to ask clarifying questions and to recommend additional women to participate in the study.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout history, women have faced barriers. Conducting a qualitative study on how women superintendents accessed and utilized social capital can provide rich and thick descriptions of a field with existing discriminatory practices. The study is significant for two reasons. First, it expanded the conversation about obstacles that women superintendents have faced. If women remain unaware of potential barriers, those barriers can become self-imposed (McGee, 2010). Second, since it is a study focused on women who have obtained the superintendency, their usage of social capital becomes important to women aspiring to this position and the educational communities that prepare aspiring women leaders.

Women are clearly an integral part of today's school system. This is evident by the sheer number of women teachers in the public school system. Past and current research has suggested that women do possess leadership qualities, have had opportunities for leadership roles, have

mentors available to guide them in the process, and are preparing for leadership (Allred et al., 2017; Gilmore & Kinsella, 2009). The study examined the barriers but more importantly examined the conditions of opportunity or social capital that assisted women in their career path to leadership. The themes uncovered offer recommendations to school districts and educational programs at universities to continue fostering the upward progression of women in education.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

In this study, the following terms are defined as follows:

**Confidants or Confidantes:** Important providers of support with whom one can share personal thoughts feelings and desires (Howard, 2002).

**Feminist theory:** The struggle to end sexist oppression (hooks, 2013). It aims to understand the nature of gender inequality.

**Gender biases:** An ever-present barrier affecting women and their efforts to acquire superintendency positions in public school (Brunner, 1998; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Grogan, 1996).

**Glass ceiling:** An invisible societal barrier that prevents women from advancing in their careers (Knopik & Moerer, 2014). Although this term is used to describe women and minorities, this study uses the term in reference to women in educational leadership (MacArthur, 2010).

**Mentor:** One who teaches, coaches, advises, trains, directs, protects, sponsors, guides, and leads another individual or individuals (Brunner, 1998; Kochan, 2003; Shakeshaft, 1989).

**Mentoring** is a developmental relationship, with the goal of career development and guidance for the mentee (McGee, 2010).

Networking: Behaviors aimed at building, maintaining, and using informal relationships to facilitate work-related individuals by voluntarily gaining access to resources and maximizing common advantage (Wolff & Moser, 2009).

Old boys' network: An informal male network with a significant masculine support system based on gender (Knopik & Moerer, 2014).

Personal barrier or self-imposed barrier: An obstacle that exists in oneself (MacArthur, 2010). A barrier that serves as a delay of or failure to obtain administrative positions due to a personal decision to delay or avoid the position because of family responsibilities, inflexibility to relocate, and family and motherhood influences (McGee, 2010).

Professional barrier: An obstacle that exists within the workplace (MacArthur, 2010).

Role models: Role models can positively impact people's aspirations and self-perceptions through social comparison process deemed important for those underrepresented in various professions (Hoyt & Simon, 2011).

Social Capital: Connections with outside parties, providing access to resources that include structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions (Kickul et al., 2007).

Stereotype threat: A perceived incongruity between female gender roles and leadership roles.

This incongruity can lead to prejudice and can indicate a less favorable attitude toward female leaders and greater difficulty for women to attain top positions (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016).

Superintendent: The chief executive officer of a public school district who is responsible for the health and welfare of the students in their school district communities (Gilmour & Kinsella, 2009).

Transformational leadership: Lead with idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1985), which allows leaders to become intimate with the needs of individual followers (Northouse, 2015).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Women's rights, particularly in the workplace, are a major issue today. The Women's Rights Movement, part of our nation's history, sought equal rights and equal opportunities for women. Current movements such as #MeToo, One Million Women, and Everyday Sexism Project have manifested in global movements (Bell et al., 2019) and have forced us as a nation to look closely at the treatment in the workplace in terms of gender equity and equality. Much has happened since the women's movement that arose in the 1960s to better integrate women into the public sphere, but even after more than 50 years, women still lag behind men in leadership positions. Although the visibility of women has increased dramatically in recent years on many levels, Quilantan and Menchaca-Ochoa (2004) stated that women still face challenges in their professional lives, and barriers such as the "good old boy's network persist in suppressing opportunities for the women in cooperate and management worlds" (p. 1). For example, women represent only 29.3% of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of all organizations in the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020). The numbers are even more alarming when we look at Fortune 500 companies, where women hold a mere 7.9% of the highest titles (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016).

The underrepresentation of women in high-level leadership positions is a distinct theme across this literature review. Women are underrepresented in high-level leadership positions across society in the world of business, healthcare, and government, including corporations and political systems (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). In terms of law enforcement, only 33 women hold the position of sheriff in the United States. There are 3,067 counties (Hughes, 2011) and one sheriff per county. The same inequity is apparent for women in academic leadership, where only 34.3% of professors are women (Tienken, 2021). The percentage of women college presidents is 30.1%, with this number being significantly disproportionate in terms of gender (Tienken, 2021).



The inequity of women leaders across many fields raises concerns about the barriers that women in leadership across society are facing. Researchers in the field stated that significant obstacles still exist for women in education (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Although women represent over 75% of the nation's teaching force, they are underrepresented in the nation's top educational position, the school superintendency (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010). Literature on women's leadership refers to a glass ceiling as a major barrier that prevents women from reaching the highest levels of leadership (Hughes, 2011).

Several decades ago, people began to use the term *glass ceiling* to describe organizations' failure to promote women into top leadership roles. The glass ceiling is defined as an attitudinal and organizational barrier that prevents women from reaching the most senior levels in organizations (Ballenger, 2010). Women are seen as less favorable candidates for senior leadership positions, with gender roles in contradiction to the traits required for successful leadership (Eagly et al., 1995).

Gender biases can include both discrimination and sex-role stereotyping: "For women who aspire to a high-level leadership position of superintendent, the invisible barriers of the glass ceiling can damage their hope and motivation" (Munoz et al., 2014, p. 767). Although this metaphor has been used for many years and is understood by most, it can lead to organizations overlooking interventions that would address the problem. Eagly and Carli (2007) suggested that this metaphor has outlived its usefulness and that a labyrinth is more fitting to help organizations understand and address the obstacles that women face. They argued that rather than depicting just one absolute barrier, a labyrinth conveys the complexity and variety of challenges that women may face during their careers, which can include "vestiges of prejudices against women, issues of leadership style and authenticity, and family responsibilities" (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 1).

Public schools in the United States face a similar leadership crisis. The sheer number of current and projected superintendency vacancies across the United States is staggering, with the shortage of superintendents in large urban school districts being especially acute (Short & Scribner, 2002.) With the underrepresentation of women holding the top spot in education, our nation continues to overlook a valuable pool of candidates who are actively preparing for this position (Allred et al., 2017). The nation also continues to miss the style of women leadership that women can offer. Today's superintendents must be transformational and instructional leaders capable of building collaborative models for decision making (Brunner, 1998). Literature has shown that women can be outstanding leaders in the field of education, and there is strong evidence for adopting a more collaborative, cooperative, or democratic style of leadership (Chin, 2011). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010) extended the understanding of women in leadership and indicated that many women are motivated to transform the learning opportunities for those who have been least well served by current policies and practices.

In the following sections, I provide a review of the literature surrounding the history of women superintendents. The perceived barriers or constraints for women leaders are critical to this review. They served as one of the themes presented across the literature and are explained from a feminist point of view. When barriers are clearly understood, the conditions of opportunity can be more closely examined—specifically, the usage of social capital to mediate barriers for aspiring women superintendents. The techniques of mentoring, networking, and building relationships are discussed as conditions that can break through barriers and provide women an entrance into the superintendent's position of leadership.

Social scientists use the ideas of social capital to understand how individuals can use resources to better position themselves for career advancement (Lin, 2000). Researchers have referred to social capital as the acquisition of resources (Knopik & Moerer, 2014). Mentoring,

networking, and relationship building, as social capital, are discussed in the literature as ways to “generate better returns for members of a disadvantaged social group” (Lin, 2000, p. 4). In other words, how can women use social capital to gain entrance into the male-dominated superintendent’s position? How can women succeed? It first becomes critical to understand the history of women in this position to comprehend the gender-based barriers that women have faced throughout history.

### **Women Superintendents in History**

In 19th-century America, both teaching and school leadership were women’s domains, since women could be paid less by school boards, and the common understanding was that women were better at caring for children (Maranto et al., 2018). Although these gendered norms seemingly gave women opportunities early on, when the schools became larger and more bureaucratic, credentialed male principals and male superintendents soon replaced the women in leadership positions (Maranto et al., 2018). Tallerico and Blount’s (2004) article, *Women, and the Superintendency: Insights from Theory and History*, explained that this change in the 19th century can be explained as a “shift over time.” They further stated that “although the sexual division of labor is persistent, it is not static” (Tallerico & Blount, p. 634) and the most lasting and widespread division of labor was based on gender. For women, this often includes lower pay and status and fewer opportunities for advancement. These sexual divisions of labor, sex stereotyping, occupational sex segregation, or stratification of work are noted throughout the research.

Dana and Bourisaw (2006) explained that during the 1960s, positions in the workplace included more people of color, but they were still not equitable to those of White men. Women and people of color still did not have access to conditions, salaries, and benefits of the workplace, nor did they have access to the highest leadership positions in organizations and government.

According to the authors, the superintendent was “likened to the new executive in peacetime America” (p. 12). By 1968, the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association had a clear vision of the role of the superintendent. However, the “rhetoric plainly reinforced the older rather grandiose image of the superintendent and reaffirmed his maleness” (Grogan, 1999, p. 14). Slowly, social conditions for women began to receive attention.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy created the Committee on Equal Employment, requiring projects with federal dollars to include affirmative action. In 1963, Congress passed the Equal Pay Act, promising equal wages for the same work. In 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Yet despite these advancements for women, the number of women superintendents in the US remained at 3%. The years 1970 through 1990 saw little improvement in the number of women holding the superintendent’s position (Tallericio & Blount, 2004). By the 1970s, there was even a decline of women in top district leadership positions (Grogan, 1999). It was not until the late 1990s that gender issues surrounding the superintendency began to be addressed (Harris, 2007). Leading to the 21st century, the literature began to explore the experiences of women who aspired to be superintendents. Inquiries focused on issues such as discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes (Skakeshaft, 1989), gatekeepers (Tallerico, 2000), and mentoring (Hart, 1995). The first superintendent gender literature focused on investigating and telling the lives of women who had been superintendents. Continuing the departure from male-dominated literature, Grogan (2000) re-conceptualized the role by applying feminist concepts that considered gender by drawing on the experiences of women. Although the experiences of women were taken into consideration in the research, women continue to be vastly underrepresented in the superintendency in the United States.

Today, over 80% of superintendents nationwide are male. Despite the dominance of females in the classroom, few have broken through the obstacles to reach this highest position in K-12 education (Glass, 2000). Even with advanced technology and enhanced data-collection methods, it is difficult to get an accurate number of women in the superintendency due to an absence of reliable data within the United States (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010). Currently, no federal or national organizations collect or reports annual educational administrative data by gender. The field of education relies on membership counts in administrative organizations, surveys from these organizations, or surveys by the National Center for Education Statistics (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010). Access to knowledge is just one of the concerns. The challenge in the ability to gather data concerning the number of women leading school districts can make the problem more difficult to address.

### **Superintendents of Color**

Women of color face different challenges than White women superintendents. If we factor in the race of the superintendents in the United States, African Americans account for 5.3% and Latinx account for 2.7% (Quilantan & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004). The challenges for women of color are even more significant than those facing women who identify as White. Latinx and African American women are twice the minority, barred as both females and by their race (Quilantan & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004). According to Osler and Webb (2014), they face the challenge of fitting into the majority's world. African American women superintendents are required to transform their persona into one that does not appear "too Black" or "too female" (Fordham, 1993). Dillard (2000) stated that the voices of African American women are excluded from research literature and practice in the social sciences. The importance of including women of color becomes a matter of inclusion and equity.

## **Feminist Theory as a Theoretical Framework**

Feminist theory is founded on the concept that gender and gender-racial inequality shape all aspects of social and economic life (Bell et al., 2019). The feminist theory attempts to understand the pervasive and persistent gender inequality and women's oppression in society (hooks, 2000; Lorber, 2001). According to hooks, "Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression...it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture" (p. 361). I rooted the study's framework in feminism. Feminism is a long-established, often-ignored presence in the study of organizations and social relations relationships at work (Bell et al., 2019).

Feminist theory can explain the barriers that women in the superintendency have faced. To construct answers to the research questions and better understand the study's leaders, feminist theories from the Second Women's Movement served as the theoretical framework to analyze the data. I used the ideas of identities and oppression as the lens through which I examined how women superintendents make sense of their experiences of the barriers they faced (hooks, 2000).

To further explain and understand the feminist idea of oppression toward women aspiring to leadership, the seminal works of Dana and Bourisaw's (2006) *Women in the Superintendency*, *Discarded Leadership* and *Voices of Women Aspiring to the Superintendency* by Margaret Grogan (1996) are significant. Regarding the oppression of women, Dana and Bourisaw (2006) stated that the problem of gender inequality is part of a larger picture. They further stated that social justice does not exist for women but is rooted in society's ideology that does not ensure equitable freedom, rights, and responsibilities for women.

## **Barriers to Becoming a Superintendent**

Many explanations are offered for why women have difficulty reaching top leadership positions. Biases, based on gender, affect women in their efforts of obtaining a leadership

position (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006), and research has indicated that being a woman significantly increases the difficulty in gaining this position (Munoz et al., 2014). In his article “Where are all the Superintendents?” Glass and Franceschini (2007) outlined seven reasons why women are still lagging in gaining positions in top district posts. He stated that the school boards are in the position to hire superintendents and are reluctant to hire women. Most school boards, he went on to say, still contain mostly men and women superintendents who perceive some restrictive forces when hired by the board. In an extensive study (Tienken, 2021), 825 of the women superintendents indicated that school boards do not see them as strong managers, and 76% of the boards did not view them as capable of handling finances (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Other explanations have been offered for why women have difficulty reaching top leadership positions, including stereotype threat. Steele and Aronson (1995) defined *stereotype threat* as a focus on a social psychological predicament that can arise from a widely known negative stereotype about one’s own group. Davies et al. (2005) found that exposure to stereotypic commercials can undermine women’s leadership aspirations. Their study also found that gender stereotype-based expectations of inferiority can lead to underperformance on specific tasks (e.g., negotiation) and decision making across many domains (e.g., entrepreneurship, STEM fields) relevant to leadership in contemporary society.

Hoyt and Murphy’s (2016) research expanded the understanding of stereotype threat and women in leadership. Their research indicated that although many factors can contribute to women being historically underrepresented in leadership fields, the lack of fit between women’s characteristic skills, and aspirations, and those deemed necessary for effective leadership. This incongruity can lead to prejudice and can account for the numerous findings that indicate a less favorable attitude toward women leaders and an increased difficulty for women to attain top-level leadership positions.

To explain further, Hoyt and Blascovich (2007) stated the descriptive stereotypical attributes of men include “agentic” characteristics emphasizing confidence, control, and assertiveness, whereas the stereotypical attributes of women include “communal” characteristics that highlight a concern for others (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007). A study by Katz (2006) reinforced the position that women must have both “communal” and “agentic qualities” to be successful in this top position.

Derrington and Sharratt (2009) stated that perceived barriers for women have changed over time, and it is important to understand this change and note the implications. A study conducted in 1993 on women subscribers to a professional job listing service asked aspiring superintendents to identify barriers to the superintendency (Derrington & Sharratt, 2009). In April 2007, this study by the original researchers found a shift in focus regarding the perceived barriers. According to the 1993 survey study, barriers for women superintendents are perceived as institutional and rooted in society. More specifically the study found in 1993 that the primary barriers included sex discrimination and sex role stereotyping as compared to 2007, where the perceived top barriers were often self-imposed, and women avoided the superintendency because of family commitments and the inability to relocate (Derrington & Sharatt, 2009).

Although studies have indicated that barriers have changed, the literature offers an abundance of empirical evidence supporting gender bias as a condition that continues to keep women out of the superintendency. In 2006, a study indicated that the primary reason why so few women were in the superintendency was due to the glass ceiling and gender discrimination by boards of education (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). This contradicts the findings of Derrington and Sharratt (2009) who claimed the perception of barriers have shifted and that women superintendents no longer indicate gender discrimination as a primary barrier. Holland (2011) reported that the percentage of women indicating they had encountered discrimination in their



pursuit of the superintendency was more than three times the percentage of men who said they had experienced it. Grogan (1996) stated that women in leadership often must face many limitations that men do not have to face, and there is an unmistakable gender divide in certain domains, particularly in the domain of leadership. Grogan further explained this gender disparity in leadership by arguing that the path to power for women contains numerous impediments and barriers characterized by some researchers as an obstacle course.

### **Women Breaking Barriers**

Despite facing barriers, women can erode the glass ceiling and continue to fulfill their aspirations to reach the superintendency. Katz (2006) stated that due to the number of superintendents aging out and the considerable turnover rate, there will be numerous opportunities for both men and women capable of filling these high-level leadership positions. In relationship to leadership, literature has indicated that social capital may be seen as a valuable resource and more necessary to a leader's advancement than merely performing traditional tasks associated with management (Eagly et al., 1995). Building a valuable network, although time consuming, can be extremely valuable for women who aspire to leadership positions (Glass, 2000; McGee, 2010).

### **Social Capital Theory**

Social capital theory holds a distinct and long-standing place within research (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2000). Bourdieu defined the forms of capital that can exist in a society. These concepts of capital are invaluable for looking at the distribution of advantages and disadvantages for members of that society. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital exists in institutionalized relationships that provide its members with mutually owned capital. The capacity of social capital depends on the size of the network connections. The more the members invest in social relationships, the stronger and more beneficial these can become.

The theory can be interpreted to mean that the greater the size of one's network, the greater one's social capital. Individuals with large networks have many resources. Much of Bourdieu's (1986) work addressed social class hierarchy, so part of his discussion claimed the upper classes strove to keep their networks closed or densely organized to maintain nobility status. Given a network's collective strength, connectedness, and pool of resources, it did not necessarily look to expand its size with outsiders. The idea of closed networks was important to the work of Coleman.

Coleman (1988) incorporated Bourdieu's (1986) definition into his own work and agreed that closure must exist in most social networks. Furthermore, Coleman (1988) extended the theory by stressing the feeling and expectation of obligation felt by network members. If most members felt a deep sense of obligation to help a member in need, the likelihood of individuals utilizing resources became very strong. This sense of obligation is bolstered by a sense of trust that members will assist others even if they have already or have not yet received benefits from the group's resources.

Lin (2000) also wrote extensively on social capital theory, and his work stands apart from that of Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) and is important to the understanding of this theory's application toward the superintendent candidacy. First, Lin (2000) identified four critical elements of the resources inherent in a network's social capital that set it apart from economic and human capital. Those four elements were that networks "share important information with each other, exert influence on outsiders for members' gain, certify members' social credentials, and reinforce members' identities" (Lin, 2000, p. 3). The benefits of social capital and career enhancement for women leaders are addressed in the literature.

## **Benefits of Social Capital on Career Enhancement**

The literature has indicated the benefits of social capital for women leaders. In a study by Knopik and Moerer (2014), the behaviors of women leaders were explored—specifically, those interpersonal behaviors of developing, maintaining, and leveraging social capital. The results of this investigation indicated that leaders who actively pursued and developed networks to advance their careers enhanced professional visibility and developed professional skills. The women leaders in the study invested significant time, energy, and effort in relationship building and utilization.

In a study done by Seibert et al. (2001), the relationship between social capital and career success was examined. The study indicated that there were clear benefits of social capital, including access to information, access to resources, and career sponsorship. Recent advances in social capital theory have begun to provide a finer-grained analysis of ways individual social networks affect their careers. Luthans et al. (2004) found that the most successful managers in their study spend 70% more time engaged in networking activities and 10% more time in routine communication activities than their less successful counterparts. Seibert's (2001) study sought to examine social capital as it pertains to career success and examined the relationship between social capital and career outcomes. The results showed that a relationship between social capital and career success does exist. Access to information and resources and career sponsorship is determined as critically important.

Ortiz (2001) demonstrated the critical nature of social capital for effective leadership in a qualitative study of 12 Latina women superintendents. Data included interviews, written documents, visitations, and observations. Results indicated that each superintendent used their social capital to gain and sustain entrance into the superintendency. The women superintendents in the study leveraged an embedded structure, which is considered a capital around oneself

(Ortiz, 2001). The successful strategies of the superintendents in the study included creating diverse cabinets that represented the social ties, cultural practices, and political contexts that were a part of the community where they served as leaders. One superintendent developed a rainbow cabinet that was not exclusive to group personality, maintained uniformity with the principals, and replaced two board members that reflected self-interest rather than institutional improvement.

### **Mentoring, Relationship Building, and Networking as Forms of Social Capital**

The literature cites mentoring, networking, and relationship building as promising for women. Many researchers indicated a relationship between these forms of social capital and the career enhancement of women. Brunner and Grogan (2007) reported that networking has assisted women superintendents appointed to their position. Grove and Montgomery (1999) stated that for women to succeed in attaining administrative positions in education, some type of mentoring must occur. Munoz et al. (2014) concurred and stated that women who have female models and mentors can overcome significant barriers.

In a qualitative study with a naturalistic design and a feminist approach (ethic of care), Allred et al. (2017) examined women superintendents' perceived experiences, motivations, and needs. In this case study, women superintendents decided to certify for the superintendency only after a mentoring supervisor or professor suggested it. Only four out of seven women admitted they aspired to become superintendents, even though all were prepared for the role. Three out of the seven women stated that they had never wanted to be superintendents despite seeking credentials and preparing for the role.

Copeland and Calhoun (2014) conducted a mixed-method study of 39 women superintendents in a Southeastern state, and 84.6% reported that they had mentors. Superintendents who took part in the qualitative portion of the study indicated that their

experiences with mentoring were positive and believed that the process was beneficial to them and included significant actions of leveraging social capital as building support systems and school board relationships. 91% of participants who had a mentor believed the process had been beneficial to them.

Similar findings concerning the significance of acquiring capital through mentoring were done in a study by Munoz et al. (2014), whose participants were six current or retired women superintendents. According to the study, mentoring played a significant role in developing leadership and networking skills. Findings offered insight into women's aspirations to become school superintendents. Power and empowerment play a major role in whether women seek and attain the top-level position of superintendent. By increasing the number of influential mentoring networks, women put themselves in a better position to gain the superintendency.

A study by Howard et al. (2017) sought to answer the same questions about the influence of mentorship on the development of women superintendents. The study found that mentorship experiences increased women's cultural capital by giving aspiring women the opportunity for professional exposure. The researchers found that mentorship experiences do indeed influence the development of female superintendents as transformational leaders. Some specific findings include that mentorship experiences give aspiring women leaders the opportunity for professional exposure. Mentoring experiences helped superintendents understand the need to lead through inspirational motivation, fostering a sense of purpose, and being a resource for helping others. The authors concluded that it is imperative for the transformational leader to learn what to do and what not to do, and they advocated that the mentorship experience be mandated and job descriptions for superintendents mention transformational leadership strategies (i.e., these strategies can include idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration; Howard et al., 2017).

Sampson (2018) conducted a study with five female superintendents to examine who had achieved longevity in their positions. Findings showed emerging themes for factors that led to their longevity. They included a stable school board, strong connections with the community, a commitment to the job, and a passion and love for what they were doing.

A study by Freeley and Seinfeld (2012) focused on preparation and access to the superintendency. Freely and Seinfeld (2012) investigated four female superintendents using two individual interviews with each superintendent and one focus group, where the four superintendents came together to share their thoughts on designing a program to prepare future superintendents. The findings of the study indicated that broad and diverse experiences and the people they met on the way who served as mentors affected their successful journey. Communication skills, mentoring, and self-reflection were considered keys to their success in gaining and maintaining social capital, which advanced their careers.

In a qualitative study by Ravetz (2014), 118 responses were gathered from women leaders from all over the United States. Leaders overwhelmingly stated that they actively pursued networks to advance their careers. In addition, the research showed a strong connection between leadership and relationship building. For 85% of the leaders, social capital was a means to an end, leading to four opportunities: formal network expansion focused on building relationships with professional women; employment and advancement; increased visibility in the workplace, community, and industry; and professional development. According to the discussion of results, leaders overwhelmingly stated that they actively pursued these networks to advance their careers; it therefore seems there is a strong connection between leadership and relationship building.

Techniques to leverage social capital such as relationship building and networking were highlighted in the literature. However, mentoring was clearly the most influential technique present across most of the studies. Dana and Bourisaw (2006) stated that women with mentors

could obtain a superintendency position sooner than those without mentors. Howard et al. (2017) agreed and found that a successful mentorship is critical to women aspiring to the superintendent's position.

### **Feminist Theory Meets Social Capital Theory**

Research has stated that building and leveraging social capital is critical for women (Sampson, 2018), even more so than men, who aspire to leadership. Eagly and Carli (2018) stated that men are more adept at building professional relationships, while women tend to have less social capital and often do not recognize the impact social capital can have on their careers. Lin (2000) concurred and stated that there are significant gender differences between the social capital of men and women. Eagly et al. (2007) stated that pressures for intensive parenting and increasing demands of most high-level careers have left women with little time to build professional networks—that is, to accumulate social capital that is important if women hope to move up in their careers.

Although Bourdieu (1986) has defined four forms of capital that can exist—economic, cultural, educational, and social—he “did not consider the gendered forms of capital” (Ross-Smith & Huppertz, 2010, p. 555). McCall (1992) extended Bourdieu's interpretation of capital by proposing that gender is a potential form of capital. Lovell (2000) stated that feminine traits as a “cultural capital” are beginning to have broader currency in unexpected ways, and stereotypical feminine skills are increasing their value in the labor market. Female leaders tend to utilize ethical perspectives of care, including dedication to students, efforts to create child-centered schools, and empowerment of others in varying degrees (Lovell, 2000). The demand for masculine physicality has diminished almost to the vanishing point and gender has become a significant form of capital (McCall, 1992).

Several studies confirm the significance of gender capital as a valuable form of capital available to women. Allen et al. (1995) found that people prefer to have mentors of their own gender, and females often seek out other females as mentors when they are in leadership roles. Women leaders understand the importance of the gendered form of capital that other women can provide. Howard et al. (2017) agreed and stated that a successful mentorship should include someone of like values and interests, and for women, that is another woman.

In a study by Katz (2006), women superintendents in four Midwestern states were interviewed to understand and perceive their leadership skills and their uses of power in their position. Women superintendents spoke about strategies they used to challenge the system, including their gendered capital to build relationships, getting to know the school community, and assuring staff they were in a protective environment so they would be willing to take the necessary risks for improvement. The results of the study reinforced the role of gender in leadership, specifically how women tend to be more collaborative when it comes to leading. It also reinforced the idea that women had to establish “credibility among the men.” It seems that women must have both communal and agentic qualities to succeed in this top position.

Literature has also revealed that social capital or, in some instances, gender capital can be the force or the condition that can break through gender-based barriers that women face in aspiring to leadership positions. The techniques of mentoring, networking, and relationship building were cited in the literature as examples of the type of social capital women may need to enhance their careers and ensure advancement and promotions, but are these types of social capital available to aspiring women superintendents and readily available to meet their needs?

According to a study by Coleman (2010), since the year 2000, the number of women attending professional network meetings has steadily declined. A new generation of women may not see the need for this type of social capital. Amongst the reasons for the decline is the aging



profile of the membership accompanied by a lack of interest from younger women who may believe that gender issues are no longer relevant. Finally, there is less support for the networks from universities. Boyland (2013) stated that although professional organizations such as the American Association of School Administrators and the Urban Superintendents Association of America have developed and offered professional development programs designed to encourage aspiring leaders, membership is declining. The results of Boyland's (2013) study indicate that since the year 2000, the numbers attending the meetings have consistently decreased, with meetings becoming infrequent and only attended by a handful of members who are principals. In 2008, the organizers felt it was no longer big enough to be run as a subscription organization, and they held a conference to celebrate the organization's existence and consider its future.

A critical part of any profession is the preparation of those who will practice the profession in future years. According to Glass et al. (2001), the preparation of school superintendency has never been an important program in colleges and universities. According to the literature, women are actively preparing for leadership through their educational programs. Given that professional networks for women may be on the decline, colleges and universities should provide opportunities for aspiring women leaders to access and acquire social capital. In addition to providing the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to lead school districts, additional opportunities to gain access to mentoring, networking, and relationship building must be available. Colleges and universities should partner with school districts to provide professional development opportunities, conferences, and internships for women aspiring to high-level leadership.

### **Significance**

The need to increase the number of women in the superintendency is not just a matter of equity. It is also a matter of social justice. The numbers are clear; there is an inequity when it

comes to the representation of women in the nation's superintendency. Although researchers often mention statistics that show the numbers are increasing, it will take until the year 2035 for women to achieve parity in this important administrative position. Brunner and Grogan (2005) indicated a concern that little progress is being made in the number of women aspiring, applying, and assuming superintendency positions, in relation to the number of women enrolled in university educational administration. In addition, a 2003 study led by Brunner and Grogan found that 40% of women in central-office administration identified themselves as aspiring to be a superintendent. The evidence shows that women are preparing for the job but not being hired.

As women are not leading districts in larger numbers, I agree with Dana and Bourisaw (2006) when they state that social justice for females is lacking. The authors further stated that "the causes are rooted in cultural norms and values coupled with systemic overlays of policy and governance that are most difficult to change" (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006, p. 1). Tom Peters (2001) stated that American women possess leadership abilities that are particularly effective in today's organizations, yet their abilities remain undervalued and underutilized. Women's unique strengths include collaborative and transformational leadership, focus on curriculum and instruction, shared decision making, empowerment of the school community, and articulation of new visions that could change public school districts and ensure successful changes (Funk, 2004).

Peters (2001) stated that not using human resources is a social justice issue. Social justice for aspiring women leaders should include equity of opportunity, equity of access, and equity of treatment. The treatment of women based on personally held biases and prejudices is an injustice: "Reformers concerned with advancing equity and social justice in society have criticized the lack of correspondence between the gender and race, of those who teach and lead public schools, particularly those in the superintendency" (Bjork & Keedy, 2001, p. 406).

U.S. schools need the style of leadership that women can offer. A transformational leader is aware of the potential and needs of those who follow them (Northouse, 2015). Most leadership research has found that the transformational style is more suited to leading the modern organization and that female leaders are more transformational than male leaders, especially in providing support and encouragement to their employees (Eagly et al., 2007). The same study also indicated that the transformational style of women leaders includes the adaptation of a participative and collaborative style. Gilmour and Kinsella (2009) stated that the fundamental philosophies of social justice expressed by superintendents involved focusing on not just teaching and learning but also the needs of an individual child each day. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010) concurred and indicated that many women are motivated to transform the learning opportunities for those who have been least well served by current policies and practices. The importance of leadership that will address the individual needs of all students is not overstated.

Presently with the disparity of women leading our nation's schools, the nation risks not hearing the voices of women in decision making and policy that affect all our school districts (Mahitvanichcha & Rorrer, 2006). Although the importance women's voices in decision-making policy is critical, we need their physical presence leading our nation's school districts. Women superintendents can use their presence to influence and promote gender equity in educational administration. As there are more women in district superintendencies, the opportunity to be role models for the new generation of females also increases. Having a woman superintendent can inspire young girls to aspire to leadership positions (Holland, 2011). Both the voices and presence of women leaders are needed. Our school districts call for and deserve the representation of women as leaders with a mission to end social injustice and encourage a more equitable and diverse society.

## **Summary**

This chapter reviewed the literature pertaining to the history of women superintendents. I introduced the theme of social capital pertaining to women superintendents. Factors that led to perceived barriers to the superintendency for women were explored and specific barriers were discussed. The usage of social capital—specifically the use of mentoring, networking, and relationship building—were defined as ways to leverage social capital for women superintendents. I introduced feminist theory and social capital theory as the theoretical theories framing the study. I also introduced gender capital as an additional form of capital that women can use for career enhancement. This chapter concluded with an attention to social justice issues and the importance of equity in representation for women. The increased number of women superintendents and their input regarding policy changes and decision making is of paramount importance to the future of education.

### Chapter 3: Method

While over two thirds of the nation's teaching workforce is comprised of women, only 26.68% are employed as public-school superintendents (Tienken, 2021). It is not that women are uninterested in pursuing high-level leadership; research has indicated that they express their interest through preparation. They are preparing by getting advanced degrees, but the fact remains that males are five times more likely to ascend to the superintendency (Wallace, 2015).

The school superintendency is an important position in education. The absence of women in this male-dominated position means that their voices are not heard, and they are left out of policy issues that can affect the education of students. When it comes to leadership, social capital is seen as a valuable resource for women. Eagly et al. (1995) stated that social capital is more necessary to a leader's advancement than performing traditional tasks associated with management.

The present study examined how women superintendents leverage social capital in their ascent to the superintendency. The importance of understanding the role of social capital in the ascent of women in leadership is critical. Gender has a strong influence on social capital, and according to Eagly et al. (2007), "women have less of it and men excel at strategically building crucial professional relationships" (p. 144). Significant differences appear in the social networks and embedded resources between males and females. Lin (2000) stated that males have bigger networks and are affiliated with larger organizations since they occupy higher positions in hierarchical structures, whereas women are affiliated with smaller and less diverse networks.

The acquisition of social capital has been linked to the career advancement of women aspiring to the superintendency. Building a valuable network, although time consuming, can be valuable for women who aspire to leadership positions (McGee, 2010). Grole and Montgomery (1999) stated that for women to succeed in attaining administrative positions in education, some

mentoring must occur. Although there have been numerous studies on the advantages of mentors for women, the lack of women or role models in the superintendent position can be a barrier or obstacle for women aspiring to this high level of leadership. The disproportionate number of women in the superintendency could possibly be linked to the challenges they face. Brunner and Grogan (2007) noted that a lack of support and mentorship was the main reason that there are few women in the superintendency.

Within the next several years, there is potential for considerable turnover in superintendencies (Glass, 2000). These numerous vacancies and job opportunities must have a pool of highly qualified candidates to choose from, represented by both men and women. According to Knopik and Moerer (2014), the best leadership is found by choosing leaders from the largest pool of talent, and that includes women. Literature has cited numerous barriers that keep women out of leadership. Many of them are gender based, including stereotypical experiences and beliefs (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010). Hoyt and Murphy (2016) explained that chief among the barriers is a lack of fit between women's skills and those that are necessary for effective leadership.

While much is known about the gender-based barriers for women that are keeping them out of the superintendency, less is known about those conditions of opportunity or the accruing of social capital that allow women to ascend. Although research has made the connection between social capital and career enhancement using mentoring (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Howard et al., 2017), other interpersonal behaviors that allow women to accrue social capital such as relationship building, networking, and sponsorships need to be examined. The underrepresentation of women in the superintendency is significant, so it becomes vital to examine additional ways that women can use social capital to ensure career

advancement. Although the present study included the use of mentoring, it also examined additional ways that current women superintendents gain entryway into the position.

This study is especially relevant to aspiring women in administrator-preparation programs and educational doctoral programs since it can offer women important insights on ways to leverage social capital to gain access to high-level educational leadership, specifically the school superintendency. Wallace (2015) has stated that due to the continued underrepresentation of females in the male-dominated profession of public-school superintendent, there is need for further research in this area. The present study will add to the already existing knowledge.

Women superintendents and those aspiring to the position must be made keenly aware of various strategies that can be used to enhance social capital. They must also be given the opportunities to engage in programs that offer opportunities for engagement and accruing social capital. College and university leadership-preparation programs must be aware of new knowledge in the field and be able to provide appropriate and vital programs to aspiring women leaders that will not only provide the necessary knowledge but also the necessary experiences of building and accruing social capital through additional avenues.

This chapter describes the research methods I utilized to conduct my qualitative, hermeneutic, phenomenological study. Through the lenses of feminist theory and social capital theory, I focused on exploring and capturing the lived experiences of current women superintendents leading school districts on Long Island, New York.

### **The Research Problem**

Women are not equally represented in the ranks of the American public-school superintendency. Although the numbers tell a story about the inequity for women in leadership

positions, they do not tell the whole story. I examined how current superintendents were able to ascend to a top-level position despite the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency.

I examined the lived experiences of women superintendents as pertaining to their accruing of social capital. Their experiences with social capital resources such as mentoring, networking, and relationship building gave insight into the career path that allowed them to ascend despite the obstacles they faced. The participants in the study are current women superintendents. I believe that the most valuable insights come from those who experience the demands of the job. The study allowed women superintendents to share their voices and perspectives and speak honestly about both the barriers and opportunities that have advanced them to a high-level leadership position that is male dominated.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to examine the role that social capital has played in women's ascent into the superintendency. Drawing on feminist theory and social capital theory, I examined how social capital might have mitigated gender bias and stereotype threat in women superintendents' experiences, many of whom moved up to these high-level leadership positions despite facing barriers in a male-dominated field. The following research questions guide the study:

### **Research Questions**

1. How do superintendents describe ways in which social capital contributed to their ascent to the highest level of leadership in public education?
  - a. How, if at all, has social capital mitigated gender bias and stereotype threats for women in the superintendency?
  - b. What unique challenges do superintendents of color have?



2. How have relationship building, networking online sources of support, and mentoring assisted women superintendents in overcoming barriers and challenges?

## **Research Methods**

The following sections of the chapter discuss the procedures I used to conduct this dissertation study through a qualitative, phenomenological design. The individual components of my study are described, including the participants, methodology, and worldview.

## **Worldview**

The worldviews for my research design are both a social constructivist and a transformative view of the world. It is social constructivist in that I will “rely as much as possible on the participant’s views of the situations being studied” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). Using this narrative inquiry, I did not focus on one specific event but on an accumulation of experiences that have impacted the superintendent’s journey.

My study also connected with the transformative worldview. According to this worldview, Creswell and Creswell (2018) opined that studying the lives of diverse groups who are traditionally marginalized is of central importance to transformative research. Women leaders continue to experience oppression, as they are underrepresented in high-level leadership positions. This long-standing inequality is apparent in school district leaders across the state. My experiences and identity as a woman leader who has experienced these barriers have contributed to the connection that I feel toward this worldview. This study seeks to be transformative and add to the knowledge of social capital as a way for women to break those glass ceilings that can act as barriers to career enhancement. The objective is to find answers to my research questions by paying attention to the opinions of people who suffer from certain social barriers, and the focus will be on proposing solutions to the identified issues.

## **Research Paradigm**

The research questions of this study were answered using a qualitative, interpretive, hermeneutic, and phenomenological methodology. The intent of this qualitative research was to obtain possible understandings and interpretations of everyday phenomena, with an emphasis on getting a deeper understanding of the multiple ways things manifest in and throughout the world (Vagle, 2018). The phenomenological design comes primarily from the philosopher Edmund Husserl who focused on understanding phenomena as the way things appear in people's experiences and the meanings people contribute to those experiences (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). Heidegger further developed this philosophy by making the shift from descriptive to interpretive analysis. Whereas Husserl believed in suspending all judgment through the process of bracketing, Heidegger's phenomenology proposed a hermeneutic approach that valued the researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon. Unlike Husserl, Heidegger believed that there was no way that individuals could bracket their experiences since we are always in the world with others in the circumstance of existence with no way to separate ourselves from being in the world (Peoples, 2021).

My study used the hermeneutic, phenomenological approach to understand the women superintendents' human experience, often referred to as lived experience (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). The interpretive-oriented study captured participants' views best because it aims to make sense of their experiences. My research obtained possible understandings and various interpretations of phenomena of social capital, with an emphasis on gaining a deeper understanding of the multiple ways things manifest through being in the world. The study used a naturalistic design. A naturalistic study on leadership seeks to construct shared meaning collected from multiple perspectives and examine the real-world perspectives of the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Hermeneutic research phenomenologically focuses on the essence of something as it is described via their lived experiences (Peoples, 2021). My study was able understand the essence of a phenomenon of social capital from the point of view of the participants. The philosophy of phenomenology assumes that individual actors subjectively experience the world and that reality is not objective (Beaudry & Miller, 2016).

This hermeneutic, qualitative method captured the shared experiences and essence of the phenomenon of superintendents because it is interpretive and aims to make sense of their experiences while valuing the researcher's experience. In hermeneutic, phenomenological dissertations, the understanding is that biases cannot be set aside or bracketed. My goal was not to produce knowledge that would be generalizable to all superintendents, but instead to reach an in-depth, informed understanding of these women's experiences from their own understanding (Skrla, 2000).

My study followed the steps for a phenomenological methodology of the interpretive type, and this was evident in the data collection and data analysis. The approach was to understand the transcribed interviews with the purpose of understanding how women superintendents experienced social capital in their world. The data gathered from interviews revealed women superintendents' experiences with social capital, and the analysis led to the selection of generalized emergent themes. Throughout the data collection and analysis, I moved through the hermeneutic circle of investigation, attempting to make sense of the data by journaling before and during data analysis (Peoples, 2021). I attempted to create meaning in women superintendents' lived experiences throughout the entire process of data collection and data analysis.

## **Role of the Researcher**

A principle underpinning this study is my role as a retired leader in education, giving me a unique perspective and understanding of a superintendent's journey as both an insider and an outsider. In qualitative research, there are advantages to both positionalities. As a former principal, I was able to relate to their experiences and knowledge. Research has indicated that the superintendency's pathway takes a familiar route, from a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and then superintendent. Although my path did not reach the superintendency, I have taken this career pathway into leadership and have experienced many of the triumphs and challenges encountered when climbing up the career ladder. This intimate understanding of women's leadership in education and past experiences as a leader allowed me to feel connected with women leaders in my role as the researcher, but there is my outsider status since I am a retired administrator.

As an outsider, there are advantages. Fay (1996) stated that sometimes not being a member of the group can facilitate the knowledge of the group. Fay (1996) further stated that others external to the experience might be able to appreciate the wider perspectives, with its connections, patterns, and influences, than one internal to the experience. These outsider advantages were significant to my study. Although I understand that as a former principal, there were commonalities between myself and the women superintendents, my outsider status as a researcher allowed me to have the appropriate distance that allowed me to adequately understand the experiences and perspectives of the women superintendents who participated in the study.

A second outsider advantage may be my urban experience as an educational leader as opposed to a suburban experience. Again, the distance between these two demographic populations allowed me as a researcher the opportunity to be objective. My outsider status

supported my understanding of the wider perspective. As I further considered my role as a researcher, I reflected on the duality of the role. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) stated,

As researchers we can only ever occupy the space between. We may be closer to the insider position or closer to the outsider but because our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher (which includes having read much on the topic) we cannot fully occupy one or the other of these positions. (p. 61)

### **Sampling Process, Setting, and Participants**

The study participants consisted of nine women superintendents currently working on Long Island, New York. According to the most recent estimates, there are currently 129 public school districts on Long Island, and 38% are led by women. Although this percentage is above the national average number of women serving as superintendents, it still is an underrepresentation. Of the superintendents in the United States, African Americans accounted for 5.3% and Latinx account for 2.7% (Quilantan & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004). The challenges for women of color are even more significant than those facing women who identify as White, Latinx, and African American, barred not only by gender but also by their race (Quilantan & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004).

As the demographics of Long Island have shifted and expanded with more Latinx and Asians continuing to increase their share in the population (Long Island Index, 2021), the need to obtain a racially diverse sample of participants is important. Long Island is a densely populated island in the southeast part of the state of New York and part of the New York metropolitan area. Looking further at the gender breakdown of elected officials in statewide positions or who represent Long Island, 35% of women hold these positions. Since Long Island is a place with equal representation of both men and women, and the ratio of women in the superintendency is

higher than the national average, this situation might allow for considerable data concerning the role that social capital has played in the ascent of women to the superintendency.

## Participants

I identified 43 women currently working on Long Island as superintendents and used this list to identify prospective participants. An initial outreach through district email identified those superintendents who wished to participate in the proposed study. I also asked participants at the end of the interview to refer current women superintendents that they felt would be interested in taking part in the study. This purposeful snowball sampling resulted in participating superintendents giving me the contact information for women superintendents and several additional women agreeing to be part of the study.

**Table 1: Description of Participants**

<b>Superintendent Pseudonym</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b># of Years as Super</b>	<b>District Demographic</b>	<b>Focus Group</b>
Kara Walker	African American	17 years	Predominantly Black and Hispanic	Participated in focus group
Faith Ringgold	African American	3 years	Predominantly Black and Hispanic	Participated in focus group
Mary Cassatt	White	18 years	Predominantly White	
Louise Bourgeois	White	3 years	Predominantly White	
Georgia O'Keeffe	White	9 years	Predominantly Black and Hispanic	
Berthe Morisot	White	2 years	Intensely Segregated	Participated in focus group
Artemisia Gentileschi	White	6 years	Predominantly White	
Frida Kahlo	Latinx	9 years	Diverse	
Kiki Smith	White	3 years	Predominantly White	Participated in focus group

## **Data Collection**

I recruited nine participants through a purposeful snowball sampling. Six of the participants identified as White and three of the participants identified as women of color. After they expressed initial interest, interviews via Zoom were scheduled in March 2022 at times convenient for the participating superintendents. The first phase of data collection began March 8, 2022, and ended on March 31, 2022. Each interview ended with the request for them to participate in a focus group. Four superintendents participated in the focus group during May 2022 (See Table 1).

The semi-structured interviews were open-ended questions aligned with the research questions. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 90 minutes and followed Creswell and Creswell's (2018) sample interview protocol, which included basic information about the interview, an introduction, the interview content questions with probes, and closing instructions (see Appendix A).

The interview protocol consisted of three phases, with the first phase concentrated on building rapport and focused on the superintendents' background. The next phase focused on the use of social capital in gaining access through the techniques of networking, relationship building, and mentoring. Participants were also asked if other factors, besides social capital, played a role in their ascent. The third phase focused on their experiences with gender bias and stereotype threat. During the third and final phase of the interview, the participants were thanked, and final questions from the participants were addressed. During this phase, superintendents were invited to attend an optional focus group to further discuss the research questions and discuss emerging trends in the data. The researcher asked for opportunities to send follow-up emails for specified points to be clarified (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and organized for analysis. The analysis began by looking at all the data to get an overall understanding. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), this step of reviewing the data offers a general sense of the information and the opportunity to reflect on its overall meaning.

As outlined by Peoples (2021), the initial step for the data analysis was to read the individual interview transcript in its entirety to understand the participant's complete story. This step also consisted of deleting any information that was irrelevant or unnecessary. I then created preliminary units of meaning. Next, I broke down all the preliminary meaning units into final meaning units (or themes), which were informed by each participant's description. I then organized specifics and experiences thematically under the specific interview questions. The meanings of each participant's experience were highlighted thematically through direct quotes from the interviews. Next, I unified from a general description of all the participants' narratives. The final step of the analysis produced a general description. The aim was to discuss themes that were implicit in all or most of the participants' descriptions of their experiences and to unite the major phenomenological themes into a cohesive general description.

Since the study was hermeneutic phenomenology, I used the hermeneutic circle during the analysis by reflexive journaling to ensure a constant process of renewed understanding. To organize and manage the data, I relied on the data analysis software *Dedoose* since it has text capacity and additional features assisting with storage and coding. The role of the qualitative researcher in the phenomenological hermeneutic method calls for the researcher to attempt to understand how the participants make sense of their personal and social world as an integral part of the analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2016).



## **Validity and Reliability**

Trustworthiness and credibility are thought of as two types of validity, or two ways that the research can be accurate, true, or correct (Allred et al., 2017). The trustworthiness of a research inquiry refers to a combination of truth value, potential application, findings, and external judgments made about the consistency of the procedure (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The credibility of the study refers to the measure of agreement on the findings of an inquiry by the participants within the context of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Trustworthiness can be thought of as an external judgment of an inquiry, while credibility is an internal judgment (Allred et al., 2017). I ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of my study by triangulation of data, reflexivity, peer review, and member checking.

My triangulation methods included the use of both feminist and social capital theory to explain data, using both the interviews and focus groups to understand data, and asking all superintendents the same set of questions to provide a framework for developing common themes among the participants. To validate interview data, I used member checking (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2016). The importance of member checking in my study became critical, and a focus group of women participants were vital in providing additional insight into the data collected and the accuracy of the data. Emerging themes in the data were discussed and participants were given the opportunity to provide additional feedback and insight into the data. According to Beaudry and Miller (2016), member checks ask participants for feedback on the accuracy of the data.

I ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the research by cross-referencing and comparing data from within and across interviews and reaching out to other phenomenological researchers to critique the work (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). I was very specific with the questions to successfully address the research questions, since the interviews had to be completed during a

limited period of time. When the data are analyzed in terms of codes and themes, errors may occur due to time constraints. To ensure validity and reliability, I used my co-primary investigator and a member of my dissertation committee to review all codes and themes for accuracy. I also included them to check for drift in the coding to maintain consistency in the definition of the codes. The careful transcribing of the interviews, followed by member checks by the superintendents in the focus group, ensured the accuracy and transferability of the data.

With the use of phenomenological research, it is the researcher who reflects and interprets data. Personal bias was addressed to ensure the validity and reliability of the data. As a former administrator, I was aware of personal biases or interests that may affect data collection and analysis. According to Beaudry and Miller (2016), reflection is the process that enables a researcher to examine his or her role and the ongoing process of inquiry. Although a close personal connection with educational leadership could be positive for a researcher studying leaders in the field, past experiences may shape interpretations. To ensure validity, I utilized a reflective journal during the process of research, where I “made continuing entries about decisions concerning data collection and analysis, and reflect on any personal values, interests, and biases and consider how they may shape the interpretation of results” (Beaudry & Miller, 2016, p. 51).

### **Ethical Considerations**

To avoid any ethical issues, there was attention ethical issues prior to beginning and conducting a study; during data collection and analysis; and reporting, sharing, and storing data. Prior to conducting the study, my application was submitted to the Institutional Review Board and approved (see Appendix B). Once approved, the participants were informed about the general purpose of the study and signed consent forms agreeing to the provisions of the study. I communicated with the superintendents in clear, straightforward, and appropriate language. I

used language that is sensitive to labels. I reviewed the three guidelines for biased language in the APA publication manual before beginning the interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ethical concerns related to confidentiality were critical for this study. The superintendency is a very public position, so it is crucial to ensure confidentiality for the superintendent. I reported the findings of the data using pseudonyms for the interview participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Peoples, 2021). Also, I ensured confidentiality by omitting any identifying information.

As a researcher, I was reflexive when using a journal (Peoples, 2021) to gain insight and understanding of any biases that I may have. Reflective notes were used to record insights about what was learned during the interview (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). To ensure that participants were not led during the interview, I asked questions that were open ended for the participants to use their own words and phrases. I refrained from making judgments, adding additional comments, or participating in the interview, and I used the specific questions and probes that were designed (Beaudry & Miller, 2016). I was also sensitive and respectful of the superintendents' time.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) explicitly stated, "respect the research site and disrupt as little as possible" (p. 93). Therefore, I conducted interviews via Zoom or at the participants' office or home, at their convenience. I asked for permission to record the interviews on Zoom and transcribed all interviews through Rev.com. All transcribed interviews were then reviewed by the researcher for accuracy. All data were kept at my residence on my personal computer that is password protected. I paid close attention to the storage of data and will be keeping the data for five years. After that time, I will destroy the data to further ensure confidentiality.

## **Limitations**

The following limitations could affect my study. The focus was on women superintendents currently working on Long Island, New York, as opposed to studying women leaders across New York State. While this population may affect the transferability of this study, I provided sufficient information to the readers to make connections. According to Beaudry and Miller (2016), in qualitative research, it is up to the readers to make the connections. Although studying women superintendents across the state could give the study a broader scope and perspective, I mitigated this limitation by including superintendents from several school districts across Long Island that serve very different populations and communities.

In focusing on women, I certainly am not discounting the male ascent into this top educational position, but my study examined the ascent of women leaders who have less access to high-level leadership. Future studies can certainly examine the role of social capital for both male and female superintendents in educational leadership. Future studies can also include comparative studies between men and women leaders on the use of social capital.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the design and methods of the research. I explored the lived experiences of women school superintendents. The research method was inquiry based, with a naturalistic design, and framed in the constructivist worldview. This hermeneutic, phenomenological approach and the interpretive framework of social constructivism are complementary, since they both support the philosophical belief that realities are constructed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

To understand the experiences of women superintendents, I conducted my research using qualitative methods with a phenomenological design. The use of qualitative research is important because it provides the opportunity to listen and tell the story of those women who have had

firsthand experiences in the superintendency. Data gathered through interviews and focus groups were used to understand the barriers women faced as well as experience of social capital in the lives of women superintendents on Long Island. The techniques of networking, mentoring, and relationship building were specifically explored.

The study was driven by the fact that women are not equally represented in the ranks of the American public school superintendency. This inequality is significant in education, particularly to those women in the position or who aspire to be. There is a need to understand the superintendency from the perspective of women who are successfully accomplishing it (Skrla, 2000). The study gave current women superintendents the opportunity to share their voices and perspectives and can inform aspiring female leaders, educational leadership programs, and researchers in the field of educational leadership. The results of this study can help aspiring women leaders in educational leadership programs more fully understand how leveraging social capital is utilized to gain access to high-level leadership positions. Although the superintendency is still considered the most gender-stratified executive position in the United States (Skrla, 2000), the best hope for working to change the current situation in the public school superintendency lies in future women leaders and those who aspire to be.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

This chapter addresses the research questions that explore the issue of the disproportionately low number of women in superintendent positions. When race is factored into the equation, the number is even lower. Black superintendents account for a mere 5.3% of all superintendents and Latinx superintendents only make up about 2.7% (Quilantan & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004). Given the low number of women serving in this leadership position, I aimed to give voice to nine women superintendents on Long Island, including six White women and three women of color, to understand their career pathways and the potential constraints they faced and how they were able to mediate them effectively.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. The first purpose is to uncover the obstacles women faced in advancing to the superintendent's position. The second purpose was to investigate the strategies women need to strengthen their opportunities for the role of superintendents. The first area of focus was to clarify the gender-based barriers women experienced. The second was to use the lens of social capital to examine the career supports they used to ascend to the role of superintendent. Through the lens of social capital, mentoring, networking, and relationship building were examined to gain an understanding of their leadership journey. The findings of personal preparedness were also discovered as an area other than social capital that provided career support. By examining the barriers and how women superintendents used social capital and professional preparedness to mediate them effectively, the goal of this dissertation was to inspire more women to the superintendent position and close the opportunity gender and racial gap that exists in educational leadership.

### **Research Questions and Summary of Findings**

A feminist framework was used to examine the obstacles faced by women in attaining high-level leadership. Feminist theory is founded on the observation that gender inequality

shapes all aspects of social and economic life (Bell et al., 2019). Social capital was utilized as the lens to examine the career supports that they perceived as influential in their pathway to the superintendency. Social capital is the gaining of valuable relationships that can lead to success (Bourdieu, 1986). It is important to note that all the participating superintendents are currently leading school districts. As a researcher, I felt it was important to speak to women in the position to really understand this phenomenon. My findings answered the following research questions:

1. How do women superintendents describe how social capital contributed to their ascent to the highest level of leadership in public education?

2. How, if at all, has social capital mitigated gender bias and stereotype threat for women in the superintendency?

3. What unique obstacles do superintendents of color face in their ascent?

4. How has relationship building, networking, and mentoring assisted women superintendents in overcoming obstacles?

The main finding of the study was that the acquisition of social capital was critical in the ascension of the women superintendents. Using the lens of social capital theory to examine how individuals can use relationships and networks to better position themselves for career advancement (Lin, 2000), the interview data showed that female superintendents successfully drew upon social capital during their career pathway to gain access to the superintendency. As indicated in the literature and in my study, mentoring, networking, and relationship building were perceived by participating female superintendents as having served as career supports. Although mentoring was considered most important in the ascension of superintendents, the women in the study were more apt to have ‘highly influential mentors’ who supported their ascension to the superintendency.

Another finding in the study was that women superintendents in my sample had experienced gender bias, discrimination, and sex-role stereotyping as obstacles in their ascension to the superintendency. Although studies have indicated that barriers have changed, the literature offers an abundance of empirical evidence that supports gender bias as a condition that continues to provide obstacles that aim to keep women out of the superintendency.

Last but not least, I found that participants embodied and activated preparedness or “what they knew” in terms of experience, skills, and knowledge. These additional professional capacities were critical in their ascension to leadership and were a second theme discovered in the data. In addition, positive psychological capital became significant in the journeys of women of color who participated in the study. Their responses to interview questions embodied the additional capacity of resilience, which has been linked to positive psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2004). Therefore, it became important to understand the intersection of race and gender in discrimination regarding women leaders of color. Gaining access to the superintendency becomes more difficult when adding the intersection of gender and race, and mediating the obstacles and gaining access can depend on additional positive psychological capital these women of color possess.

### **Chapter Overview**

This chapter is divided into two parts. Part 1 provides a vignette of each female superintendent, which familiarizes the reader with the women in the study and includes my perceptions of what made them unique as leaders. This draws from an analysis of the introductory questions in the research study: How would you describe your experience in your journey to the superintendency?

Although the pathways of the nine participants offered commonalities, they all had multiple distinctions that made their journeys to the superintendency unique. Therefore, it was



important to provide essential and additional insights to provide important additional insights through their vignettes before highlighting several themes that developed from an analysis of their career pathways. Part 2 describes the prominent themes and findings discovered. Last, I summarize the chapter based on the findings.

### **Part 1: Participants**

The following section describes how each of the nine superintendents was obtained and presents a vignette, followed by a table describing demographics relevant to this study. The participants in this study are female superintendents on Long Island. There are currently 129 school districts within Long Island, and they are broken down as follows: Nassau County has 57 superintendents, Western Suffolk County has 19, and Eastern Suffolk County has 53. Of the 129 districts, 47 (or 36%) are female superintendents leading Nassau and Suffolk school districts (Ike et al., 2020).

### **Data Collection**

As described in Chapter 3, the participants and I met on Zoom, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, for an interview that ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. During each interview, I completed field notes based on the research protocol and research questions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Rev.com. I then printed and read each transcript in its entirety to account for accuracy.

Data collection began in the form of interviews that occurred in March 2022. Before conducting interviews with the actual participants, I conducted a practice interview with a superintendent who met the criterion established but was not chosen for the study since the superintendent currently works for the New York City Board of Education. All interviews were confidential. Twenty initial outreach letters through district email were sent, and 12 female

superintendents leading a district for at least one year replied that they were interested in participating in the study.

Of the 12 superintendents who initially agreed, nine interviews were scheduled and completed using a semi-structured, open-ended research protocol to obtain a broad range of perspectives. This approach allowed the interviewer to “maintain maximum flexibility to be able to pursue information in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on what emerges from talking to one or more individuals in the setting” (Patton, 1990, p. 281). It also ensured I obtained the perceptions of superintendents regarding the factors identified in the literature as both barriers that they faced as well as opportunities that supported their ascent. Data collection ended when I reached data saturation and had multiple perspectives on the research topic. The women represented a range of geographical areas on Long Island and had varying years of experience as superintendents. The nine superintendents represented three racial groups: African American, Latina, and White.

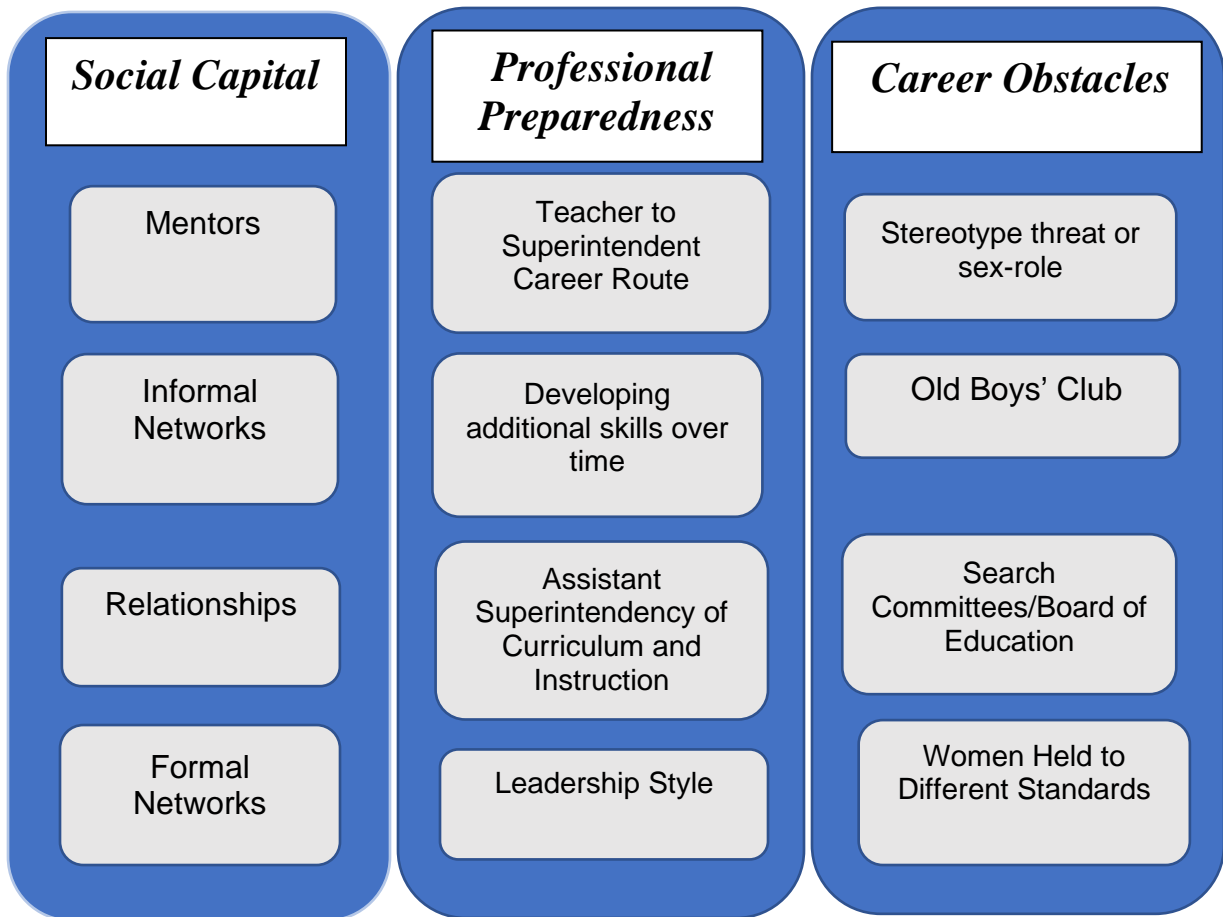
For member checking during the final stage of the interview process, I asked superintendents to participate in a voluntary focus group, and four women were able to participate in May 2022. The focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed. During the group discussion, emerging themes in the data were discussed and women had the opportunity to provide feedback and add additional feedback concerning the themes.

### **Development of Codes**

In this section, I provide a graphic representation in Figure 1, followed by an explanation of how I developed codes into themes derived from the interviews. In the analysis, common codes were discovered individually and across all participants, which informed the 3 major themes and 12 subthemes derived from the data. I analyzed each participant individually and then followed by analyzing the participants as a group to discover cross-cutting codes. The main

themes arose by combining the codes from individual participants and the group. Three themes informed the findings of this study: Social capital career supports, Professional preparedness, and Career obstacles.

**Figure 1: Codes to Themes**



The first theme was about social capital and career support. I wanted to hear from the participants if and how social capital played a role in their ascension to the superintendent's position. Specifically, mentors, informal and formal networks, and relationships were important in their journey to the position. The codes came together to develop the first theme.

The second theme was professional preparedness in the women's ascension to the superintendency. I wanted to know if any other reasons besides social capital helped them on their way to the superintendency. All superintendents spoke about the common sub-themes:

teacher to superintendent route, developing skills over time, expertise in curriculum and instruction, and their leadership style. These codes came together to paint a picture of professional preparedness, the second theme in the study.

The third theme was obstacles to the superintendency. I wanted to know how gender bias and discrimination served as obstacles when women were aspiring to the superintendency. The common codes were stereotype threat or sex-role stereotyping, old boys' club, search committees/boards of education, and women being held to different standards; these came together to develop the third theme. Also examined were the additional obstacles for women of color who participated in the study.

The next section provides vignettes of the nine participants, including a quote for each superintendent. Although it became difficult to choose one quote, the selected one highlights their unique perspective on the ascent to the superintendency. The women's pathways and experiences shared common themes, but their uniqueness as leaders became apparent and significant to the study's findings. Pseudonyms were used for each of the superintendents to protect their identity. Again, because I found it difficult to select a common name that might be fitting for each of these leaders, I decided to use the name of women artists who, like the participants in my study, have also been trailblazers in a male-dominated world.

### **The Superintendents**

The participants in the study consisted of nine women superintendents from school districts on Long Island. The women represented demographically diverse districts; however, the district demographics are not presented in this study to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. The National Association of School Superintendents provided a list of female superintendents, which shows that women make up 36% of the superintendents on Long Island.

## **Superintendent Kara Walker**

*“I’ve done it all.”*

Superintendent Walker is a woman of color with a 40-year career in education and has been a superintendent for 17 years. She is currently in the second year of her third superintendency. Her pathway began as a high school mathematics and physics teacher in both private and public schools. When asked about her pathway into leadership, she stated, “I had a very traditional route from teacher to chair to building leader to district leader.” Her positions included assistant principal, instructor, supervisor, director of science, director of the curriculum, assistant to the deputy superintendent, and then superintendent.

Walker added some critical insights during the interview concerning increasing the number of women in the superintendency. She stated, “We need to build and improve the pipeline.” I understood this to mean that we must pay attention to the superintendency and those who will serve in the role in the future. As a senior leader, Superintendent Walker continues to advocate for women, particularly women of color in obtaining leadership positions. She values the relationships that she has developed in her extensive career, including those with current women superintendents, those who aspire to be, and those that hire them.

Superintendent Walker has some advice for aspiring superintendents. She stated that often, aspiring women leaders’ strength lies in curriculum and instruction, but there is another critical piece, or an additional skill set that is necessary for success. She explained, “Do the homework about negotiations and finance,” and added, “You can’t rely on someone else to do that.” She also mentioned the importance of networking and critical friends. She described those critical friends as people who share visions, intentions, and purpose. Walker explained that a critical friend’s role is to provide superintendents with the additional strength to succeed and

thrive in leadership. She reflected, “Without that, you are not going anywhere; you cannot be successful.”

### **Superintendent Faith Ringgold**

*“You need to have people skills.”*

Superintendent Ringgold is a woman of color who has been a superintendent for two years. She shared that she followed “the natural order of progression to the superintendency.” She began her journey as a teacher, assistant principal, and then building principal of an elementary school. An incoming superintendent asked her to serve as his assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction in the school district where she worked. When he retired, the school board appointed her to serve in the school district superintendent’s position.

During her interview, Ringgold explained that she always needs to contribute in some way, and as a Black woman, she shared she knew that she would have to work twice as hard as any man in her position. When asked about specific skills that a superintendent needs, she stated, “You need to have people skills. Getting along with people is key, and many people that you will meet can serve as your mentors.” When asked what prompted her to go on this journey, she spoke about what she wanted for her district,

I wanted to change the image of my district, wanted the scores to go up, and help as many kids as possible. I wanted to re-imagine this district as a more positive one. It is a great place, people care and go beyond, and everyone should know that.

When asked about advice she would give aspiring superintendents, she recommended that aspiring women pursue the highest degree they are able to obtain and afford and then seek out and apply for the positions. She also emphasized the importance of making connections, networking, and taking advantage of opportunities when they present themselves, including workshops and conferences on the local and state level.

## **Superintendent Georgia O’Keeffe**

*“I think it was possible when I held one position to have some opportunity to be involved in another.”*

Superintendent O’Keeffe has been in the top leadership position for nine years. O’Keeffe started her administrative career as dean of students in a large middle school, then moved to high school. She then became assistant director of special education and then the English language arts and reading coordinator. She was a grants administrator, started the first Pre-K program in her district, was a director of special education in another district, and then the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. After five years, she became deputy superintendent and then superintendent.

Superintendent O’Keeffe shared during the interview that there is a unique aspect to how she performs her job and handles it. She explained that she never lost sight of the student’s needs and as a superintendent has meetings with them on a regular basis. She also shared that students are very insightful and give her critical feedback that she “must continually process and understand. Whether it is elementary or high school students, I think that the relationship I have with my students is my uniqueness.” She further explained, “The uniqueness of the job is very personal, and I think that’s an important piece not to ever let go.”

Her advice for aspiring women leaders was to get involved in all opportunities in the positions and learn everything possible. O’Keeffe commented, “I learned to understand all areas of supervision, curriculum and instruction, personnel, and the business office as well as special education.” Superintendent O’Keeffe said that her experiences were vast enough and she was able to use all the knowledge and experience she accumulated to understand the running of a district. She advised, “Do your networking, but do it with knowledge; knowing the district and understanding the district is far more important than anything else.”

## **Superintendent Artemisia Gentileschi**

*“The more information I acquired, the more knowledge I acquired, the more people I listened to and met.”*

Superintendent Gentileschi has been a district leader for 6 years and has 29 years in the educational system. Her journey into the superintendency began with her career as a high school teacher. She was a reading teacher and a social studies teacher. She also ran a high school alternative and summer school programs. She has been a staff developer in charge of professional development, ran a college administrative cohort, and was an adjunct professor teaching an introductory course in educational leadership. She served as the interim superintendent for curriculum and instruction, assistant superintendent for personnel, and director of humanities. In her words, “I wore a lot of hats.” Superintendent Gentileschi was an assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction when she was selected for the superintendent position, which she described as like the former superintendent’s style in which “relationships and people are the biggest assets in an organization.”

Superintendent Gentileschi shared that she lives by the words she tells her teachers and central office staff: “We are here to provide one service, and that service is education. If we are not providing an education that you feel would be good enough for your own children, then you are clearly in the wrong business.” She further explained that the service for the community has increased in importance over the past decade, “It is about academics, social-emotional partnerships with families, mental health, and wellness; and if you are not growing with what we are providing, then you need to change careers.”

Her advice for aspiring women superintendents is to have confidence in themselves. She added that if they put in the time, the work, and the studies, they should be confident that they “know more than most people out there.” She is an avid believer that if they prepare themselves



professionally and with the appropriate experiences, background, and education, then they can be successful in that position. Superintendent Gentileschi added that in any position, it is important to take advantage of opportunities that come up. She shared that her knowledge base always expanded outside her job responsibilities. Superintendent Gentileschi reflected, “The more information I acquired, the more knowledge I acquired, the more people I listened to and met.”

### **Superintendent Frida Kahlo**

*“It was important to me that I learn all that I could.”*

Superintendent Kahlo has been a superintendent for 9 years and in the field of education for 44 years. She began her career as a special education teacher. Her career pathway led her from the assistant principal to the principal position in her school where she assisted the principal with administrative duties. She then was appointed to the position of principal in another district. After two years, she was appointed as principal in another district, followed by a position in the central office titled the director of pupil personnel services. After five years, she went to an elementary school district where she was an assistant superintendent for pupil personnel services. The following year, she moved to another assistant superintendent position where special education was a significant part of her responsibilities. She stayed in that position for six years and then was appointed superintendent in that district.

Superintendent Kahlo commented that she took the traditional pathway that many women take into this top-level position. She stated, “I have done every job and climbed my way up.” She stated that women aspiring to leadership should be personable and genuine. She also stressed the importance of aspiring leaders being involved in both local and state networks where women support one another. Her very first mentor, a female principal, told her that it was her job to identify future leaders, encourage, and support them, and she has lived by this practice as a

female superintendent. Superintendent Kahlo reflected, “I think if she had not done that for me, I might not take this path. I will continue to support aspiring women leaders.”

Her advice for aspiring women is that women must work twice as much as any man and not give up. She stated further, “If it is something that you aspire to, you just move your way up there and apply and then try to get as much feedback as you can...you must be prepared in every aspect of the superintendency.”

### **Superintendent Mary Cassatt**

*“To be your best self and be in a position where you could make and effect the most change...with the goal of students and student’s success.”*

Superintendent Cassatt has been a superintendent for 18 years. Cassatt began her career in education as a speech pathologist and moved very quickly into administration. She took a position as a full-time administrative intern, which she spoke of as a wonderful opportunity. After two years, she became the district director of special education. Her journey continued when she moved into an assistant principal position in another district and then an elementary principal position in a different district. She felt it was there that she would remain because she “loved being a principal so very much.” Superintendent Cassatt’s journey continued when she was encouraged to apply for the position of assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in another district. It was in that position that she had her “hands in everything” and became superintendent of that district for nine years. She then moved over to a larger district and is presently in her ninth year as the superintendent there.

Superintendent Cassatt attributes her role models and mentors as critical in her journey to the superintendency. She spoke of a male superintendent who was a wonderful mentor and explained how she was encouraged by him to apply to become a superintendent. She also had an internal drive “to be my best self and be in a position where I could make and effect the most

change with the goal of students and students' success." Cassatt attributed her success to become very well versed in many aspects of school business as well as curriculum and instruction. She emphasized the importance of networking and started early on with affiliation in both local and state networks.

Superintendent Cassatt's advice for aspiring superintendents was that they should know they can do it. She shared, "I believe that the organizations that prepare superintendents are doing a decent job, and I think it is a matter of getting women to be comfortable taking the next step." She added, "You also must be able to network, and I worry about those that are hesitant to do that...the personal connection is vital."

### **Superintendent Louise Bourgeois**

*"You need to speak about children being in classrooms."*

Superintendent Bourgeois has been superintendent in her current district for nine months. Previously, she was superintendent in a different district for three years. She started her career as a teacher and spent many summers working on curriculum and instruction for the school district. After completing her administrative courses, she became an assistant principal and then a principal in an elementary school in a different district. After a year, she was appointed to an assistant superintendent's role and oversaw 12 elementary schools. She then moved to an assistant superintendent position that included both elementary and secondary students. She stayed 10 years in this position as an assistant superintendent. During this time, she had the opportunity to lead the district during the superintendent's absence and served as interim superintendent. Her journey continued when she became a superintendent in a smaller district. After three years, she moved to a different district as superintendent and has been in her current district for nine months.

Superintendent Bourgeois shared that a critical part of the superintendent's journey is to find your niche and find like-minded people with a growth mindset who "move your needle." She shared, "You have to find that spot where you are the most comfortable." She also emphasized the importance of relationships with colleagues.

Her advice to aspiring women is that women who want to take on this role must show progression. Superintendent Bourgeois reflected that women must put in a great deal of time in district office positions and prove themselves for a longer time than men. She also believes it would be hard to get a superintendency position without being involved in local and state organizations.

### **Superintendent Kiki Smith**

*"The more you are involved in, I think the better it is."*

Superintendent Smith is completing the third year of her superintendency. She has been in the same district for 17 years. She shared that she has always attended conferences and believes in the importance of "general networking." Superintendent Smith began her career as a special education teacher. After she completed her degree in administration, she began her first administrative position as a teacher coordinator in a high school. She then moved to a high school principal position, followed by eight years as an elementary principal, and then moved to the district level as the assistant superintendent, the deputy superintendent, and then the superintendent.

Superintendent Smith shared some insights concerning increasing the number of women in the superintendency. She feels that she was never given any less opportunity in her preparation programs but believes strongly about the need to do a better job of exposing young children to every opportunity and letting them know they can be anything they want to be. She added that she believes we have come a long way, but we must do more work for our female students,

which she said must start earlier. She stated, “We just need to change some of the cultural messages we give our young women.”

Superintendent Smith’s advice to aspiring women is to have thick skin because of the constant criticism. She shared that she believes the opportunities for women are there. She also believes in the importance of attending conferences, general networking, and preparing for the position. Superintendent Smith explained that she believes that every superintendent “has their own journey” and that she has been fortunate to have supervisors and mentors who liked her and encouraged her to advance to higher leadership positions. She added that she has always had strong mentors (both males and females), strong working relationships (both males and females), and has always “been super lucky to have people take me under their wings.”

### **Superintendent Berthe Morisot**

*“To be a superintendent, you have to be very sure, strong, and decisive.”*

Superintendent Morisot has been a superintendent for two years. She started her career as a teacher. She then went into an administrative role as a staff developer, followed by an appointment as director of curriculum and technology at the district level. Superintendent Morisot then moved to another district to serve as an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, then as district superintendent. Superintendent Morisot spoke about her pathway as different from other more traditional paths, “I was not a principal. I was an administrator, then a director. I went right to the central office.”

When asked why she thinks women are underrepresented in the superintendency, she replied, “I think it has a lot to do with the sacrifice you have to make to be a superintendent and the time that you must give up from your own life, which if you do have a family, it is a lot.”

Superintendent Morisot also spoke about the lack of security in the position. She stated, “In New

York, you get a three-year contract, but you can lose your job at any time. I think women are less inclined to put themselves in that high-risk situation.”

When asked about one vital thing that led her to the superintendency, Superintendent Morisot stated that she has a long-standing good reputation with other administrators. She explained that over the past 20 years, her critical network has been based on the connections she made with central office administrators. She stated further, “So when there were openings, somebody would think of me or recommend my name to someone else.”

Her advice for aspiring superintendents is to network with female leaders. She shared that The New York State Council of School Superintendent’s Women’s Initiative offers support to aspiring women leaders. They identify women in education who have leadership potential and help those that aspire to leadership roles. She also shared that women who are currently in these positions need to share more information and opportunities with aspiring female superintendents. She added, “It’s not a competition; we can all be women superintendents.”

## **Part 2: Research Themes**

This section discusses the following three themes: Social capital and career support, Professional preparation, and Career obstacles. These themes are developed and described using the data from the participant interviews. As shown in Figure 1, each theme is broken down by subthemes that assisted with theme development. At the conclusion of the section, Chapter 4 is summarized and the final chapter of the dissertation is introduced.

### **Social Capital and Career Support**

All the practicing superintendents acknowledged that career support in terms of mentors, formal and informal networking, and personal relationships were influential in their leadership journey. Many researchers have indicated a relationship between these forms of social capital and the career enhancement of women. This understanding of social capital is consistent with

Early et al. (2007), who have suggested that women can create pathways and mediate barriers and obstacles to leadership positions by building social capital. The superintendents' vignettes and responses to the questions concerning career support indicated they used connections to build relationships, had multiple mentors, and were involved in both formal and informal networking. All the female participants in the study reported that influential mentors played a significant role in their ascension into the superintendency.

## **Mentors**

A mentor is described as one who advises, trains, directs, protects, sponsors, guides, and leads another individual or individuals (Brunner, 2000). All the women spoke of the importance of relationships in their careers and many women had influential as well as multiple mentors through their journey. They all explained that the relationships with formal mentors and informal role models were a part of their career journey and success. Several women superintendents reported that their mentors were influential as they embarked on their career journey by providing them with additional opportunities, resources, and networks. For the participants in my study, additional terms are used to describe their mentors, including cheerleaders, as in the case of Superintendent Gentileschi.

Superintendent Gentileschi talked about the mentors in her journey when asked about opportunities supporting her career. She stated, "That's human nature. Everyone needs that cheerleader. Everyone needs that person who thinks so highly of them and gives them motivation and persistence to succeed." Other female superintendents who participated in the study echoed that the role of a mentor is one who thinks highly of them and supports their career aspirations.

Superintendent Smith shared,

I have always had strong mentors, both male and female. I have always been super lucky to have people take me under their wing. I worked well with males. I have no problem

having male relationships. I have also had some strong female relationships, but I do not think that was based on gender. It was just the people that I met along the way.

As noted in the above quote, mentors can be those who provide the necessary career support for women aspiring to leadership. In the case of Superintendent Smith, I took her phrase “take me under her wing” to mean the persons she met in her career journey who supported, guided, and encouraged her throughout her career. Superintendent Smith also emphasized that the mentors in her career included both men and women. She further reported that the relationship of mentorship for her was not based on gender.

Superintendent O’Keeffe also spoke about how “fortunate” she was to have multiple mentors in her journey to the superintendency. She stated,

I have to say I was very fortunate. I have had several mentors along the way, several people who have guided me and have even encouraged me in my career and have taught me a lot. I have gained a lot that has allowed me to strengthen my own skills.

Superintendent O’Keeffe also spoke about the positive influence of her mentors in her career journey who have guided her, adding that they also allowed her to strengthen her skills as an aspiring leader. The quote from Superintendent O’Keeffe points to the relationship of social capital theory to career advancement for women. The mentors in her journey were also perceived as influential, acting as a resource of social capital, and eventually supporting her in obtaining a top leadership position.

Similarly, Superintendent Kahlo spoke about several mentors in her career. The first was a principal who encouraged her to go into administration and then served as her mentor. She stated,

Well, I think I have had three very strong mentors in my career. The first was the principal, who encouraged me to go into administration. I kept in touch with her as a



friend and colleague, and she continued to support my career and helped me. She would reach out when she heard of positions and would recommend me to hire committees. As you know, opening doors is so difficult, and getting an interview where you have an opportunity to sell yourself can be challenging. So, she would call me up and inform me about positions and encourage me to apply.

Superintendent Kahlo, similar to Superintendent O’Keeffe, spoke about having multiple mentors during her career who were also influential. While she was a teacher, her principal served as one of her three mentors. As her mentor, she encouraged her to go into administration and recommended her for positions she may not have pursued on her own. Recommending her for positions gave her opportunities for professional exposure, leading to career advancement.

Superintendent Walker spoke about her superintendent who served as her influential mentor:

I worked for the superintendent as the chair of science for the district. I worked for the superintendent who saw something beyond what I saw. I never wanted to become an administrator. I was a chair, but back in the day, chairs were not administrators. They were part of the teaching unit. I was very happy being a chair, but he had a vision of me as an administrator and eventually becoming a superintendent that I did not have. He would put me on a committee and call me to do presentations to the school board.

Superintendent Walker also spoke of the significance of the professional exposure acting as social capital that she received from her superintendent mentor. She spoke of the invaluable exposure she received by serving on committees and doing presentations. The importance of having a mentor as one who is more experienced and an expert in the field is also well noted. Having an influential mentor can be extremely supportive for a woman aspiring to the superintendency since social capital acts as a critical resource for career advancement.

Superintendent Cassatt spoke about the role of influential mentors during her journey. When asked if mentors were influential during her career ascension, she spoke about her experience:

No question about it. I had a male superintendent who believed in me. I knew I could accomplish what I set my mind to, but he was the one who said I was ready to be an assistant superintendent. We are friends to this day. As I went through my journey, it became very important for me to establish a core group of friends who were colleagues. We became our own little professional network of support; we were colleagues, but we were also friends.

Superintendent Cassatt also spoke to having an influential mentor who believed in her during her leadership journey and provided social capital as a resource. Her mentor, like Superintendent Walker's mentor, was her superintendent. Both superintendents had mentors who were influential or in a position of power to support their career aspirations. Both superintendents also discussed how they developed supportive networks, which allowed them to acquire additional social capital.

Superintendent Ringgold also spoke about the superintendent mentor. She shared that one of her mentors was the male superintendent in her building when she was principal. She shared that whenever he needed something, she was there to help. Superintendent Ringgold explained that a strong bond was eventually developed based on trust and mutual respect.

Superintendent Kahlo spoke about mentors also acting as role models:

I did have a strong mentor in a specific district and a strong mentor when I was in a different district. So, both were my superiors that I reported to, and they were both very supportive of me. I learned so much from both, in terms of their roles. I was in a large school district, and we had 10 schools, so there were a lot of administrators in the district that I interacted with. I think I learned a lot of wonderful practices and skills, and I also

learned how I did not want to be a leader. I always found negative role models to be powerful for me, just as much as positive role models are.

Similarly, Superintendent Bourgeois spoke about her mentors serving as role models:

I had two mentors. I was in a position where I was working very closely with two superintendents in two districts with very different leadership styles. I really feel I was able to take the best practices from each of them—what worked well and what mistakes were made along the way. One superintendent was very collaborative, and she included me in a lot of the decision-making. She included her whole team and so she really built a strong team.

As noted in the above quote, Superintendent Bourgeois also had an influential mentor in her career journey who included her in her decision making. Her mentor also acted as a role model for exemplary leadership practices. Superintendent Bourgeois' quote points to the social capital theory of the importance of building professional relationships for career enhancement. These professional relationships included those that acted as role models for the superintendents. As explained by both Superintendent Kahlo and Superintendent Ringgold, role models can be important for two reasons. Positive role models serve to guide and inspire them during their careers, while an anti-role model can show what leadership strategies to not emulate.

Researchers have also suggested that informal mentorships can be just as valuable for personal and professional growth (Gorman et al., 2010). Although the participants in the study spoke about the influence of their mentors, their mentors acted in more than one role, including role models. Mentors also often grew into relationships that were often considered friendships. The mentorships for many of the women proved to be influential since many times they were in positions of power. Mentors often became part of what several of the women in the study referred to as their informal network.

## **Informal Networks**

It is to a woman's professional advantage to develop and maintain relationships with peers and others with more experience to assist them in their work and career (Ferret & Dougherty, 2004). All superintendents in this study participated in informal networks, spoke about them extensively, and found support from them that they believed opened doors for career advancement. Munoz et al. (2014) noted that the power of informal networks to empower women is significant. Superintendent Bourgeois shared her ideas on the value of professional relationships:

Professional relationships are important, and you need a group of people to lean on. I think that is probably one of the elements that make people successful or not. It is vital to have a group of people you know, who share ideas, and when you have a challenge, to call upon. I think those relationships are essential. I think most superintendents take advantage of relationships. There are a few that kind of just do their own thing and are comfortable doing that, but I would say, for the most part, everybody really feels like those relationships are important and those connections are critical.

As noted in the above quote, Superintendent Bourgeois understood the informal network as a core group of professional people who share the same ideas and whom she was able to collaborate with professionally. Superintendent Bourgeois' quote points to the acquisition of social capital in the form of significant professional relationships that supported her career. The social capital developed through this type of networking allowed her the opportunity to develop strong ties and bonds and acquire resources that positively impacted her career journey.

Superintendent Cassatt also talked about an informal network as a core group of friends:

As I went through my journey, it became very important for me to establish a core group of friends who were colleagues. We became our own little network of support, and we

were colleagues, but we were also friends. Having that social interaction with them was crucial and special. It is not to say I was not friendly with my male colleagues, but certainly much more intimately involved with my female colleagues because we were also friends.

Superintendent Cassatt also understood informal networks as a group of colleagues who became friends. Like Superintendent Bourgeois, the group allowed her to develop strong ties and bonds that were supportive of her career.

When asked about the influence of networking, Superintendent Gentileschi spoke about the importance of it in her role as a school superintendent:

Networking is very important because those are your cheerleaders. Those are the people behind you when you are a superintendent, and when you need to talk to someone, those are the people you call. You call colleagues who are superintendents, you call mentors in your past, and those are the ones that provide support.

Superintendent Bourgeois offered a vivid picture of her relationships as a new superintendent:

I have very close relationships with the superintendents in the surrounding districts.

Three of us are brand new. We talk just about every day. And there is a superintendent who is retiring this year and because she started when it was a lot tougher to be a female and she has taken us all under her wing. During Covid-19, we were talking every couple of days, and she really looked out for us.

## **Relationships**

All superintendents spoke to the relationships that were supportive of their career growth and advancement. All felt that networking was important, but many superintendents spoke to the stronger, closer relationships that were developed and “the friendships” that had a positive impact on their careers. In the words of one superintendent, “There is networking, and then there

are people who you isolate as your critical friends.” Many of the women in the study echoed this sentiment and continued to use the word “friendships” when speaking about their relationships.

Superintendent O’Keeffe commented on relationships during her pathway to the superintendency:

I think my relationships with other administrators and working together to tackle obstacles that we encountered have been most beneficial. I think troubleshooting as a team brought knowledge and experience together to come up with solutions for the entire group, not just an individual. I had mentors along the way that became friends. They often helped me to see things from different perspectives.

Superintendent Kahlo spoke to a mixture of mentors, professional relationships, and strong female relationships being influential in her journey:

I would say that I have had some strong female colleagues in every district I have worked in. I have strong friendships with other females inside the organization or outside my organization, who served in a similar role. I would not say it was a whole group of people; I would say it was key people, one or two people, in each of the roles that I have served in, who became my confidants who understood and experienced the same challenges that I have faced.

When probed further about her important relationships as a support to her career as superintendency, she stated,

I think it was a mixture of having mentors and professional relationships who I learned and collaborated with. There were also role models that were friendships. I had strong friendships with a couple of women in every district I worked in. I also had confidants. You really do need a confidant, somebody who works in the field. I sought out other people that I would seek out for advice, and they also understood the culture.

Superintendent Ringgold spoke about how building relationships leads to networking:

You must build relationships with your colleagues and others; that is how you start networking. That is how you find out about different avenues you can take and how you can help others. Networking is so much easier today than it is other than because of the internet.

Superintendent Walker spoke about the intersection of critical friends and how they can differ from networks:

There is networking, and then there are people who you isolate as your critical friends. I have critical friends. I have a group of friends who share everything. You must have people who you can trust and who you feel confident are acting in your best interests. You must have those people who share your vision, intention, your purpose. I call them VIPs. Networking is sort of a step away from that. Without critical friends, you cannot be successful.

All the participants in the study spoke to the importance of informal networks as a force that acted to support their ascension to the superintendency. These informal networks served as significant relationships that allowed the women to gain valuable social capital. They often included close relationships with colleagues who became friends. Another support women participants in the study spoke about was the support of formal networks.

### **Formal Networks**

Formal networks are gatherings of like-minded professionals meeting under the authority of an organization. State organizations and local organizations can act as networking opportunities for superintendents. They provide workshops and conferences to help administrators with their current roles and to prepare them to move up in their administrative position. The professional conferences and superintendent symposiums serve as professional

learning and network opportunities. All the female participants in the study reported that formal networks had a positive effect on their career journey to the superintendency. Several of the participants in the current study also shared that they held officer positions.

Superintendent Walker spoke about the career benefits of her formal networks:

My associations were significant. For example, the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) was essential for my upbringing. I really think that I grew up as a Long Islander in the field because of the collaboration and collegial relationships that were established with Long Island ASCD. I still am very much a part of that organization. Those people who I look up to the most are in that organization. Also vital is my active membership in The New York State Council of School Superintendents.

As noted in the above quote, formal organizations were critical in Superintendent's Walker ascension. The relationships that were established as active members of the organizations were influential in giving her the opportunities to expand and strengthen her professional network.

Superintendent Ringgold spoke about her formal networks as places for resources:

There are several formal networks, including Eastern Suffolk BOCES and Western Suffolk BOCES on Long Island. That has a lot of resources for aspiring superintendents. They are constantly sending out information on workshops and conferences. I participate and always encourage others around me to participate.

Superintendent Ringgold's quote points to social capital theory. Formal networking can give aspiring leaders opportunities to acquire additional resources from professional organizations. Resources can serve as social capital that can benefit career enhancement for aspiring superintendents, including vital professional development.



Superintendent Kahlo described how networks provide the opportunity for professional development, including the Association of Curriculum and Development and Aspiring Superintendent's Academy.

I participate in a lot of professional development and conferences, including those sponsored by the Association of Curriculum and Development. Every conference I could attend was an opportunity to soak up and learn as much as I could, either from colleagues presenting, or national leaders in education, or both. One of the best experiences I had was with the New York State Council of School Superintendents. I was in the first cohort of LEAF, which is their professional development arm. They had a future superintendents academy offered through the Wallace Foundation. It was a full scholarship for a year-long program. We would go up to Saratoga once a month, and I met a lot of people there. There were seven of us from Long Island, and that became a network for me as we were aspiring to the superintendency. I think going through that program was probably the best thing I did for my career. I would highly recommend anybody who is interested in the superintendency to apply to a superintendent preparation program.

Superintendent O'Keeffe's quotes point to the Aspiring Superintendent's Academy when asked if formal networks played a role in her ascension to the superintendency. She stated that The Aspiring Superintendents Academy was critical to her career.

I think you get more from those facilitators and those people in the room than anyone else in your career. Every meeting or conference was a vital learning experience. So yes, I see the academy as being very significant in my professional life.

Both Superintendent Kahlo and Superintendent O'Keeffe's quote point to the formal network of The Aspiring Superintendent's Academy, which gave them additional opportunities for

networking and professional development. The relationships developed as aspiring superintendents became significant to their career advancement.

Superintendent Smith spoke about her experience with formal networks:

I have been active in the Long Island Association for Curriculum and Development. I have always attended conferences, those kinds of things I feel are important and just general networking and getting to know what you are taking on. The more you are involved, I think the better it is.

Superintendent Smith's quote points to how networking, as a form of social capital, can be positive in terms of career enhancement. The conferences she attended allowed her additional opportunities to form impactful relationships that were beneficial to her career.

Superintendent Gentileschi shared her perception of networking beyond the district:

It is important to network even beyond the district that you work in. That is why going to conferences, going to workshops, and signing up for courses are all very important. That is how you expand your network outside of where you personally work. I think that is what is most important—getting to know people and learning from them.

Superintendent Gentileschi's quote relates to social capital acquired beyond the district where they work. These opportunities to expand their knowledge, skills, influence, and recognition outside the district can be significant to their career aspirations.

Superintendent Cassatt shared her involvement in her networks:

I was involved with formal networks as an elementary school principal, including NASA, The Association of District Curriculum Officials, NADCO, and Long Island ASCD. I started to be involved locally, and then it just grew. So, from the local networking, you had your professional networks, but then within those groups, you found your little tribe, and that is how I found my position as Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum.

In the above quote, Superintendent Cassatt spoke about her involvement in formal networks. She, like Superintendent Walker, had strong relationships with networks on Long Island that provided additional opportunities to acquire the social capital needed for career advancement. For Superintendent Cassatt, her involvement in the formal network led to a job opportunity.

Superintendent Morisot spoke differently at first about the role of formal networks in her journey to the superintendency when she first explained their role in her career. She explained, “I think my network is definitely built on my own reputation and not so much a formal network like an organization or things like that.” But when probed about the role of networks, her answer differed to include the importance of a formal network that focused on women:

I think that networks are important. I know I talked about having a less formal network, but I think that the Women’s Initiative through the New York State Council of School Superintendents is important as a formal network. I think women need to talk more about these issues and there is a need to share information. You need to talk to somebody who can help you understand the role and the work of the superintendency. I would say getting opportunities to network with leaders is the most important thing that will support other aspiring women.

Superintendent Morisot at first pointed to the network as something that was intrinsic to her, but after further reflection, she agreed with the importance of formal networks as a vehicle for sharing information and acquiring additional resources necessary for advancement.

All the superintendents in the study spoke about the influence of formal networks in their careers. They all explained how these networks were influential in acquiring social capital in terms of opportunities, resources, additional knowledge, and skills. Superintendents Gentileschi and Walker also spoke about how the networks allowed them to connect and form relationships with mentors who positively affected their career journey.

Although the superintendents in the study were all able to describe the influence of social capital in their career paths in terms of mentors, formal and informal networking, and relationships, they also reported the existence of an additional type of support in their career paths: professional preparedness.

### **Professional Preparedness**

Another factor besides social capital also influenced the career pathways of the nine women who participated in the study. I asked the participants the following research question: Are there other reasons besides social capital that helped you on your superintendent journey? I found that the superintendents in the study spoke about their professional preparedness, which served to bolster their ascension to the superintendency. Luthans et al. (2004) defined *professional preparedness* as “what you know” and includes experience, education, skills, knowledge, and ideas. The common subthemes included in the second theme include teacher-to-superintendent route, the development of professional skills over time, expertise in curriculum and instruction, leadership style, and the positive psychological capacities of resilience and optimism, especially for women of color.

### **The “Traditional” Teacher-to-Superintendency Route**

The career pathways of the nine female superintendents followed a similar pattern, and a common theme across the data indicated that their careers began as teachers. Four started their careers as special education teachers, two began as high school teachers, and one as an elementary teacher. One participant began her career as a speech pathologist. The positions they held after teaching were administrative. These positions varied and included directors of pupil personnel services, directors of curriculum, directors of special education, assistant principals, and principals. Notably, all nine served in the position of assistant superintendent of curriculum prior to becoming district superintendent.

The female superintendents in the study clearly valued their experiences as teachers. As teachers, coordinators, and staff developers, most women began relationships that increased their visibility as curriculum and instructional experts. Superintendent Bourgeois stated, “When I started out as a teacher, I spent many summers working on curriculum and instruction for the school district, being the lead teacher in that area.” Superintendent Gentileschi also spoke about her extensive work as a teacher of social studies, English language arts, and reading. Like Superintendent Bourgeois, she was involved in curriculum and instruction during the summer months and provided the leadership for an alternative summer school program.

Superintendent O’Keeffe spoke about her extensive and varied experiences as a coordinator. Her experiences as an English language arts coordinator, reading coordinator, and her role in starting the first Pre-K program in her district gave her visibility as an expert in curriculum and instruction. Superintendent Walker’s career path also included a concentration on curriculum and instruction. She spoke about her pathway: “I set out to be a great curriculum person. That is my passion. I really like the work of curriculum and its impact on kids.”

The position of a teacher was the beginning of the career pathway for eight out of nine participants in the study. All participants had many varied positions during their journey from teaching to leadership. These various positions proved to be a vital part of their journey into the superintendency.

### **Developing Professional Skills Over Time**

A common theme across the data indicated that all participating superintendents took advantage of opportunities to build and enhance their personal and professional skills as they climbed the career ladder. Superintendent Gentileschi shared, “I find that many women seem to go through the path where they have done every job, and you really climb your way up.” Superintendent O’Keeffe shared, “I was the product of a lot of significant experiences. I

understood all areas of supervision curriculum instruction, personnel, and the business office as well as special education.” Both superintendents acquired the experiences necessary to add to their skill sets for the superintendent’s position. Most of the leaders described a journey that took advantage of opportunities to learn additional skills over time in several different ways and positions. Superintendent Gentileschi shared her belief, “I’m an avid believer in whatever situation you’re in or whatever position you’re in, to take full advantage of any opportunities that come your way.” She also reflected,

I signed up for every training, every workshop, and every experience. I was trained in curriculum audit. When they needed someone to go to a workshop and represent the district, I always volunteered. My knowledge base began to expand outside of just my own job responsibilities. The more information I acquired, the more knowledge I acquired, and the more people I listened to and met.

Developing professional skills beyond teaching and learning was a theme found across the data. All the female superintendents explained their ascent to the superintendency, including the opportunities to develop these skills they felt they needed to advance to the superintendency, including finance, human resources, and facilities, in addition to their knowledge of curriculum and instruction. One superintendent shared, “I need to know about personnel, civil service, facilities, obviously teaching and learning, curriculum, and instruction. That is one piece of it. My experience as a teacher helps me with one piece, but the other pieces, I had to learn myself.”

All superintendents recognized that acquiring additional skills necessary for career enhancement was necessary, but they perceived that they had to acquire these skills on their own. Superintendents spoke to this issue directly and spoke about the need for schools of education to do more in superintendent-preparation programs.

Superintendent Walker explained the gap in preparation,

College and university programs can prepare you for the curriculum and instruction part of the position, but when it comes to negotiations and finance, where you must master developing policy, those are extremely important aspects of developing superintendents that Schools of Education do not do.

The role of the universities in preparing women leaders was also discussed by Superintendent Gentileschi when she expressed the following, “I think that the universities need to partner with superintendents who are women now in the positions and host seminars and guest speakers and provide internship experiences for doctoral students.”

Superintendent Kahlo spoke about acquiring additional business skills on her own as an assistant superintendent of curriculum. She explained,

As an assistant superintendent, we had a very small central office, and as a result, I was able to work very closely with the business official, who was female, and we became very close friends. She was very good at what she did. The business was probably the area in that I had the least amount of experience. Obviously, I knew how to do grants, and I knew how to do my budget, but in terms of school finance, which is so complex, my skills were lacking. The superintendent and business officials supported me by always including me in all the budget development meetings.

Superintendent O’Keeffe shared her similar “fortunate” experiences in gaining additional budgeting skills when she was coming up the ranks:

I think I was very fortunate in getting involved in different aspects of leadership, not just curriculum and instruction as I was coming up the ranks, not just any one area...so, my experiences or my opportunities to gain experience in other areas. For example, I held an assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, but I shared the personnel office responsibilities with my superintendent. This allowed me to get a better understanding of

the budget process and gave me opportunities to be more efficient, even as an assistant superintendent. So again, I think it was being able to—when I held one position—have some opportunity to get involved in another area.

Superintendent Cassatt also spoke about developing additional skills over time. She stated, “I had my hands in everything and took advantage of every opportunity.” The institute at Harvard had an influential effect on her as a superintendent. She stated,

He sent me (her superintendent) to Harvard for a week in 1974 to an institute and it changed my life. Madeline Hunter who was the guru in effective teaching provided professional development. We did not get professional development from just anybody. We got it from Madeline Hunter herself. I have taken that knowledge with me to the superintendency, and it has never failed me.

The institute with Madeline Hunter was clearly influential in Superintendent Cassatt’s journey to the superintendency. The knowledge she acquired during her professional development was part of her preparation as an educational leader. Clearly, the professional preparedness she received had an impact on her professional career.

### **Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction**

All superintendents served in the position of assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction prior to becoming superintendent. Superintendent O’Keeffe explained that serving as the assistant superintendent was the experience that prepared her for the superintendency.

Superintendent Cassatt, similarly, to Superintendent O’Keeffe, also spoke about the importance of the curriculum position. She shared that in that position, she had her “hands in everything.”

Superintendent Bourgeois had a similar experience and spoke about her assistant superintendency as a significant experience in her ascension to the superintendency.



I took the position of assistant superintendent for four years, and I learned a great deal, not only about elementary supervision but also about the secondary program. We had a strong team. We did a lot of professional development. We attended several institutes at Harvard, and we really worked on a model for the district that was well received.

Superintendent Kahlo's experience as assistant superintendent for Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) provided her with critical experiences in special education. She stated, "I was hired as a superintendent for PPS. And the following year, the curriculum position just happened to open, and I really wanted to be there...so I moved in there."

The position of assistant superintendent also opened opportunities for Superintendent Ringgold. She explained how being in this position during the pandemic allowed her to highlight not only her skills but also her dedication to her superintendent who was out sick with Covid-19. She shared, "I knew he (the superintendent) relied on me, and he needed me to come to work...so even though I was exhausted, and my chest was hurting. I knew they relied on me. So, I came in. I tried to keep my distance, I had meetings and even helped with the food delivery."

Many of the participants in the study perceived that the assistant superintendent's position was a critical part of their preparedness as a superintendent. It was vital in that it gave them the opportunity to show their skills as a leader of curriculum and instruction, as well as giving them the opportunity to learn and develop additional skills necessary for advancement. Superintendent Ringgold's case also showed she was able to take on additional responsibilities associated with the superintendent's position.

The leadership practices of women in the study were an important part of their preparedness. The leadership practices outlined in this section were established from the analysis of the emergent themes in the data.

## Leadership Style

As Superintendent O’Keeffe stated, “There is a unique aspect to how each person does their job and how each person handles it.” Although there is a uniqueness in the study in how participants perceived and enacted their leadership, a common leadership style emerged. All the female participants in the study spoke about the student-centered style of leadership.

Superintendent O’Keeffe reflected, “I never lost sight of the students.” This conviction was echoed in the voices of the other participants, including Superintendent Gentileschi when she spoke about her belief in education.

As a superintendent, I live by the words that I tell my teachers and my central office. We are here to provide one service. The service is education. And, if you are not providing an education that you feel would be good enough for your own children, then you are in the wrong business, and you need to leave.

The idea that educators must deliver the best education they can to students as well as the understanding of education as a service is found in the above quote.

Superintendent Cassatt stated,

It is the pinnacle job that allows you, in the right place, to do amazing things for kids.

You demonstrate that over time that the decisions you make are in the best interest of kids and that is the core of the work we do.

Several superintendents spoke about the idea of service to both students and their community.

Superintendent Ringgold shared, “I wanted to respect the Latina students; I wanted to respect all the value that they bring to our district, our country, our world. I wanted to help as many kids as possible.”

Superintendent Walker spoke of her style of leadership, which can be seen as transformative. She stated,

My style of leadership is more of a fellowship. I believe you cannot lead if people are not following you. I look to being inclusive, and transparent, getting ideas from my other leaders, and making sure that I am growing them, and I am growing as well. I try not to be top-down, but I do have a clear direction of the vision.

As noted in the quote, Superintendent Walker's idea of sharing and promoting a vision was a critical part of her leadership style.

Superintendent Ringgold also spoke about collaboration when describing her leadership style:

I cannot tell people what they need to have, but a collaborative style works for me. I feel that we must do things together to help students because the main objective is our children, to make sure our children have the best education possible.

The female participants in the study displayed styles of leadership that was student centered, collaborative, and transformative. Given this understanding, it becomes important to note that a part of the preparation to access the superintendency for the female superintendents in the study was perceived to be a style of leadership that can be valued by the communities they serve.

Although the superintendents in the study were successfully able to ascend to the superintendent's position, there were obstacles present in their journey. The importance of knowing and understanding the barriers that aspiring women can face is a significant part of the study. The topic of career obstacles is discussed next.

### **Career Obstacles**

All the female superintendents reported the existence of obstacles that were gender based and organizational in nature. In addition to the structure of traditional organizations, several other factors—including cultural stereotyping, gender bias, the search and selection process, family obligations, and other women—emerged as common obstacles that may obstruct women from

this educational leadership position. All participants in the study acknowledged that gender bias existed when they were aspiring, accessing, and securing their superintendency. They all agreed that the superintendency could be all-encompassing, with many additional challenges for women and women of color. As women in the field, all the participants in this study were able to speak about these challenges and barriers they believed men in the role did not have to face.

The question that generated a strong reaction asked the female superintendents about a time they were treated differently because of their gender. Eight out of nine women leaders talked freely about a time or times when being a woman put additional obstacles in their way and these barriers and challenges were those they believed that men did not have to face.

There was also the perception that men aspiring to or who are in this position are favored by certain groups. Superintendent Kahlo spoke about the search committees when she was a candidate for the superintendent position. She reflected, “I was solid; I knew my stuff. I do believe men were favored by this group. I think they still are, to tell the truth. These groups still exist.” When answering the question about barriers, Superintendent Smith stated the following, “I think there is still a big difference between what is expected from men and what is expected from women.”

The women in my study were honest and forthcoming with their perspectives and perceptions concerning barriers and challenges in their careers, including those topics that have traditionally been silenced because of the political culture of educational leadership (Anderson, 1990; Bell, 1995). Although research in the field pointed out women’s reluctance to talk about the differential treatment or talk openly about their experiences with sexism, discrimination, and unequal treatment (Skrla, 2000), this was not the case with the women participants in the study. A common theme that all superintendents were able to speak to was sex-role stereotyping or stereotype threat.

## **Stereotype Threat or Sex-Role Stereotyping**

The women in this study reported instances of sex-role stereotyping as they aspired to the superintendency. They also expressed the necessity of overcoming society's perceptions about women being able to serve as superintendents. More specifically, the incongruity between society's view of women is not assertive enough, or when they are, they are viewed negatively. Superintendent Smith's understanding is shared in her words, "I think that women in general always have a tougher time because I feel like if we are nasty or if we say something, we are considered bitches."

There is also the cultural stereotype that women do not possess the strength to handle the challenges of the physical challenges of the job. Superintendent Smith again reacted to this situation during her interview with the board for a high school principal. When the board member commented, "You don't look very tough, how are you going to handle the kids?" her response was, "If you want someone who is going to beat up the kids, I'm clearly not that person." She added, "But if you want someone who is going to be consistent, I am the person." Superintendent Smith then added another experience with sex-role stereotyping and again added her response.

I was in with a candidate during an interview, and they (the school board) asked a question, and it was almost the exact same question I was asked during my interview. I chimed in and redirected it. At the end of the meeting, I said to them you cannot tell females that they do not look like they are going to be able to handle a situation. That is so sexist.

Superintendent Kahlo described her beliefs regarding cultural stereotyping. She stated, "People see men as strong leaders. They see women as weaker; they see women as hysterical."

Superintendent Walker said that many times, if it is a secondary district or includes high schools,

“they will not look at a woman because they think that those are the jobs that only men can do. But in the elementary districts, they may give it to a woman.”

Superintendent Gentileschi stated,

My resume could stand next to any male superintendent’s resume and my experiences and my knowledge and my expertise. So, something needs to change, and I have experienced it in talking to other superintendents. Another joke, so to speak, is if a female superintendent did that, she would have been fired. But if a male superintendent does that, he will just get another job somewhere. I am sure you have heard that one.

Superintendent Cassatt recalled her experience with stereotype threat.

One of the stereotypes I really had to work against, and I was successful at it...because I was a curriculum person and curriculum instruction...is that women fuzzy area—that tends to be where the women flock—and the business side tends to be more the stereotypical male role. Well, anyways, today I had no choice, but to become very well versed in many aspects of the business. I know that I sit now as a superintendent who has strong school business knowledge. I think people are surprised by that since I do know the inner workings of the school business. While I would not want to do the job day in and day out single-handedly, I have that sense and I know that stereotypically people do not expect that of a woman.

Cultural stereotyping is perpetuated when a fixed impression that may not be factual exists. This means that individuals have impressions of others before they even know who they are. Three participants in this study reported the belief that cultural stereotyping does still exist in educational leadership and was perceived while they were aspiring to the superintendency. They shared their experiences with sex-role stereotyping.

When the superintendents in the study were asked if they ever had to change their behavior because of stereotype threat or gender bias, their responses included the influence of the old boys' club. The superintendents in the study described this club as a barrier that has affected their ascent to leadership and still operates and exists today.

### **Old Boys' Club**

The good 'old boys' network, as described by Witmer (2006), is a group of White men in positions of power who seek to promote other men in the workplace and careers and to mentor men for the purpose of replicating power structures that benefit those like them. The term is defined as any closed system of relationships restricting opportunities within the group or a close-knit group of men resembling a private men's club. Several women in the study spoke about the influence of this club in various ways. For one superintendent, it was the all-male administrative team; for another, it was an exclusive "breakfast club" that met before each superintendent's meeting was all male; and for another, it was more of an attitude.

Superintendents Kahlo and Smith perceived that the old boys' club existed and mentioned it by name when discussing stereotypical challenges in reaching the superintendent's position. In the case of Superintendent Kahlo, it was the make-up of her all-male central office administration:

In one of my districts, it was an old boys' club in the central office. All the central office administrators were men, and there was a little bit of a sexual atmosphere. It was subtle. Today, probably it would not so subtle. On one occasion, a male supervisor asked me, "How come you are not wearing your high heels today? I like when you wear three-inch heels." I think today, males would refrain from making those comments, but those comments were made in those days. The women during that time stuck together because it

was years ago. People did not really report things of that nature, and a lot of it was very subtle and just short of being completely inappropriate.

Similarly, Superintendent Smith also talked about her experience with an ‘old boys’ club’ that was formed by male superintendents in her district; the “male breakfast club” that happened before each meeting did not include women. She shared also how she managed to “push her way forward a bit” by asking to join:

These are some smart people in their own all-male breakfast club, which I asked to join. I remember they kind of chuckled a little bit and said, we do not have any women that join us. We would have to use a napkin—you know, kind of being funny. When I asked again, I remember they said to come, but I know they were uncomfortable with me asking.

Several study participants indicated that the old boys’ club is still operational and can exist in different forms. In the case of Superintendent Smith, the private male breakfast club that met before all the superintendents had their district meeting felt exclusionary and was perceived as a male advantage in a social situation. According to Skrla (2000), these types of social interactions by men are how they interact in the superintendency. In these social settings, rituals and ways of easing social discourse are based on the male model and can be particularly problematic for women. Although the men in the club laughed when Superintendent Smith asked to join, I felt that they were uncomfortable when a female superintendent asked the question and perhaps felt challenged when the female superintendent questioned the membership criteria for their club.

During the focus group discussion, the women spoke about and confirmed their experiences with gender bias, and specifically how they are held to different standards and treated differently because they are women. The participants also spoke about the need for support. One superintendent put it this way: “We don’t take lunches. We give time after school. When you take over the superintendency, you basically give up your life as a woman.” There was also the



importance of having a relationship with people that you can trust in the superintendency. In the words of one participant, “It would be very helpful to have a trusted confidant.” Another women participant agreed with the significance of a confidant in the position: “You don’t want people to think you are vulnerable; you do need someone.”

The women participants talked again about their experiences with gender bias and discrimination as part of their experiences with search committees and boards of education when asked about additional challenges or barriers as they aspired to the superintendency.

### **Search Committees/Boards of Education**

Several superintendent participants reported that perceived practices of local school boards or the professional search firms they hired were barriers to the superintendency. The term “gatekeeper” was used by three superintendents when referring to the search firms that played a significant role in whether the school board considered them for the superintendency.

Superintendents Walker, Kahlo, and O’Keeffe spoke specifically about the role of the search committees acting as gatekeepers during their ascension to the superintendency. Gatekeepers were also discussed during the focus group when search committees were described as the major gatekeeper for women who try to access the superintendency through the interview process. The view that search committees still view the position of superintendency as a male domain was shared by Superintendent Walker. She stated, “It is definitely a male’s world, and the doors open easier for males and certainly for White males.”

This understanding of the superintendency as a White male role is consistent with those described by Bell (1988) that the superintendent’s position has developed over time to be a role for White, middle-aged, conservative, and married males. According to Skrla (2000), the norms associated with the superintendency are that males will occupy this position. Therefore, it appears that society has socially constructed the superintendency as masculine, and this

understanding transfers to the fact that search committees and boards of education consistently prefer males and support their access to the superintendent's position.

Superintendent O'Keeffe spoke about the stereotype that a superintendency is viewed as a "man's role" by those gatekeepers.

If you asked board members who were in superintendent searches, what characteristics were they looking for in the superintendent? None of them would list handsome or ugly. But I have seen and experienced situations where men have been given the position over perhaps a more qualified woman. And I think it is just a matter of how you present yourself. I think the stereotype, which is a man's role, is still very much a subliminal characteristic.

The superintendency is seen as a male-dominated position with masculine expectations. The stereotype perpetuates and can seep into the workings of both boards of education and search committees. In her response, it became clear that Superintendent O'Keeffe is aware of the social construction of the superintendency as male. She spoke to the frustration of hiring less qualified males for the positions just because they are male. The qualities these committees look for in district leadership, such as assertiveness, charisma, financial literacy, and business experience, are qualities associated with males and are incongruent with perceived qualities that women possess.

Superintendent Kahlo also talked about how search group hiring practices served as barriers for aspiring women. When answering the question about the current practices, she shared her thoughts about screening interviews, a first step in the hiring process.

I also had a few female friends who experienced the same thing. You would get an initial screening interview but did not move you forward. That happened quite a few times. You then would see who wound up getting the position, and it was a male. I do feel that they

favored men. I had two female colleagues that felt the same way. They did not get as many upper opportunities past the first interview. The search committees acted like gatekeepers because the board never really gets to see you until somebody decides to move you on to the next level. They hold the keys. At least that was my experience.

Superintendent Morisot also spoke about the idea of high-level leadership as a man's domain and about search firms' discriminatory practices by bringing in people they know—often White men:

As a woman in a top position, the higher you go up, the more you go up, and the more you realize that it is a man's world. I do not know how better to say that, but you just do not have the same access, you do not have the same networks. So, I think one of the biggest things I have noticed is that the search firms, the superintendent's search firms, especially on Long Island, searches are run by older White gentlemen. And so they bring in who they know who is in that network and that is the people who get to move forward. So even if you have the credentials and you are overqualified, a lot of times, you do not even have access to the superintendent position.

The discrimination of boards and search committees when hiring for the superintendency, whether implicit or explicit, was well noted in the responses of several superintendents who participated in the study. The women spoke about how boards of education and search committees may operate under the generally accepted social construction of the female gender (Skrla, 2000). The expected feminine characteristics for women, such as being demure or passive, can be incongruent with what the hiring gatekeepers want for their district leaders.

While aspiring to or in leadership positions, stereotype threat and sex-role stereotyping may cause a difference in how people have treated the rules for appropriately feminine characteristics, and behavior are widely shared and agreed upon in social constructions and the penalties for not following the rules appear to be clearly understood (Skrla, 2000). When asked

to share stories about differential treatment in their superintendency, the women in the study again were forthcoming in sharing their perceptions and experiences.

### **Women Held to Different Standards**

A common theme in my study is women being treated differently than men because they are women or held to different standards. Several of the women superintendents shared specific stories about the role of discrimination or rules of exclusion (Foucault, 1972) in their career pathways. As mentioned previously, there was little hesitance from the women who voiced their concerns about gender bias and discrimination in the ascension to their position or in their position. Superintendent Bourgeois spoke of a specific experience she had as a lawyer working for her Board of Education. She shared,

I would say we had a very strong attorney in one of the districts, and I would say it was blatant how he was more dismissive of the female leaders than he was of the male leaders. I mean, just pretty apparent. He yielded a lot of power with the Board of Education. I do not think the Board of Education treated anyone differently, but the attorney had a lot of influence over the board, and he was very dismissive of when women spoke, including myself.

Restrictions on women's speech align with an understanding of rules of exclusion for female leaders who not only have to follow rules and maintain a subservient role. Foucault (1972) described society's rules of exclusion. Living in a society, we all know the rules of exclusion: "We know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or when we like not." (p. 216).

These rules governing women's speech are mentioned at various times in the interviews. One superintendent described an experience this way, "At the last superintendent's meeting, I

wanted to say something to one of the top leaders and I was told that there is a pecking order.

You cannot speak after that person.”

Superintendent Walker shared instances of bias during superintendents’ meetings, highlighting the different treatment of women leaders:

I have listened to people who are drooling over the males at meetings. Although the women have done more research, they are not listened to. Let one of the male leaders say “boo,” and everybody is impressed. They have not said anything powerful. They have not done their research and are often speaking off the top of their heads, but they are often fawned over.

Superintendent Ringgold also shared an experience she had with construction workers in her building while serving in the assistant superintendent’s capacity. While her superintendent gave her the authority to oversee a building project in the district, which was not meeting her standards, the worker told her, “to get your boss, so he could explain this.” Her response was “I am the boss.” She then reflected, “This happened a lot.”

When asked about gender bias, Superintendent Smith explained that women in leadership are held to different standards than men. She reflected,

I feel sometimes, women feel that they must prove themselves more than men do. There is a statement we hear all the time. People say to me, ‘If you were a man, that would not have happened; and I agree.’ There are many times that people may be disrespectful to me because they are angry but would never be that disrespectful to a male superintendent.

As she shared, this disrespectful response from educators and colleagues often comes out when they are angry with her decision. The following three superintendents echo the ideas that women need to put in more time: Superintendent Gentileschi, Cassatt, and Bourgeois commented on

how women are held to different standards and accountability; they also experience additional barriers and obstacles compared to men. Superintendent Cassatt shared her belief,

I do believe that women are not allowed the same level of mistakes that men are. I see that all the time. I see male counterparts and think about what they have done and where they are. I then think if he was a female, it would be very different. I know I work incredibly hard and have worked hard to avoid falling into that trap. We all make mistakes. We all make some mistakes, but you always must be willing to defend them, not hide behind them.

Superintendent Bourgeois stated,

I think women must show progression. I have seen high school principals who are male and are highly considered for superintendent positions, or men only in the central office for a short period of time and sent to the superintendency, whereas I feel as a woman you must really put in a lot of time and prove yourself for a lengthy period time than men do.

The female superintendents in my study faced bias and discrimination in their careers. The characteristics that society has indicated as feminine are incongruent at times with leadership.

The women face barriers in terms of differential treatment and have indicated they have to work harder and prove themselves because they are women. These women also faced challenges when it came to their working and personal lives.

### **Family Obligations**

Another emergent subtheme in the data was the difficulties or challenges women can face when trying to balance their work and their personal life. Superintendent Bourgeois talked about the difficulty of raising a family with a job that requires a great deal of time. Although she does not have children, she spoke to the expected time commitment when asked about a challenge for women superintendents today:

I am sure that raising a family is a factor...I am sure is a strong factor. You know, balancing work and family is huge. I do not have children myself, but I would question whether I could provide the same level of commitment to the districts that I have worked in if I had a family. I also question if I would be able to do my job at the same level of commitment. That is me, personally. I do not know how some of these people do it. I mean, it is a super challenge that is based on time commitment, and it is a 24/7 job, so it is hard to pull away from it.

Superintendent Smith also spoke about the challenge of having kids and a demanding job: “You must be home,” and she further explained, “It is hard to leave that piece behind.” Superintendent Morisot shared her concerns about the sacrifices you must make, particularly if you have a family. She shared, “There is a great deal of time that you have to give from your own life, and when you have a family, it is a lot.”

Superintendent Cassatt has a somewhat different perception. Although family obligations are viewed as an obstacle, and there are typical stereotypes about the role of a mother, she described how a balance was possible:

I think the typical barriers are the typical stereotypes of what I should be doing and how I choose to raise my children. I was raised with great support from my husband and my mom. I made those decisions every step along the way. There were others that would look askew at that, but that was not enough of a barrier to stop me from getting to where I am today.

Superintendent Gentileschi also described the support she had at home She stated, “Whereas I do not believe men have to do as much as women...I just know my life. My husband participated so much with our children. He was a police officer, so we were able to work opposite hours.”

## **Jealousy of Other Women**

Jealousy of other women was a subtheme of the study. Four out of the nine women responded that women were obstacles in their ascension to the superintendency and spoke about their jealous behavior. When asked the question about barriers, almost half the superintendents talked about other women negatively influencing their careers.

Superintendent Smith shared, “Females are judged differently, and some women in the community can be petty and actually jealous.” She shared an incident where a small group of women wrote something offensive about her. She explained that one of her school board members literally wrote on social media that she gained some weight and was happy about seeing her look so bad. She stated in her reflection, “You would not write that about a man. You just would not. So, it is pettiness, and I feel like some of the worst offenders are women. We just lose sight that we really need to be there for each other.”

Superintendent Cassatt also spoke about women acting as obstacles as she was aspiring to the superintendency”

So, one barrier quite honestly was other women being barriers and blockers. And, what I mean by that was, I was very successful in obviously achieving positions, but there were also several positions that I should have gotten and I did not, and I am confident it is because the women in the decision making at the time whether they were sitting on the board or whether they were teachers in the interview process, they looked at a young woman, a successful achieving young woman. And I believe that I was blocked from moving forward in several positions because, for lack of a better word, it is a terrible word, but just jealousy. Why is she sitting in that seat and so on and so forth? So, I believe other women are barriers; there are no two ways about that. At the same time, I



also had women who opened the doors for me. I had women board members who absolutely had the sense that I was the right person, and it was the one that they wanted.

Superintendent Kahlo stated that jealousy of women could come from many places.

This is uncomfortable to say, but sometimes, women can be women's own worst enemies. I think it comes from sometimes a place of jealousy, that some women do not like to see other women succeed. I was interviewed and went all the way to the end. I was one of two women for the superintendent in a district when my superintendent retired, and I did not get it. There were comments made that people shared with me who I trusted and who said they did not want a female superintendent. They felt that a male superintendent was a better fit for the district. Sometimes those things are absolutely said. They were said by female secretaries, female boards, trustees, and females who served on the PTA. I think sometimes women do not like to see other women succeed.

Superintendent Bourgeois also spoke of the jealousy of other women. When asked about the barriers she faced, she spoke specifically about her female colleagues.

Sometimes the women themselves can be very competitive and malicious, and there are times that I feel much more comfortable with male colleagues and not being judged as much as some female colleagues. Female colleagues can be harsh at times.

According to superintendents, jealousy can come from many places. At times, it may seem that women do not like to see other women succeed, but the limited number of open positions for superintendents can bring out jealousy in people. The male-dominated superintendency can set up women to compete. A scarcity of top leadership positions and the culture of the workplace can create female rivalry, resulting in women's sometimes jealous and petty behaviors.

The women in my study faced barriers and challenges as they aspired and became superintendents. The women participants shared their voices on gender bias and sex-role

stereotyping and were forthcoming and honest with their perceptions and experiences. Three women of color participated in the study. When asked if there were additional barriers for women of color, the women, without hesitation, spoke about the additional obstacles they faced.

### **Additional Barriers for Women of Color**

Women of color face additional challenges in their ascent to the superintendency, as evidenced by their even lower numbers securing the top spot in education. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the importance of including women of color in this study becomes a matter of inclusion and equity. The probe into additional barriers for women of color yielded important data during the interview. Superintendents Walker and Ringgold spoke about their experience with both gender and race as barriers to ascending to the top position. Superintendent Walker stated, “As a woman of color, stereotyping is part of your entire life.” Similarly, Superintendent Ringgold shared, “If you’re a person of color and a woman, it is always a challenge.” She added, “The obstacles that I face are on both ends of the spectrum because if you think about it...when I get up in the morning, I know that I am a person of color because if I do not remember that it is a survival thing.”

Superintendent Ringgold stated,

I think race is very big, and we cannot deny it, because I do know women of color do not always have the same opportunities or are not always taken under a person’s wing the way women of non-color, people of non-color. Those are the unspoken truths, and I firmly believe them because I have seen them in my life.

Superintendent Walker echoed her perceptions about the influence of stereotype threat in her pathway:

My whole life has been that way. My whole life is, because no matter what you think, the first thing you see is my color and my gender. So, I mean, without knowing me, there are

perceived ideas about who I may be and what I may bring to the table. My whole life has been about being 150% so that those stereotypes are not used to define my progress.

She added, “I think that there is an adage that you must do a lot more than men, and certainly for people of color, they must do even much more. So as a Black woman, I have always known that I must give more than 150% to be able to be treated at the 80% level.”

Superintendent Kahlo spoke about the idea of race and her district bringing in people of color in leadership roles. She stated, “I have an African American principal. She is just so distinguished and so intelligent, and she is just a fine, fine woman who I hope will ascend to the superintendency, but I know it is hard for her. It will be harder for her.”

Superintendent Walker also spoke about how women and women of color face the additional barrier of getting the superintendent jobs that are the most difficult:

Well, the mindset that leadership or the top job is for the White male...It is in the corporate world; we mirror the corporate world. And when a woman gets a job, it is generally not a sought-after job. In fact, there was an article in *Ed Week* this week on this very notion that the very urban districts—where nobody wants the headaches of it—the large urban districts are going to women, and women of color, because nobody wants them. It is a real headache. The meal distribution, transportation, and changing facilities to accommodate the health conditions. Nobody wants that. And with a large district, that is all you do. There is no teaching and learning. So that’s where women are getting the jobs, but a fine district that has resources and education in place, that is going to the White males.

Superintendent Walker’s words echo society’s belief that the role of the superintendent is often the White male. Gender role and race role expectations are deeply embedded in society, which affects the way women and women of color are viewed by others and how they view

themselves. Just as people in educational leadership do not share a common set of experiences, neither do White women and women of color (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010). While the women of color in my study faced gender bias and sex-role stereotyping, they also faced racial bias in their ascension to the superintendent's position.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter discussed the major findings of this qualitative study. Through interviews and a focus group, I collected and analyzed data and presented my findings. I discovered three significant findings throughout the data and one finding that cut across all themes. First, female superintendents acknowledged that creating and acquiring social capital contributed to their professional successes. Although their relationships—both formal and informal—and networks were all valuable, influential mentoring networks proved to be most significant in acquiring a position as a superintendent.

Second, besides social capital, the superintendents recognized that their professional preparedness positively influenced their career journey. The varied curriculum and instructional positions they held, their abilities to acquire additional necessary skills over time, and their leadership style served to bolster their ascent into an assistant superintendency and supported their ascension to the superintendent's position.

Participants also recognized their obstacles along the way. The women superintendents recognized the role that gender bias and discrimination played in their journey and spoke freely about discrimination and sex-role stereotyping they encountered in their professional journey. Although research has indicated that this is not an area that female superintendents are often willing to discuss, it was not the case for the women in my study, and most shared specific examples of bias by school boards, hiring committees, and women in the community.

Women of color also recognized these gender-based obstacles in their journey and spoke of the additional obstacle of race. The finding of positive psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2004) was significant for women of color who faced both gender and racial obstacles. In addition to their use of social capital and human capital (professional preparedness) to gain access to the superintendency, the women in the study embodied resilience as leaders who were important in mediating barriers they faced as well as meeting the tremendous challenges of their position.

The finding that cut across all themes was the style of leadership that women used in their position. Women superintendents in this study were collaborative and empowered others in their approach to leadership. They also had strong backgrounds in teaching and learning. The combination of these two values naturally leads to a vision of instructional success for all children (Miller et al., 2006). These findings open the doors for future research and provide implications for female leadership programs discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

This chapter presents a summary of the study and the conclusion of the dissertation. I begin with a summary of the study and an overview of the first four chapters of this dissertation. This is followed by a review of the problem, the purpose statement, research questions, and methodology. I then transition to a discussion of findings related to the literature and the theoretical frameworks, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research. This chapter ends with the limitations of the study and concluding remarks.

### **Summary of the Study**

In this dissertation, there were two purposes. The first objective was to examine nine female superintendents' perceptions of their journey into the superintendency. Through semi-structured interviews over Zoom, I looked specifically at social capital, professional preparedness, and career obstacles. While much is known about the significance of social capital on career enhancement, the significance of the study was to examine how current female superintendents perceived the role of mentors, networks, and relationships in their ascension to the superintendency.

The second purpose of the study was to understand the role of gender bias in the career trajectories of nine female superintendents. I used the lens of feminist theory to examine obstacles that women superintendents faced during their ascent. The study adds to the scholarly research in the field of both social capital theory and feminist theory by considering the perceptions of women superintendents on significant opportunities and obstacles as they rose to high-level leadership.

### **Overview of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. In Chapter 1, I provided an overview of the history of the superintendency, which gave insight into the evolution of the position and the

historical and contemporary demographic data regarding women superintendents. I then introduced the study's problem, purpose, and significance. In addition, I provided an overview of the methodology, setting, and participants. I concluded the chapter with limitations, assumptions, and design control and defined the key terms related to the study.

In Chapter 2, I provided a review of relevant literature related to the research topic as well as literature connected to the two frameworks used: social capital and feminist theories. These theoretical frameworks gave me the lens to examine how participants perceived social capital career support as well as the obstacles in their career journey. In Chapter 3, I detailed the method used in this qualitative phenomenological study by discussing how I obtained participants, collected data, and designed the interview protocols. In Chapter 4, I analyzed data, provided a visual representation of code development, and explained how the codes merged to form the themes of the study. I concluded by discussing my findings related to the common themes and research questions.

### **Overview of the Study**

A current problem in U.S. public schools is the lack of women in the superintendency. Although women make up 75% of the teaching force in the United States, only 26.68% of women have ascended to top-level educational positions (Tienken, 2021). The importance of promoting more women in leadership roles is greater than just fulfilling the promise of equal opportunity. Women tend to adopt a leadership style that is particularly well suited for the complexity of today's organizations, and this can translate to enhanced institutional effectiveness (Davies et al., 2005). There is evidence that women adopt a more collaborative and cooperative leadership style compared to men and embody a democratic style, which motivates them to transform the learning opportunities for those who have been least well served by current policies and practice (Chin, 2011; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010). As women continue to be

underrepresented in the school district superintendency, our nation is at risk of not benefitting from the leadership of women in decision making and policy that affect the education of all students in public schools (Mahitvanichcha & Rorrer, 2006).

This dissertation study allowed women superintendents the opportunity to share their perspectives and speak about the factors that have supported their pathway of ascent to the school superintendency and those that served as obstacles. I specifically examined women superintendents' experiences with mentors, networks, and relationships as career supports and examined the obstacles they faced during the superintendent's journey, particularly gender bias and sex-role stereotyping in their lived experiences. I also examined additional obstacles that women of color faced in their ascent to the superintendency.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

While much is known about the importance of social capital on career enhancement, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to discover the connections between mentors, networks, and relationships and women's access to the superintendency that led to the perceived success of the leader. The study also sought to identify and understand the obstacles that women superintendents faced as they aspired to their leadership position. Using both social capital and feminist theory, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do women superintendents describe how social capital contributed to their ascent to the highest level of leadership in public education?
  - a. How, if at all, has social capital mitigated gender bias and stereotype threat for women in the superintendency?
  - b. What unique challenges do superintendents of color face in their ascent?
2. How have mentors, networks, and relationships assisted women superintendents in overcoming barriers and challenges?



## **Review of Methodology**

The study's research questions were answered through a qualitative, interpretive, hermeneutic, phenomenological methodology, collecting data through semi-structured interviews, with each participant and a voluntary focus group with four participating superintendents. Phenomenology is the process of interpreting experiences through the first-person narrative (Moustakas, 1994). I used this approach to understand the superintendents' lived experiences. Since the questions were posed to a marginalized population (females), it was essential to hear their voices and experiences working as leaders in the field. Grogan (1996) stated, "The traditional literature of the superintendency might provide only a partial understanding of what it is all about" (p. 18). Therefore, it is critical to hear the voices of those traditionally marginalized and examine their usage of networking, relationship building, and mentoring as conditions of opportunity.

## **Discussion of Findings**

After discussing the significant findings of this study, I then relate the findings to the literature in Chapter 2. My first finding answered the first research question. All the female superintendents in the study perceived that social capital was important in their journey into leadership. I found evidence that mentoring, informal and formal networks, and relationships were social capital career supports. All the female superintendents spoke about the importance of mentors who guided them in their journey to the superintendency and confidantes whom they trusted to help them navigate challenges. Their positive experiences of social capital were evident, particularly in the areas of mentors and both formal and informal networks. These mentorships, many with current or outgoing superintendents in the districts where they already had a position, often were the social capital needed that supported their ascension to the superintendency.

The second finding answered the questions concerning the gender-based and sex-role stereotyping obstacles that women faced as well as the additional obstacles for women of color. Three of the participants in the study identified as women of color. All the study's participants faced gender discrimination, including the practices of hiring committees, the old boys' clubs, as well as sex-role stereotyping by both men and women as they aspired into leadership. While all women faced bias based on gender, women of color faced an additional bias based on race. All three women of color in this study experienced stereotyping that was based on racial discrimination.

The third finding was professional preparedness. It combined the answers to a probing question concerning the other factors, besides social capital, that contributed to their ascent to their top-level position. The women in the study reported that their expertise in curriculum and instruction, developing additional skills over time, and a collaborative and student-centered style of leadership based on a transformational model were common themes that were positively influential during their career ascension to their position as superintendent. Although the data revealed that mentors, networks, and relationships, or "who they knew" were vital in their career journey and offered the opportunities needed to advance, their professional preparedness or "what they knew" indicated to those in influential positions that they had the professional preparedness for career ascent.

Although the study's focus was on social capital, or 'who they knew,' as a major support to the superintendency, it became clear that a superintendent's professional preparation was also important. 'What they knew', and 'who they were' were perceived by the women as additional factors in their ascension to the superintendency. The women superintendents brought their power and experience to their jobs and led meaningful changes in education and learning in their respective school districts. In moving beyond social capital, the full force of the human factor (or

“who they were”) was used to meet the tremendous challenges faced by their organizations now and in the future (Luthans et al., 2004).

### **Findings Related to the Literature**

The three major findings in the study reflected female superintendents’ perceptions of social capital: career supports, professional preparedness, and career obstacles. As stated in Chapter 2, a common theme in literature is the positive connection between social capital and career enhancement for women aspiring to leadership. The literature has indicated that social capital is seen as a valuable resource for women who aspire to leadership positions (Eagly et al., 1995; Glass, 2000; McGee, 2010). Support systems that the participants identified were mentors, networks, and relationships. Women in the study also reported on the importance of confidants, role models, and critical friends during their ascension to the superintendency.

### **Social Capital Supports**

When asked about the role of mentors, all participants agreed that mentors played a significant role in their journey. All the women attributed their career success to relationships, with multiple influential mentors throughout their journeys. These results are expected. Studies have indicated that the importance of mentors for women aspiring to leadership is so great, that the lack of mentorship is the main reason that few females hold the superintendent’s position (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Although one often thinks of mentors as playing a more formal role, such as one facilitated through leadership-preparation programs (Howard et al., 2017), superintendents in this study spoke about their informal mentors, both male and female, who acted as mentors but also provided additional levels of support, including sponsorships and often friendships. According to the literature, sponsors serve as advocates and are usually well-known, established people with major decision-making responsibilities that include employment and promotion (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006). In the case of the participants in the study, sponsors were

most often the catalysts who provided influential support that connected women with job opportunities, including the superintendent's position.

Copeland and Calhoun (2014) listed the attributes of a mentor as providing opportunities for growth and development in the context of work. Although this definition seemed to fit the relationships that many of the superintendents had with their mentors, additional analysis of the data indicated that often, the relationships with mentors or sponsors grew stronger and often became one of friendship. Although research on the significance of mentoring for women aspiring to the superintendency is extensive, the term *friendship* was not something I initially discovered in the literature. Upon closer examination of the literature in the field, I did find that mentors could provide emotional support to a protégé by offering to counsel and building a relationship of acceptance, trust, and even friendship (Sethna, 2014). A common theme among the participants was that their mentors—especially if they were women—were often considered both mentors and friends. Women in the study also reported that relationships with role models, critical friends, and confidantes as being important as they aspired to the superintendency.

The female superintendents in the sample stated that their mentors were influential in that they provided significant support as they aspired to high-level leadership. The women in the study perceived their mentors as a significant resource for career enhancement. Many of the superintendents had mentors who were superintendents and in a position of power to support their career aspirations. These findings are consistent with the literature. As indicated in Seibert's (2001) study, which examined the relationship between social capital and career success, access to career mentorships and sponsorships was critically important for aspiring women superintendents. According to Brunner and Kim (2010), providing an environment where women can develop important relationships through career sponsorships or mentors is not necessarily offered in superintendent-preparation programs.

## **Formal Networks Support**

All the women in this study belonged to multiple professional organizations and associations because of the opportunities for training, professional development, and networking. All participants agreed that formal organizations were extremely beneficial for career enhancement on both the local and state level. Membership in the New York State Council of School Superintendents was universal. Several of the women spoke about the Women's Initiative that created professional-development opportunities, including an aspiring leadership program. Another facet of the organization the participants reported as beneficial was the Leadership for Educational Foundations, which provided one-on-one support for superintendents and for current leaders to help them navigate complex challenges faced by their school district. One superintendent referred to it as the "professional arm" of that organization.

Other formal networks that participants mentioned included the American Association of School Administrators, Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, and Long Island Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. The participants reported that these networks offered workshops, conferences, and professional development that supported their career advancement and current position. Participants clearly emphasized the value of these organizations, and all of them shared they took advantage of available opportunities.

The importance of formal networking opportunities for female superintendents is found in the literature. Formal networks and organizations focused on building relationships with other professional women have been linked to the advancement of careers for aspiring women superintendents (Ravetz, 2014). The benefits of social capital include access to information, resources, and career sponsorship (Seibert et al., 2001). Women participants spoke of these benefits as supportive of their careers. They also shared that although social capital is accrued in formal networks, informal networks can offer benefits and career support.

## **Informal Networks**

The literature has indicated that superintendents' success is often based on relationships built with others. As indicated in Chapter 2, the research by Lin (2000) indicated there are critical elements inherent in an informal network, including sharing important information with each other, exerting influence on outsiders for members' gain, certifying members' social credentials, and reinforcing members' identities that set it apart from other types of capital. If a superintendent is female, it is imperative that she builds "strong social networks" (Muñoz et al., 2014, p. 765).

All the superintendents who participated in the study spoke about the benefits of informal social networks as they moved through their career journey and ascended to the superintendency. Informal networks were understood by many of the superintendents as a core group of people who are colleagues who become a network of support. Many of the female superintendent's social networks were with other administrators who often work together to tackle obstacles, troubleshoot as a team, and come up with solutions for the larger group. The social capital developed through this type of networking allowed many of the female superintendents the opportunities to develop strong ties and bonds and acquire resources that positively affect their careers. All the participants in the study spoke about additional significant relationships they had that served as social capital support. In addition to mentors, the women reported that confidants and role models were influential in their ascent and in their present position. The women in the study reported that strong relationships with both men and women role models had a positive effect on their career trajectory.

## **Relationships**

Nikkah et al. (2012) stated that women should search for or take advantage of opportunities with other leaders to consider their own personal strengths and areas to improve. If

women have built strong relationships with colleagues and have strong networks, they may be encouraged to apply for higher positions if they are viewed as having great potential (Muñoz et al., 2014).

Many of the female superintendents spoke about the role of both men and women in their ascent and their position as superintendents. Participants in the study spoke about confidants and role models. The women participants shared that it was essential for them to have close and trusting relationships with colleagues in the same field whom they could share their problems with as well as work through solutions. In most cases, although the superintendents valued relationships with both male and female colleagues, the confidante was female. Many of the women were grateful for these confidante relationships that provided individual support in several different ways. As the literature indicated, while confidantes often serve as a sounding board, they can also be a voice of encouragement to apply for higher positions. Many times, as women indicated in the study, the relationships they had with confidants were stronger over time and grew into friendships that offered women additional emotional support.

### **Role Models**

The women in the study also spoke about role models being important in their ascent to the superintendency, with several of them speaking about both men and women serving this role. According to Hoyt and Simon (2011), role models can positively impact people's aspirations and self-perceptions through a social comparison process, a process deemed important for those underrepresented in various professions. All the women participants in the study reported that both men and women administrators were valuable role models, and several said they were encouraged by them to enroll in leadership courses and eventually apply to the superintendent positions. Several women in the study spoke about other female superintendents acting as important role models during their career journey. These were women that participants looked up

to and were influential in their careers. The women superintendents in the study also learned essential practices and skills from their role models. Research suggests that women are more inspired by females as opposed to male role models who demonstrate that women can overcome gender barriers to achieve success (Hoyt & Simon, 2011). Several women also spoke about negative role models in their careers being just as powerful. One superintendent put it this way: “I also learned how I did not want to be a leader. I always found negative role models to be powerful for me, just as much as positive.”

All the superintendents in the study agreed that social capital in the form of mentors, networks, and relationships was a critical part of their superintendent journey. In many instances, formal and informal networks offered valuable opportunities that enhanced their careers. In addition, and of greater importance, the formal and informal relationships supported their ascent into leadership. Formal relationships that were influential included both mentorships and sponsorships, and for many of the participants in the study, these relationships were based on advocacy and grew into friendships. Other informal relationships such as confidantes and role models offered a different type of support but also led to opportunities for career growth and advancement. The women participants spoke highly about their confidantes, who were trusted friends but at times acted as advocates, mentors, and even sponsors.

Although the women in the study did speak specifically about the types of relationships that were influential in their ascent, at times, the nature of the relationships overlapped, and women used the terms interchangeably. Literature has indicated that women develop multi-layered networks to gain access to the superintendency: “Professional connection, multiple mentors and groups who may not appear beneficial may be in the future are established and maintained” (Ortiz, 2001, p. 68). Although the evidence is clear that women with mentors move into school district leadership sooner than those that do not, formal and informal networks as



well as other relationships such as role models and confidants can assist women who aspire to high-level leadership within school districts.

While the participants in the study spoke about relationships as important, I also found that the superintendents in the study spoke about other factors besides social capital that supported their journey. It was not only whom the women knew that assisted them in their journey but also what they knew. These other factors became the second theme of professional preparedness.

### **Professional Preparedness**

Professional preparedness for the purpose of the study can be defined by Luthans et al. (2004) as human capital or “what you know” and can include experience, education, skills, knowledge, and ideas. Human capital can provide organizations with skills and experiences that are valuable, rare, and difficult to replicate. This type of capital also offers competitive advantage (Luthans et al., 2004). According to Brunner and Kim (2010), there are two types of professional preparedness. Formal preparedness is defined as the advanced education administration training that can be received through conventional coursework and programs of higher education, while a candidate’s actual employment record and other quality experiences are experiential preparedness, which can also contribute to professional preparedness. The female participants in the study spoke about both types of preparedness as factors that offered a “competitive advantage” (Luthans et al., 2004, p. 46), which was significant in supporting their journey into the superintendency. Professional preparedness included the following themes from the participants: curriculum and instruction experts, developing additional skills over time, and leadership style.

## **Curriculum and Instruction Experts**

According to Kowalski et al. (2011), the general career path to the superintendency begins as a teacher. Indeed, eight out of the nine women superintendents began their educational careers as teachers, and all were also assistant superintendents for curriculum and instruction prior to their superintendency. All the female superintendents valued their teaching and their strong curriculum and instruction background, and it was apparent that this strength became a vital part of their leadership style that the women perceived as child centered. According to the research, women superintendents' longer tenure in the classroom may play a role in their interest in and focus on curriculum and instruction (Brunner & Grogan, 2005). Munoz et al. (2014) concurred and indicated that because of their long time in the classroom, they develop higher expertise in curriculum and instruction. This expertise can prompt alternative techniques to leadership, reforming outdated practices, and placing more emphasis on teaching and learning rather than organizational management. All the women participants shared that curriculum and instruction was the area that they were strongest in and the area that they were most passionate about. For the women participants in the study, their strength as educational leaders served as part of their professional preparation, which supported a child-centered leadership style as well as their access to the superintendency. According to Brunner and Kim (2010), curriculum and instruction may be the most significant career path and should be required for gaining a superintendent position.

## **Developing Additional Skills Over Time**

Although the female superintendents in the study began as teachers, their career paths diverged after teaching and included different leadership positions with greater responsibility. This various leadership provided opportunities to learn additional skills they perceived to be critical to their career success as a superintendent. A strong common theme was that they were

able to ascertain the additional on-the-job skills needed for the position, despite what they perceived as a lack of formal university training in superintendent skills. As Brunner and Kim (2010) stated, the experiential knowledge that women gain over the course of their careers has greater variation than for men. Women's career paths include both line and staff positions, and as a result, are complex and diverse. Women, on average, enter the superintendency five years later than men, and these years were often spent in curriculum and instruction jobs, which added to the preparedness for the superintendency (Brunner & Kim, 2010). The participants in the study held several positions that supported and enhanced their leadership skill set. Superintendent Cassatt spoke about developing additional skills over time when she stated, "I had my hands in everything and took advantage of every opportunity." All the superintendents reported taking advantage of every opportunity, including the skills that were not necessarily learned in their formal education programs such as financial management, business, and negotiations.

### **Leadership Style**

The superintendents in the study embodied a student-centered, collaborative leadership style. During the interviews, I also recognized leadership qualities as transformative. Literature has indicated that women leaders are considered transformative (Shields, 2004). As discussed in Chapter 1, the transformative leader inspires their staff to take ownership of a shared vision and is always aware of the potential and needs of those who follow them (Northouse, 2015). The women superintendents in the study embodied a style of leadership that was transformative. This style of leadership is endorsed by scholars as essential for today's leaders, given its emphasis on fostering intentional change that is based on what is best for the students (Shields, 2004).

As discussed in Chapter 4, women superintendents in the study perceived professional preparation as supportive in advancing them into the superintendency. Aside from social capital, their expertise in curriculum and instruction, their development of additional business skills over

time, and a transformative leadership style were perceived as vital in the career pathway toward the superintendency. Although the women superintendents accrue both social capital and professional preparedness in their ascent, there were challenges when navigating the pathway and career obstacles of gender bias and sex-role stereotyping.

### **Career Obstacles**

In this study, the women superintendents perceived that both gender bias and sex-role stereotyping existed in their lived experience as female leaders in education. Grogan and Shakeshaft (2010) contended that the underrepresentation of women leaders is a result of females being restrained by stereotypical expectations and beliefs. Although the women's leadership research speaks to a myth of neutrality (Skrla, 2000) that effectively prevents most school administrators from confronting issues of sexism, I did not find this to be the case. I found that the participants were willing to discuss sensitive issues, which was an unexpected result.

The three women in the study who identified as women of color spoke about the intersections of gender discrimination and racial bias. One superintendent referred to it as the "double whammy," which may mean living with two types of discrimination.

### **Sex-Role Stereotyping or Stereotype Threat**

When asked if they had ever faced gender discrimination, the women in the study were forthcoming with their responses. Eight out of the nine women clearly expressed that there were times they were treated differently because of their gender, and they were able to share a specific situation when that occurred.

The research defined sex-role stereotyping as a perceived incongruity between female gender roles and leadership roles. This incongruity can lead to prejudice and can account for the numerous findings that indicate a less-than-favorable attitude toward women leaders (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Stereotype threat can also include an expectation of women as the weaker sex or

that women are only experts in “soft skills” (e.g., curriculum and instruction). Research has indicated that women’s skills set are innate with their biology (Hong, 2016), so expertise in curriculum and instruction is the primary area that women are expected to excel. This gendered assumption can disadvantage women, since it assumes their lack of other vital leadership skills in other areas. Sex-role stereotyping may also be present when people expect that women lack the skills associated with the school superintendency such as budgeting and finance. According to the literature, there is a type of sex-role stereotyping that women lack operational knowledge based on their gender (Skrla et al., 2000). These stereotypical expectations for the superintendents who participated in the study came from boards, hiring committees, and community members. The women in the study perceived that, at times, their skills in areas other than curriculum and instruction were questioned and there were assumptions concerning their lack of knowledge impacting their work as a leader.

Women are also often viewed as lacking the skills that usually are stereotypical of men, such as “agentic” characteristics emphasizing confidence, control, and assertiveness, while the stereotypical attributes of women include communal characteristics highlighting a concern for others (Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007). Several of the superintendents described instances when their qualifications or characteristics were questioned because they were women. Dana and Bourisaw (2004) explained that sexism is a barrier for women who aspire to become CEOs of school districts because people respond to women based on sex-role stereotypes. The cultural stereotypes of female leaders not being assertive enough, or having expertise only in soft skills, were found to be examples of the cultural stereotyping the women faced.

### **Gender Bias**

Garn and Brown (2008) found that women believed that gender bias created a major challenge to their path to the superintendency and to their performance after gaining the position.

Indeed, the participants in this study also cited search committees and boards of education as discriminatory. The old boys' club, being held to higher standards than men, and the jealousy of other women were common themes that indicated the perceived presence of gender bias in the lived experiences of the women who participated in the study.

During member checking, the women who participated in the focus group affirmed the presence of both gender bias and stereotype threat throughout their careers and presented additional stories of inequalities due to their gender. The focus group discussion was important in validating the presence of gender bias during their ascent to the superintendency.

### **Search Committee/Boards of Education**

As discussed in Chapter 4, women superintendents in the study reported on the discriminatory practices of the selection process through search committees and boards of education. As discussed in the literature, consultants who serve on search committees are often gatekeepers to promote men to keep women from being interviewed or from attaining the position (Shakeshaft, 1989). One female superintendent in the study reported that in her experience, search committees would screen for interviews but did not move the female candidates forward. Therefore, the board was not given the opportunity to interview female candidates. According to this superintendent, she had female friends who experienced the same thing. In such instances, the women superintendents shared they were overlooked for positions although they were qualified for the job and discovered later in the process that a male received the promotion.

Beyond the obvious, there is a need for equitable and equal selection processes. Some scholars suggested that if discrimination against women and people of color were eliminated, their hiring would be one solution for the reported superintendent shortage, smaller applicant pools, and declining quality in candidate pools (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Tallerico, 2000).

## **Old Boys' Club**

As discussed in Chapter 4, Witmer (2006) described the good old boys' network as men in power who seek to promote other men in the workplace for the purpose of replicating power structures. Moody (1983) suggested that the superintendency is perceived as a private club, with access controlled by a structure of the old boys' network. My study confirmed the perceived existence of this club. The women in the study believed that the structure still exists and gave specific examples of their experiences in accessing the superintendency and once in the position. One superintendent explained in detail the all-male breakfast club that meets each month before the scheduled superintendent's district meeting. She perceived that the breakfast club was designed to be exclusionary to women and created access issues for the women superintendents, including herself. Another superintendent described the club as the all-male central administrative team she was a part of during her journey to the superintendency. She described the atmosphere in the district office as "a bit sexual" and cited a specific incident by describing the request from one of her male colleagues to wear her three-inch heels.

Research in the field describes this club as another form of overt gender discrimination that exists in the superintendency because it is an informal network of men whose purpose is to help one another in their careers (Moody, 1983; Witmer, 2006). The women participants in the study were aware of the existence of this club, and in both examples discussed, the women shared how they navigated this long-standing old boys' club by asking to join. Although this request was met with some discomfort by the men, after a few times, they invited her to join.

## **Women Held to Higher and Different Standards Compared to Men**

Most of the women in the study perceived that they had to work harder than their male colleagues to prove that they can do the work to acquire and maintain their position. While women can do the required work, others do not share this belief. The participants in the study

perceived many obstacles in terms of differential treatment. Research has shown that women high school principals reported having to work harder and longer to obtain evaluations equal to that of men (Miller, 2006).

In addition to the barriers within the patriarchal structure and selection process, women also encounter barriers because of family and feminine expectations. Skrla (2000) stated, “In the same way that the US society has constructed the superintendency as male, it has created a package of norms about femininity and female behavior” (p. 297). Traditional sex roles create conflict for women aspiring to top-level leadership positions. As indicated in Chapter 4, several of the participants acknowledged that high-level leadership involves the loss of time spent with family. One participant even questioned if having a family was in her best interest as a superintendent. She explained, “I do not have children myself, and I would question whether I could provide the same level of commitment to the district where I work and still have a family and do my job on the same level.” She continued, “It is hard to pull away from it.” Other participants who did have families also spoke about the enormous amount of time that the superintendency requires but reported that their husbands and families were supportive. According to Grogan and Bruner (2005), support from a spouse was of great importance when taking on the superintendency.

### **Jealousy of Other Women**

As indicated in Chapter 4, the jealousy of other women was an obstacle that five out of the nine women superintendents faced throughout their journey. The jealousy that the participants perceived came from females in their community, teachers that served on hiring committees, female secretaries, and women serving on school boards. According to the female superintendents, the jealousy was harmful, and in one situation, the aspiring superintendent did



not gain a position because she perceived that a woman involved in the hiring process blocked her entrance.

Jealousy of other women was a surprising finding in my study. I did not expect the women participants to speak about other women serving as barriers in their careers. Upon a closer examination of the literature, I found that women can experience this jealousy in the workplace (Funk, 2004). Many females in education leadership positions in the United States experience a spectrum of *horizontal violence*—a term used to describe the harm that some women do to other women in the educational workplace. The curse of horizontal violence remains a hidden issue for females in educational leadership (Funk, 2004). The importance of sharing these hidden issues is significant for aspiring women and is discussed further in the section on implications for practice.

### **Additional Obstacles for Women of Color**

Women of color can face additional barriers throughout their careers. As mentioned in Chapter 3, if the race of the superintendents is factored in, African Americans account for 5.3% and Hispanics account for 2.7% (Quilantan & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004). The challenges for the three women of color in my study were even more significant than those facing women who identify as White. As research has explained, Hispanic and African American women are twice the minority, barred as both females but also by their race (Quintan & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004). The journey to the superintendency for women of color can have additional obstacles because of the intersection of race and gender. The superintendents who were women of color were confronted with the same challenges, worries, and responsibilities as any other women, but often with the additional burden of legitimizing themselves daily because of their race (Brunner & Peyton-Claire, 2000).

Women of color in my study shared several obstacles they faced because of their race. First, they share a common perception that they have to work even harder than their counterparts. As one superintendent of color stated, they “work at 150%” to legitimize themselves and prove that the stereotypes were not used to define their progress or success.” Second, the women of color in the study also perceived that they did not always have the same opportunities, such as the availability of mentors. As one participant put it, “There is the lack of being taken under someone’s wing.” Lastly, the women participants of color felt strongly about their ability to not let the racial barriers keep them out of the superintendency. Although they all realized the additional difficulties of the job because they were women of color, they believed in the importance of making a difference for students; thus, prejudices and bias because of their race would not serve as an obstacle. I found that their resilience was a sustaining attitude that assisted them throughout their ascent and their career. Resilience, which is determined to be one of the four psychological capitals, has been defined as a staunch acceptance of reality as well as deep beliefs in strongly held values (Luthans et al., 2004). The participants in the study who identified as women of color embodied these additional assets and therefore embraced positive psychological capital when faced with bias on both their gender and race.

### **Social Capital Mediating Gender Bias**

Some women have been able to mediate the gender bias obstacles and ascend to the superintendency. The participating superintendents are part of this group. Literature has revealed that social capital can be the force or condition that can break through gender-based barriers women face in aspiring to leadership positions. I found evidence that participants used social capital to mediate the jealousy of other women and family obligations. The techniques of mentoring, networking, and relationship building were cited in the literature as examples of the

social capital women need. Female superintendents in the study used these techniques to mediate gender bias in their lived experiences.

In the case of the jealousy of other women, social capital was used to mediate gender bias. Women can benefit from other females by gaining social support, role modeling, and information about overcoming discriminatory obstacles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Although the women in the study were clearly able to articulate the times when other women acted as obstacles, several women spoke of a woman acting as supports, especially when those women acted as mentors or had a strong relationship with the aspiring superintendent. Therefore, one can conclude that when strong relationships are built with other women, the gender bias of jealousy is mediated. Superintendent Cassatt spoke about women who were jealous, but she explained, “I also had women who opened the doors for me. I had women board members who I was close with who absolutely had the sense that I was the right person, and it was the one that they wanted.”

### **Contributions to Social Capital and Feminist Theory**

Both social capital theory and feminist theory were used in this study to examine women superintendents’ perceptions of how they accrued social capital during their journey to the superintendency despite gender-based obstacles that were a part of their lived experiences. While much is known about the gender-based barriers for women that keep them out of the superintendency, less is known about those conditions of opportunity or the accruing of social capital that allow women to ascend. This study used the social capital theory to examine those conditions that acted as these opportunities.

The findings of this research contribute to social capital theory as derived from the work, beginning with the idea that social capital exists in institutional relationships that provide its members with mutually owned capital. As discussed in Chapter 3, social capital theory holds a

distinct and long-standing place within research (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2000). Literature has linked social capital supports to career enhancement for women. Several studies indicated that mentoring can positively influence the careers of women superintendents (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Howard et al., 2017; Seibert et al., 2001). Other studies indicated that aspiring women actively pursue networks to advance their careers (Munoz et al., 2014; Ravetz, 2014).

Lin (2000) extended this understanding of social capital's relationship to the superintendent's candidacy. Lin further identified resources inherent in social capital that set it apart from economic and human capital. Social capital can include elements such as sharing important information, exerting influence on outsiders for members' gain, certifying members' social credentials, and reinforcing members' identities. Although multiple mentors, role models, formal and informal networks, and relationships supported aspiring women, my study indicated that the most benefit came from those mentors who were influential in the network that the women were a part of. These relationships were most often with current or former superintendents. The mentorships perceived to be the most valuable were those that occurred within the same network as the aspiring women and had an influence on the hiring process.

Research has made the connection between social capital and career enhancement using mentoring (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Howard et al., 2017). Although this connection is well documented, additional interpersonal behaviors that allow women to accrue social capital such as networking, sponsorships, confidantes, and role models were also examined and found to be important as additional forms of social capital for women aspiring to leadership. The underrepresentation of women in the superintendency is significant. Therefore, it becomes vital to examine additional ways that women can use social capital to ensure career advancement and success. I went into the study wondering if social capital would be a significant

factor in these women's journeys. I found evidence that although social capital was critical, there were additional factors that supported their journey. These factors included personal preparedness (human capital) and resilience (psychological capital), particularly for women of color.

The findings of the research also contribute to the feminist theoretical framework of oppression and identity, as derived from the work of Dana and Bourisaw (2006). The authors stated that the problem of gender equality is part of the larger picture. Social justice does not exist for women, because it is rooted in a societal ideology that does not ensure equitable freedom, rights, and responsibilities for women. The female superintendents in the study experienced oppression because of their gender. Within the data, the female superintendents expressed oppression in several ways, including hiring practices by search committees and boards of education, female expectations, and old boys' clubs.

Stereotyping and gender discrimination were a part of their experience as women aspiring to leadership, but gender stereotypes continue to exist within our culture. According to Dana and Bourisaw (2006), "Sex roles are powerful discriminators, and they are established, taught, and reinforced within a culture" (p. 24). The women participants in the study are a part of the culture and unintentionally reproduce gender-based stereotypes. When speaking about the obstacles they faced—specifically family obligations—several women superintendents had themselves internalized sex-role bias. While males are perceived as championing for their family by aspiring leadership jobs, society shows females as abandoning their families when pursuing leadership (Munoz et al., 2014). Superintendents Bourgeois, Smith, and Morisot spoke about the obstacles of having a family that women may encounter when they aspire to leadership. Their comments such as "Women must be home," "Balancing the superintendency and family is huge," "There is a great deal of time that you give from your own life," and "I don't have children myself and

would question whether I could have the same level of commitment to the district where I work if I did” indicated that these women superintendents internalized society’s expected sex-roles for women and therefore unintentionally reproduced the stereotype that it is challenging for women to balance their personal life and professional career.

According to Bell et al. (2019), these discriminatory practices are a part of social relations at work; accepting them, and not questioning them in terms of inequities that affect women, is wrong. In seeking to understand their identity, women cannot avoid the patriarchal system that has evolved in cultures and traditions over time, and women often remain at the mercy of male norms and power (Lumby, 2015).

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study warrant the following implications. First, the preparation of school superintendents has never been a high-visibility program in educational administrative programs. Moreover, very few university programs have focused on the superintendency (Glass et al., 2001). I propose that universities consider a preparation program specifically designed for educators who aspire to the superintendency. Second, preparation programs should include partnerships with districts to ensure the development of mentorships and sponsorships for aspiring women leaders. Last, the importance of additional training for search committees and boards of education is critical to ensure that women are receiving equal access to the superintendent position.

### **Reimagining Superintendent-Preparation Programs**

First, the preparation program for the superintendency should include coursework and conversations that deal with the issues of social capital and gender bias, including the “hidden” jealousy of other women as well as the need for women to forge important trusting relationships in educational leadership. Some specific items to consider for coursework would be the role of

“integrated discourse” and “inclusive conversations” (Skrla et al., 2000, p. 67) that focus on how women experience the role of gender when aspiring for high-level leadership. The use of current research, use of role-plays, and other situational teaching models would make superintendent aspirants learn essential theories while learning how to confront the barriers they may face as well as the importance of the supportive relationships that are necessary for career advancement.

Second, a preparation program at the university level must include specific knowledge of collective bargaining, personnel, budget and finance, policy development and implementation, and effective communication with stakeholders (Callan & Levinson, 2011). Universities must provide the coursework and instruction that meet the current educational needs of this position and partner with school districts to ensure support for aspiring women leaders.

Last, it is essential to include the transformative style of leadership in preparation programs. As discussed in Chapter 1 and in Chapter 4, research has indicated that women tend to adopt a style of leadership that allow leaders to become intimate with the needs of their followers (Northouse, 2015). Shields (2004) stated, “If we are to achieve academic excellence and social justice in education, our leaders must be transformative seeking not only to transform our practices of schooling but our socially constructed and persistent understandings” (p. 128). Both men and women aspiring to the superintendent’s position need a curriculum that focuses on the transformative style of leadership. A curriculum rich in coursework and conversations on this topic will empower future leaders to make socially just decisions.

### **Recommendations for Partnerships with School Districts**

University programs should include partnerships with school districts, with the goal of working toward a pipeline for the superintendency. The paramount importance of mentors and networking for females aspiring to the superintendency is clear from this study. While mentors are considered vital for women for advancement, my study has indicated that the mentor

relationship needs to include additional district sponsorships. Therefore, it becomes significant for superintendent-preparation programs to identify aspiring women superintendents at the university level and provide mentorships with women currently leading school districts. Mentors can help guide and support women. They can encourage aspiring women to take advantage of informal and formal networks such as The New York State Council of School Superintendents, which has established a Women's Initiative and an Aspiring Superintendent's Academy that provides training and recruitment to aspiring leaders.

### **Recommendations for Additional Women Initiatives**

Although there are women's initiatives in place, their significant place in the career trajectory of women leaders warrants additional programs and conferences aimed at supporting aspiring women leaders. Both the Association of School Administrators and Leadership for Educational Foundations should consider offering workshops, conferences, and professional-development opportunities that focus on the specific needs of aspiring women educational leaders. These conferences, women initiatives, and professional developments can be offered at universities that currently prepare women for leadership, and the participation in these organizations can give women a better chance at success for leadership.

### **Recommendations for Search Firm Consultants and School Boards**

The findings of this research warrant the following implication for search firm consultants and school boards, since they are directly responsible for the hiring process of the superintendency. It is crucial that consultants and school boards be aware of and considerate of inherent biases when selecting candidates to recommend to school boards. Boards of education and selection committees should participate in sensitivity training that addresses issues of gender discrimination, including sex-role stereotyping. The opportunities to have authentic conversations regarding gender assumptions must be generated among those in charge of the



hiring so that such dialogue can stimulate learning. According to Shields and Edwards (2005), four types of knowledge can be constructed during dialogic integration: (a) knowledgeable about how others perceive a particular subject, (b) knowledge that the other gains about you and how you perceive a subject, (c) knowledge viewed as the two views are synthesized and knowledge about oneself in terms of one's prejudice and situatedness, and (d) the more nuanced and changed understanding of the subject because of the process. As indicated by the women in the study, the hiring committee's practices were often exclusionary to aspiring women and often resulted in highly qualified women candidates being overlooked in favor of male candidates. There is a necessity and importance of authentic conversations around these issues. As one-woman superintendent who advocates strongly for women and for people of color explained, "I work with boards to open their minds, to have a different mindset about what leadership can look like today."

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Based on the findings of this study, I propose the following recommendations for future research. First, given that the population interviewed was narrow in focus, expanding the study to include a quantitative study of the supports needed for the success of women superintendents across New York State could provide information that informs organizations and supports district-level leaders.

Second, although large numbers of women enroll in graduate programs in education, they are still vastly underrepresented in the superintendency. It is interesting that the numbers of doctoral and master-level programs in educational administration have well surpassed male representation over the past decade (Brunner & Grogan, 2005; ; Glass, 2000). With so many women attending these educational programs, studies are needed at the university level to examine current programs to examine if preparation programs for women are designed and

function in a way that encourages and promotes women as superintendents. The support that aspiring women need has been made apparent in the study. Studies focusing on ways to enhance leadership support for women at the university level have become vital.

It could be valuable to research women serving in central office positions who have not pursued the superintendency. The proposed study could study factors in the lived experiences of these potential superintendents to examine and understand the reasons why they are not ascending in their career path. A qualitative study including women in cabinet-level positions and motivation may contribute to the understanding and underrepresentation of women in the superintendency.

It would be useful to expand the research on the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency to include boards of education members. Boards may be operating with traditional models of school leadership (Skrla, 2000), and their perceptions of school leadership, selection committees, and selection process would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how to change the process to provide greater access for women. Future research should explore ways in which search consultants and school board members can examine their assumptions, values, and beliefs about equity to ensure that the superintendent's position is equally represented by women.

## **Conclusion**

In 1909, Ella Flagg Young, the first female superintendent not only of Chicago but of any major urban public school district in the nation, held an optimistic view of women in educational leadership positions. Although she predicted that many more women would reach the superintendency, nation's superintendents are women. Skrla (2000) found that men are 40 times more likely to advance into the superintendency than women. When there are disparities, it is

important to acknowledge and examine the factors causing them, and to find ways to mediate the disparities.

The examination of nine women superintendents in the study showed that social capital was a significant factor that supported their career pathway. The forms of social capital they discussed, including mentors, formal and informal networks, and relationships with confidantes and role models, confirmed previous research that social capital can offer opportunities for women aspiring to leadership (Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Howard et al., 2017). Identifying with role models and perceiving that their level of success is attainable was particularly important for the participating women superintendents who often perform in a negatively stereotyped domain (Hoyt & Simon, 2011). Influential mentoring networks were extremely valuable in that they provided sponsorships that can be more important than mentorships (Hewlett et al., 2010) and are vital for women in accessing the superintendent position.

The participants in the study were success stories, but they also faced challenges. The women in the study talked honestly and openly about their experiences with gender bias. Although these challenges were significant, the women participants in the study were not kept out and were able to break through that proverbial “glass ceiling” and thrive in their leadership positions. However, there are not enough women leading our nation’s schools. As research indicated, the public educational school system needs the leadership of women superintendents now, and our nation’s schools deserve the transformational leadership style that women can provide. In leading schools, women leaders focus on their primary responsibility, which is the care of children and their academic success (Noddings, 1999). This uneven balance of leadership style continues to impact the students in our educational system since women are motivated to transform the learning opportunities for those least served by current policies and practices.

Women continue to prepare to lead our nation's schools, as evidenced by the sheer number of women in educational administrative and doctoral programs. There are women superintendents who are successful in leading districts, and the voices of these nine leaders have the potential to contribute to a greater understanding of what types of support women need to be successful in accessing the superintendent's role. They are the true 'stars' of this dissertation. They are luminous, and their words shed light on their experiences as women navigating the path into high-level leadership. The themes uncovered in this dissertation, the implications for practices, as well as recommendations for future research can inspire and empower aspiring women superintendents and foster the upward progression of women in educational leadership. Representation matters. Only when people share leadership equally will women be able to achieve equality.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Superintendents**

### **For respondents:**

The study will be explained by the Principal Investigator, the consent will be read, and the subject's questions answered. A dated and signed form will be given to the participant.

### **Brief Project Description:**

The study will explore how superintendents perceive how social capital has affected them in their ascent to the superintendency and while in the current superintendent's position. The concept of social capital as used in the study will be defined and explained by the Principal Investigator.

### **I. Introduction**

1. Could you tell me about yourself?

Probe: Name, District, Number of years as a Superintendent in the current district? Other districts? Other things you feel I should know?

2. Could you discuss your experience in terms of the journey or pathway you took to the superintendent's position?
3. What is the most important thing that helped you obtain the superintendent position? Do you think that's different than other superintendents' experience? Why or why not?

Probe: Were any experiences more significant than others?

### **II. Barriers or Challenges**

1. Did you experience any barriers or challenges in your journey to the superintendency?

Probe: Tell me a story when you felt you were treated differently because of gender.



Probe: Stereotype threat is when you act in a certain way to avoid confirming negative stereotypes about your gender or race. Do you ever feel like you must change your behavior because of stereotype threat?

Probe: What were your experiences with other challenges or barriers? Do you feel that recruiting firms, Board of Education hiring, family obligations, were barriers and if so, how did you address them?

Probe: Do you think women take on the superintendency later in life? Do you think that this effects the number of women in the position?

Probe: (If applicable) Are there additional barriers for women who identify as Black, Latina, or Asian and/or live outside Long Island?

2. What relationships have helped you the most during your time as a superintendent?

Probe: Other superintendents, district administrators, parents, school board, etc.?

3. Have you noticed any additional barriers or challenges for women superintendents because of Covid?

4. Has Covid caused excessive turnover in the superintendency? Please explain.

5. Why do you believe there are only 24% of women in the superintendent position?

Probe: Do school board hiring practices, family responsibilities, district history with male superintendents play a role in this underrepresentation?

Probe: Are there additional barriers for women of color during the superintendency journey? Why or why not?

### **III. Networking, Building Relationships, and Mentoring**

1. How have the professional relationships assisted you in your journey to superintendency?

2. Tell me about the importance of professional relationships before you became a superintendent?

Probe: Are any of these relationships more significant than the others?

3. Have you had a mentor during your professional journey into the superintendency? Can you describe your relationship with your mentor? What were the benefits?
4. What has been your experience with networking in your position? How important was networking in your ascent to the superintendency?

Probe: Has any network been more significant? Can you share how you got involved in the network? What is your role?

5. If you could wave a magic wand, what policies would you change to create more pathways for woman in the superintendent position? What would you recommend leadership preparation programs do to increase the number of superintendents and prepare them for the job?
6. Are there other reasons beside social networks that helped you on your superintendent journey?
- 7.

#### **IV. Grand Tour Questions:**

1. What would you say was the most important factor in your journey to becoming a superintendent?

2. If I was aspiring to be a superintendent, what advice would you give me and why?

#### **V. Additional Questions:**

1. Are there any questions I should have asked but did not ask? Is there anything else you would like to add?
2. Who else would you recommend I speak to? I am looking for current women superintendents with at least 2 years' experience. Will you allow me to use your name in the referral letter to ask for their participation?

3. Would you be interested in participating in a focus group interview with other women superintendents on Long Island who have participated in the study?

## Appendix B: IRB Approval



1000 Hempstead Ave., PO Box 5002, Rockville Center, NY 11571-5002  
[www.molloy.edu](http://www.molloy.edu)

**Kathleen Maurer Smith, Ph.D.**  
**Dean, Graduate Academic Affairs**  
T: 516.323.3801  
F: 516.323.3398  
E: [ksmith@molloy.edu](mailto:ksmith@molloy.edu)

**DATE:** February 25, 2022

**TO:** Victoria Catalano, Ed.D  
**FROM:** Molloy College IRB

**PROJECT TITLE:** [1862457-1] Access to the superintendency  
**REFERENCE #:**  
**SUBMISSION TYPE:** New Project

**ACTION:** APPROVED  
**APPROVAL DATE:** February 25, 2022  
**EXPIRATION DATE:** February 24, 2023  
**REVIEW TYPE:** Expedited Review

**REVIEW CATEGORY:** Expedited review category # 6

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Molloy College IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

**You may proceed with your project.**

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of February 24, 2023.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Patricia Eckardt at 516-323-3711 or [peckardt@molloy.edu](mailto:peckardt@molloy.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,

Patricia Eckardt, Ph.D., RN, FAAN  
Chair, Molloy College Institutional Review Board

This letter has been issued in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Molloy College IRB's records.