HOW DO WOMEN SUPERINTENDENTS' WAYS OF LEADING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SUPPORT TEACHING AND LEARNING?

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This dissertation examined how two women superintendents employed in rural school districts located in the Midwestern United States describe their leadership practices. Leadership theory suggests that women potentially adopt different approaches to leadership than their male counterparts. This qualitative study explored how these two women superintendents led their small, rural districts and therefore sought to document the barriers that they faced as they enacted their leadership in a setting that is predominately occupied by men. The thematic analysis produces three themes. First, the women superintendents adopted a relational leadership orientation as their primary leadership approach and used this approach to engage multiple stakeholder groups to achieve district goals, including those related to teaching and learning. Second, the women positioned themselves as connectors who create networks of trusting relationships with individuals and groups within their communities. They actively listened to constituents within their communities and focused many of their efforts on instructional improvement. Finally, their gender influenced how they interacted with stakeholders and prompted the superintendents to take actions that sought to mitigate the influence of gender on leadership practice. Notably, the women sought to prove themselves, share power, minimize their personal accomplishments, ignore criticism, and deflect gender-based jokes. The findings from this study have implications for the field of educational leadership and, more broadly, theories of leadership, which have only considered the role of gender in leadership action.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As a female superintendent in a rural school district in the Midwestern United States, I have become increasingly aware of how few women serve in this important leadership role. When I entered meetings with superintendents from my area, the group included 22 superintendents, only two of whom were women. As I looked to other female superintendents for guidance, I was in short supply of colleagues who could provide guidance. Indeed, as women superintendents, we are constantly aware that we are in the minority and we experience the superintendency differently from our male colleagues. Many of the meetings and key decision-making groups are directed by men. Much of the conversation in our meetings focuses on policies, finances, and decreasing enrollments. Rarely do our conversations include substantial conversation about curriculum and instruction. Indeed, it is largely assumed that these issues are either not for district superintendents or something that is delegated to other administrators in the district. While our colleagues are accepting and welcome us into the superintendency, we often feel like outsiders who are not privy to their gendered jokes and references.

This study rests on the assumption that women add value to the superintendency and that it is important to understand how women lead in unique ways. Indeed, this point has been suggested in previous research related to both leadership theory (Finnan et al., 2015; Kowalski et al., 2011; Brunner & Grogan, 2007) and in research on educational leadership (Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Funk et al., 2002). Broadly, scholars contend that women provide a different way of understanding and applying leadership skills and can add to the conversation if those differences are understood and valued. Further, as Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) reviewed the

research for recurring themes describing women's leadership, they identified five approaches that characterize women's educational leadership: relational leadership, leadership for social justice, spiritual leadership, leadership for learning, and balanced leadership. These practices were identified as the five most common approaches among women in superintendent leadership positions (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011) and will serve as my theoretical framework. I was able to expand on the understanding of women's ways of leading by examining in greater depth how and why women may choose to lead in particular ways, as gender intersects with their intentional leadership actions. To some extent, researchers have focused on how women superintendents lead and the priorities for their leadership actions. Less clear is why the women may choose their leadership actions and priorities. This study reveals the intentional decisions two women superintendents make as they lead their districts and navigate gender barriers, which are woven throughout their daily actions as executive leaders of large organizations.

A superintendent manages competing demands, priorities, and responsibilities as a senior district leader. In the age of accountability, improving instruction is clearly a priority for any superintendent who seeks to be successful in their role (Kowalski et al., 2011). Typically, female superintendents have a stronger background in curriculum and instruction than male superintendents and are often hired for their ability to be instructional leaders (Lemasters & Roach, 2012). Yet, the research on women and educational administration is predominately centered on the institutional barriers preventing women from entering the superintendency, professional obstacles to the position, and policy-based efforts to recruit more women into the role. Somewhat surprisingly, the research does not widely address how women use their instructional leadership backgrounds to improve teaching and learning when serving as superintendents. Indeed, the limited number of studies around superintendents as instructional

leaders have not considered gender differences. This study contributes to this literature by exploring how women superintendents in a rural setting describe leadership practices that aim to support the improvement of instruction. Prior research has not widely studied women superintendents in rural settings and so this study attempts to fill that void. It also considered the gender barriers identified and how the women navigate their leadership to respond to the barriers that intersect with their leadership priorities for the organizations they lead. By identifying women superintendent practices that support instructional improvement and how both women navigate gender to enact leadership, this research contributes to our current knowledge of effective leadership practices, while also expanding the field's knowledge of how gender impacts women's ways of leading.

District leaders are responsible for preparing students with diverse learning, social, and cultural needs to be successful on academic achievement measures as well as to acquire skills enabling them to be considered college and career ready. Superintendents, who lead faculty and staff toward improving outcomes for students, are also functioning in multiple competing roles as the Chief Executive Officer of school districts. Women superintendents must also navigate challenges unique to their gender, including particular hidden prejudices and stereotypes (Eagly, 2018; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Garcia-Retamero & Lopez-Zafra, 2006; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly et al.,1995). For example, according to Bowles and McGinn (2005), women are much less likely to self-promote for leadership positions than men. When they do promote themselves, this behavior is interpreted negatively by colleagues and by hiring committees. This self-promotion is not viewed negatively when conducted by men (Bowles & McGinn, 2005). Women also experience conflicts managing responsibilities related to work and home (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Women tend to undervalue their own qualifications and value their partners' careers rather than their own with regard to relocation or a long commute (Sperandio & Devades, 2015).

Research suggests the role of superintendent has been primarily filled by men (Finnan et al., 2015; Kowalski et al., 2011). In the state where I am conducting this research, 22% of all superintendents are women (Bollinger & Grady, 2015). Nationally, the numbers have increased. In 1982, 1.2% of public-school superintendents were women compared with 24.1% in 2010 (Kowalski et al., 2011). The most recent data suggest that 27% of American superintendents are women (Finnan et al., 2015). Thus, while women superintendents are steadily increasing, the number occupying this position is still much less than the teaching force as a whole. According to some recent analyses, more than 76% of public-school teaching positions are filled with women educators, and women comprise over 50% of the students in higher education leadership programs (Bollinger & Grady, 2018). Although women dominate the education ranks, the superintendent position continues to be disproportionally occupied by men.

To understand the requirements of the superintendent role, many researchers have studied the daily demands associated with the leadership position. The superintendent position is one of the most difficult and most male-dominated chief executive positions of any profession in the United States (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999). Some researchers have concluded the position is too large to expect any one individual to navigate it successfully (Kowalski et al., 2011). Often times, the position of superintendent is discussed in ways that masculinize it by emphasizing skills related to business, operations, athletics, or financial management (Kowalski, 2005). Yet, when examining the superintendent role, women superintendents have been described as having strengths as instructional leaders, democratic leaders, applied scientists, managers, and communicators (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Funk and

colleagues (2002) argue that women superintendents have stronger backgrounds in curriculum and instruction and they tend to be more collaborative in their leadership orientation than their male counterparts. According to the literature, gender influences how individuals lead. While men are discussed in terms of agentic behaviors, women are found to be more communal in their ways of leading (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). The communal approach to leadership is associated with engaging in more nurturing and kind behaviors while demonstrating concern for others (Heilman, 2001). Later, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2007) expanded to five themes common to women's leadership practices, including relational leadership. Relational leadership was described by Branson and Marra (2019) as being a phenomenon focused on authentic relationships, which are necessary to move organizations forward. As such, leadership is not a position of authority. Instead, it is earned through the relationships the leader develops with team members "The relational cornerstone of leadership is the reciprocal and dynamic interaction process between the formal leader and those to be led" (Branson & Marra, 2019, p. 93). The mutually beneficial relationship between the employee and their leader is also a predictor of employee engagement (Branson & Marra, 2019). Further, research conducted by Buckingham and Goodall (2015) suggests that as much as 70% of employee engagement can be traced back to the relationships between employees and their leaders. As leaders seek to engage employees in their organizations and move their organizations forward, they must involve their employees in decision- making and problem-solving (Branson & Marra, 2019). Indeed, communal leadership qualities are considered to be the pathway to improve employee engagement and accomplish organizational goals.

Scholars hypothesize that the accountability movement has shifted the focus for superintendents from one emphasizing business management to one that focuses on instructional

leadership (Kowalski et al., 2011; Sharp et al., 2004). School boards increasingly indicate they are searching for executives who will improve instruction (Kowalski et al., 2011; Sharp et al., 2004). Since the accountability reform movement has required a district leader knowledgeable in curriculum and instruction, women's focus on curriculum and instruction has provided them a pathway to the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Handy-Collins, 2008). This age of accountability also requires central office leaders to transform their function and serve as instructional leaders of building principals (Honig, 2012). Many women bring a strong curriculum and instruction background into the superintendent position, which allows them to serve as instructional leaders.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to examine how two women superintendents employed in a rural school district setting describe their leadership practices. I focused specifically on women superintendents, as knowledge of curriculum and instruction has been noted as a significant factor for advancement of women to the superintendency (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005). This research thus informs our understanding of the ways women use their curriculum and instruction backgrounds to lead districts to improve teaching and learning. Specifically, it addresses how two women superintendents balance the many roles of a superintendent with their priority of supporting the improvement of instruction while navigating gender.

Research Questions

This research will be guided by the following questions:

1) What approach to leadership do women superintendents located in a rural school district setting use to advance their district's agenda for teaching and learning improvement?
    - How does gender shape the superintendents' description of their leadership practice, if at all?
    - What barriers, if any, do women encounter as they lead their school districts?
    - How, if at all, do women address the barriers when fulfilling their responsibilities as superintendents?

Significance

This qualitative study contributes to the limited understanding of women superintendent leadership practices in rural settings. Specifically, it provides a new understanding of leadership practices that women superintendents in rural settings adopt to improve teaching and learning. Thus, the study has implications for how we prepare superintendents, mentor women who are new to the superintendency, and seek to diversify the superintendency. Broadly, then, this study enhances our understanding of gender and its effect on leadership. It may provide women leaders the confidence to seek higher leadership roles, since this lack of self-promotion is one of the barriers for women (Hoyt, 2013).

Organization of the Study

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter One provides an introduction to the research study and offers context for the study. Chapter Two discusses relevant literature and is organized around the following areas: (1) the role of the superintendent, and specifically women superintendents, (2) instructional leadership, and (3) women's ways of leading and how this

connects to Grogan and Shakeshaft's five themes for women's leadership. Chapter Three describes the research methodology as well as further details about the research setting, the participants, data collection process, and analytic approach. Within this discussion, I also note the efforts I took to ensure trustworthiness in my interpretation of data. Chapter Four presents the findings from the qualitative analysis, and is organized around three themes that I produced through my analysis. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the findings in relation to the existing empirical literature and offers implications for the daily practice of superintendents. I conclude the chapter by offering some possible directions for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

While the book *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, released in 1983, served as the foundation for the current accountability era, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001, referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), required district superintendents to adjust their priorities and begin focusing on teaching, learning, and student academic proficiency (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005). NCLB was based on the premise that students should be provided with a guaranteed and viable standards-based curriculum and that all students should demonstrate proficiency based on a summative assessment. Further, NCLB required the implementation of evidence-based instructional practices to support student learning. High-performing schools were provided incentives and low-performing schools faced consequences. NCLB prompted significant changes in the work of public schools and the leadership required from the superintendent to meet the challenges in the accountability era. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was adopted in 2015 and reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). ESSA placed an increased emphasis on high academic standards, assessments aligned with standards, and improved high school graduation rates as a way of ensuring students are prepared to succeed in college and their careers. Further, ESSA required accountability and action for positive changes if groups of students were not making progress in the lowest performing schools (USDOE, 2021). Notably, these changes in the policy environment necessitated shifts in the leadership focus of superintendents—including moving them from their former role approximating the responsibilities of a Chief Executive or Financial Officer to one more accurately reflecting the responsibilities of a Chief Learning Officer (Kowalski, 2006; Callahan, 1966).

As the accountability movement magnified classroom, school, and district practices, superintendents, central office administrators, and school leaders began adopting a pronounced focus on teaching and learning improvement. It is this focus on curriculum and instruction that some researchers argue has given women superintendents new pathways to the superintendency as well as greater viability as candidates for the education system's highest administrative ranks (Brunner & Kim, 2010). However, although the number of women superintendents has increased over the last two decades, nationally only 26.7% of superintendents are women, compared with 72.9% of men as public-school administrators overall (AASA, 2020). Several studies have been conducted since the 1980s to understand the barriers for women when pursuing a superintendent position and the pathways to the superintendency (Barker, 2012; Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Blanchard, 2009; Copeland & Calhoun, 2014; Dana & Bourisaw, 2006; Tallerico, 2000b). Studies have also examined the leadership styles of male and female superintendents in the top job (Brunner, 2000; Katz, 2006; LeMasters, 2011). This study will add to the research available by examining the actual leadership practices implemented by women superintendents to improve instruction in their school districts and how they navigate gender within these practices.

This chapter reviews the literature pertaining to the school superintendency, including a superintendent's instructional leadership, the evolving role of superintendents, and the contributions of women to the role, and a broader discussion about the differences in leadership practices between men and women. I begin by defining the terms of superintendent, leadership, and instructional leadership, which I will utilize for this study. Then, I discuss the evolution of the roles of the superintendent and where women fit within this role. I conclude with a discussion of the differences between male and female ways of leading. Furthermore, I will explain the integration of ideas that form the basis for the theoretical framework to ground the study.

Definition of Terms: Superintendent, Leadership, and Instructional Leadership

Superintendent was officially defined in 1994 in response to an instability in the superintendent's office, oftentimes due to a conflict with school board members and a lack of clarity regarding roles. The National School Board Association (NSBA) and American Association of School Administrators (AASA) published guidelines separating and defining the position of superintendent compared to school board member. The superintendent was defined as an advisor and leader of the school district. Further, the superintendent was described as chief executive officer of education: "A superintendent's primary responsibility is to make recommendations regarding educational issues in the district" (NSBA & AASA, 1994). For the purposes of this study, I have used this definition to guide the understanding of the role of superintendent and will confine this study to public school superintendents.

Leadership has been defined by many researchers through a variety of lenses and fields of study for decades. Kouzes and Posner (1995) identified five effective leadership practices that evoke organizational improvement. The five practices identified are: (1) Challenging the process—the leadership practice of constantly searching for opportunities to change the status quo. Leaders are seeking innovation—new ways to improve the organization. They are risk-takers. (2) Inspiring a shared vision—the leadership practice demonstrated by the leaders' passion for their work, believing they can make a difference. Leaders have a vision for the future and a unique image of the organization's possibilities. (3) Enabling others to act—the leadership practice of facilitating collaboration and building inspired teams: "When people have more discretion, more authority, and more information, they are much more likely to use their energies to produce extraordinary results" (Kouzes & Posner, 1995, p. 12). (4) Modeling the way—the leadership practice of leading through personal example. (5) Encouraging the heart—the

leadership practice of celebrating follower and organizational successes. For the purposes of this research, I will utilize Kouzes and Posner's (1995) practices of leadership, which are embedded within the relationships between leaders and followers, as the lens through which this study examines women superintendents' ways of leading.

Instructional leadership, much like leadership, has been defined by many researchers and scholars for decades. Hitt and Tucker (2016) examined three frameworks for improving student achievement through instructional leadership and created a unified framework of five categories: establishing and conveying the vision, facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students, building professional capacity, creating a supportive organization for learning, and connecting with external partners. The authors of the book *Qualities of Effective Principals* (Stronge et al., 2008) reviewed the literature and identified common themes around instructional leadership. The definition they derived from the literature included "sustaining a school vision, sharing leadership, leading a learning community, using data to make instructional decisions, and monitoring curriculum and instruction" (Stronge et al., 2008). Hallinger (2000) developed the most frequently used conceptualization of instructional leadership. He proposed three dimensions of the instructional program: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school-learning climate (Hallinger, 2000).

Role of Superintendent

Before discussing women as superintendents, I will explore the role of superintendent and how it has changed to meet changing expectations. The superintendent has often been viewed as "a fit" for a man (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Wilson (1980) stated, "The most successful superintendent is male, Anglo-Saxon, middle-aged, Republican, intelligent, and a good student but not gifted" (p. 20). Kowalski (2005) labeled superintendents of the late 1800s

and early 1900s as “teacher scholars” (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 5; Kowalski, 2005). During that timeframe, superintendents were highly educated and their primary focus was curriculum and supervision of teachers (Kowalski, 2005). In this era, superintendents did not have the authority to manage finances or facilities until the role began to shift from instructional leadership to financial management (Sharp & Walter, 2004). The role transitioned again during the Industrial Revolution (Callahan, 1962). Expectations for improved efficiency caused business and community leaders to demand that schools run in ways that were similar to business and industry. Thus, the role of superintendent moved away from instructional leader to chief financial officer (Callahan, 1962; Kowalski et al., 2011). The vision of the superintendent as operational leader persisted until the emergence of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and the authorization of No Child Left Behind (2002) (Kowalski et al., 2011; Sharp & Walter, 2004). Demands for accountability shifted the superintendent’s focus from business to instruction, with a particular emphasis on eliminating student achievement gaps (Kowalski et al., 2011). After studying more than 300 superintendents, Cambron-McCabe and colleagues (2013) determined that superintendents have a moral imperative to serve as leaders of learning and to use their leadership to increase student achievement.

Glass (2006) maintained that without solid district-level management, leadership strategies of any type would flounder or be seriously impeded. Further, Glass stated that it would be difficult to find a high-academic-achieving district without competent fiscal, budget, facilities, personnel, curriculum and support services management. Thus, the job of the superintendent has become crucial in determining the fate of a school district (Brunner & Bjork, 2001; Kowalski et al., 2011). Without proper management, Glass predicted principals would continue to struggle against central office: “The struggle to improve achievement and the struggle with a district

central office is likely a strong contributor to failing schools" (2006, p. 4). Indeed, the disconnects between central office strategy and teaching practice are a primary contributor to incoherent instructional programs in school districts.

The role of the public-school superintendent is multifaceted and complex (Copeland, 2013). Brunner and Grogan (2007) suggest the superintendent's role includes responsibilities requiring them to act as an instructional leader, manager, political strategist, social scientist, and communicator. Superintendents must be able to gain community support for changes they wish to introduce while also managing the micropolitical aspects of organizational change (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Kowalski and Bjork (2005) highlighted that the ability to communicate is imperative for a superintendent, including with community constituencies and diverse employee groups. Kowalski et al. (2011) suggest that the superintendent has key roles related to student learning, student achievement, technology, digital literacy, media, public relations, politics, professional development, career readiness, and globalization (Kowalski et al., 2011). Next, I will discuss how the role of superintendent, once defined as a better fit for a man (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011), is evolving to include the strengths of women such as providing instructional leadership (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Glass, et al. 2000; Grogan & Brunner, 2005).

Women in the Role of Superintendent

As early as the 1800s, Blount (1998) indicated that educated and trained females were allowed into teaching positions; however, not leadership positions. According to Rousmaniere (2013), "It seemed to be the natural order of things that women taught and men managed" (p. 102). Blount's research noted that by custom, women could not supervise men. Women were often denied promotions to leadership positions if a male teacher would become her subordinate (Blount, 1998). Further, Blount (1998) argued that "the superintendency was a creation of some

men who wanted to establish a safe, acceptably masculine place for themselves in a profession increasingly identified with women" (p. 3). Further, Maranto, Carroll, Cheng, and Teodoro, 2018, stated that when veterans returned from World War II and attended graduate school on the GI Bill, they pursued educational leadership positions as a career pathway. Athletic coaching also attracted men to jobs in education and provided pathways to leadership positions (Maranto et al., 2018). Sharp et al. (2004), in their study that addressed the shortage of qualified superintendent candidates in relation to women in Illinois, Indiana and Texas, highlighted data from the U.S. Census Bureau that described the American superintendency as the most male-dominated leadership position of any profession in the United States.

While the role of superintendent has historically been framed in terms of men (Blount, 1998; Maranto et al., 2018), women have increasingly moved into the superintendency in the last two decades (Finnan et al., 2015). Brunner and Kim stated that "given the current focus on academic achievement, alternative routes to the superintendency may be superior to the historical norm" (Brunner & Kim, 2010, p. 285). Further, "If the concept of school reform for enhancing students' achievement was fully reflected in the educational administration/superintendency hiring processes, the normal career paths leading to the superintendency would include positions focused on curriculum and instruction—positions most often filled by women" (Brunner & Kim, 2010, p. 286). Similarly, Maranto et. al. (2018), stated, "Given men's and women's differing experiences as educators—men gravitating toward coaching, women toward curriculum and instruction—female principals and superintendents may tend to be in a better position to provide effective instructional leadership" (Maranto et al., 2018, p. 4). In both examples, the opportunities for women to assume the superintendency seem to be growing given the shifting demands of the role as well as the attentiveness to teaching and learning that women have

historically demonstrated within the education system (Blount, 1998; Brunner & Kim, 2010; Maranto et al., 2018).

Women tend to focus on issues associated with student learning while serving in the role of superintendent (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Shakeshaft, 1989; Tallerico & Blount, 2004). This focus on student achievement actually supports the hiring of more women into the position of superintendent (Brunner & Kim, 2010; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Maranto et al., 2018): "This increased focus on academics and accountability should make the job more attractive to more women, who tend to focus on curriculum teaching, and learning" (Brunner & Grogan, 2007, p. 88). Handy-Collins (2008) agreed the focus on student learning has had a direct impact on the ability of women to be hired into the superintendency.

Given the shifting expectations for superintendents, Grogan (2000) has called for something of reconception of the role of superintendent by stating that the strategies for being successful require a different view of the role: comfort with contradiction (empowering others), working through others (reflecting on who benefits from changes made), appreciating dissent (listening to differing points of view in order to make the best decision possible), displaying a critical awareness of how children are being served (taking a stand on social justice), and demonstrating an ethic of care (serving individuals excluded from a social group) (Grogan, 2000). Grogan (2000) posited that a role reconception could also contribute to more women seeking out the superintendency as part of their career goals.

Although women are situated well to meet the current superintendent pathway demands, the role of superintendent also possesses some unique challenges and threats for women. According to Sperandio and Devdas (2015), women move into the superintendency at a slower rate than men due to remaining in classrooms longer than mean, undervaluing their own

qualifications (which inhibits them from actively seeking superintendents' positions), facing continued gender bias at the school board and district level, and valuing their partners' careers rather than their own with regard to a long commute or relocation.

In addition to a slower path to leadership, Grogan (1996) explained that superintendents are invariably viewed as being a man superintendent or a woman superintendent and that gender is intertwined and not easily removed from the role itself. This can also set up an oppositional relationship between a woman superintendent and her board, colleagues, and the community (Grogan, 1996). Brunner (2000) and Tallerico (2000b) supported Grogan's viewpoint and claimed that women are always women in the role of superintendent and their gender is never disassociated from the role they have assumed.

According to Mendelberg and Karpowitz (2015), women walk into the room with less authority. This assumption is based on theories that gender is a source of social rules and expectations that distribute power and, in some cases, overall worth in society (Carli, 1990; Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2011; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Ridgeway, 2001, 2009). Further, Mendelberg and Karpowitz (2015) explored the impact of gender on politics and women's participation in political conversations and candidacy. Similarly to women in educational leadership positions, women in political leadership positions tend to focus on issues related to children, families, and women's health (Mendelberg & Karpowitz, 2015).

Because gender is intertwined for women superintendents and never disassociated from their leadership (Grogan, 1996; Brunner, 2000; Tallerico, 2000b), stereotypes are at least partially responsible for the bias women experience in their role. Gender stereotypes often serve as a barrier for women. Women are underrepresented in the superintendency and there is evidence that the lack of fit theory could be impeding advancement for women. The stereotype-

based lack of fit between women's characteristics, skills, and aspiration and those considered necessary for leadership has been a major barrier (Eagly et al., 2014; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Two social identities associated with successful executive leadership include being White and being male (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). The masculine leadership standards can perpetuate biased perceptions of those who do not fit the image of leaders, including women (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Johnson et al., 2008; Koenig et al., 2011). The lack of fit into the traditional male role of superintendent for women enacting leadership at the district level has been discussed in the literature for decades (Heilman, 1983, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002). In this particular stereotype, women take care and men take charge (Dodge et al., 1995; Heilman, 2001; Hoyt, 2010). Women are described as communal and concerned for others while men are considered more agentic and dominant. Men are described with qualities that are more desirable and viewed as a better fit with the leader role than women (Koenig et al., 2011). As women navigate the role of superintendent, gender is often intertwined with the position.

Further, as women struggle with legitimacy in executive leadership roles, such as the superintendency, the stereotype that women are more emotional is considered the master stereotype. Gender stereotypes about emotions are a fundamental barrier for women. Women must navigate which emotions are appropriate and when to display them (Brescoll, 2016). Further, the research suggests that women are penalized when they behave agentically or fail to demonstrate communal characteristics (Rudman et al., 2012). However, emotional control is considered to be at the center of the bias. A perception exists that women express emotions more outwardly, which is considered a negative characteristic for executive leaders, particularly when expressing anger (Koenig et al., 2011). Indeed, women must balance communal behavior and agentic characteristics, while not behaving tentatively, to be seen as likeable and influential.

They must downplay power yet maintain assertiveness to experience legitimacy in leadership roles (Koenig et al., 2011; Williams & Tiedens, 2015). This intersection of gender and leadership and the necessity of balancing behaviors complicates the role of superintendent for women.

The literature on the role of women superintendents focuses on struggles, barriers, failure, obstacles, and pathways of women leaders. However, the research does not address how women superintendents navigate gender to use their instructional leadership backgrounds to improve teaching and learning. The small number of studies on superintendents as instructional leaders have not studied the intersectionality of gender barriers to enacting superintendent leadership practices.

Instructional Leadership

As the accountability era has required an increasing emphasis on teaching and learning, most women superintendents now believe they were hired for their ability to be instructional leaders (Grogan & Brunner, 2007). Bjork and Kowalski (2005) identified a list of common findings regarding superintendent instructional leadership and its impact on student learning. These findings include (1) collaboratively developing goals with administrators and the board, (2) evaluating instructional effectiveness, (3) facilitating instruction through the budget, (4) planning for instruction, (5) supervising instruction and monitoring instructional programs, (6) developing principals as instructional leaders, (7) developing instructional policies, (8) reviewing research, (9) selecting personnel, (10) facilitating staff development, (11) communicating district expectations, (12) having a vision for instruction, (13) evaluating and monitoring instruction, and (14) involving the community in setting goals.

Researchers have concluded that women may be more effective in the superintendency because they value relationships and engage in leadership that is more participatory and collaborative than their male peers. For example, Kearney et al. (2014, p. 31) explored emotional intelligence and argued that "leaders with high levels of emotional intelligence are well positioned to impact positive change in their organizations." Further, emotionally intelligent leadership is the ability to recognize, understand, and respect the needs, values, and goals of others through communication (Nelson & Low, 2011). This research further supports the impact women superintendents can have on the field based on their ways of leading (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Indeed, the research suggests that women have higher levels of emotional intelligence (Nelson & Low, 2011).

Instructional improvement is an important priority for superintendents and school principals. Research suggests that specific approaches to leadership may be more conducive to facilitating improved instructional practice. For example, Wells et al. (2010) explored the role of principals and superintendents to transform instructional practices by leveraging a collaborative, distributive leadership approach to teacher leadership. Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, and Elmore (2006) examined how quality professional development and a distributive leadership model had a significant impact on transforming instructional leadership throughout a school district. Tschannen-Moran et al. (2000) found that a collaborative distributive approach to instructional leadership maximized the success of school reform efforts. Transformational leadership emerged during the 1990s and expanded on instructional leadership to include the leader's role in fostering a collective vision and motivating others in the organization to achieve extraordinary performance (Hallinger, 2007). In fact, a meta-analysis on gender differences revealed women engage in more contingent reward behaviors, such as praising performance (Eagly & Johnson,

1990; Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004), and have been found to be more likely to take a transformational approach to leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Further, evidence has supported that transformational leadership increases trust in the leader and organizational citizenship behaviors. It is also decidedly more feminine and encompasses leadership behaviors more consistent with stereotypical gender norms for women (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Eagly et al, 2003; Yoder, 2001). Transformational leaders empower others who in turn commit to accomplishing the work as a result of a sense of community, and that changes the culture (Bjork et al., 2005; Bolman & Deal, 2017; Branson & Marra, 2019; Kowalski, 2002). This research is aligned with the strengths researchers have identified women superintendents as having. Researchers have not connected how the collaborative and distributive approach to transformational leadership practices can be used to support instructional improvement.

Urick and Bowers (2014) determined that the leadership qualities depend on the self-identified leadership styles. The core leadership behaviors of communicating mission, promoting professional growth, building a sense of community, coordinating the instructional program, and sharing instructional leadership with teachers remained constant. Shared instructional leadership is described as a "synergistic power of leadership shared by individuals through the school organization" (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 393). Within this definition, superintendents, principals, teachers, and the school community share instructional leadership, which supports successful teacher practice. Finnigan and Daly (2012) found "the type, quality, and structure of relationships mattered to a collective effort to improve" (p. 45). A high number of positive relationships based on trust and social interaction within a school district was determined to have a positive effect on the culture and overall district improvement (Finnigan & Daly, 2012). Having a greater diversity of perspectives within decision-making structures enables leaders to

solve complex problems, facilitate communication, resolve conflict, and build commitment toward common goals (Edmondson, 2012; Handy, 2005; Parker, 1990). Further research also suggests that leadership is an influence in relationships among leaders and followers who work to fulfill their mutual purposes (Browne-Ferrigno & Bjork, 2018; Rost, 1991.) Since women have been identified as valuing relationships and engaging in democratic and participatory behaviors, key shared leadership behaviors, it is interesting that the research is silent on how women enact leadership practices while navigating gender to serve as instructional leaders.

In addition to approaching instruction as a collaborative process requiring shared leadership, Kelsey et al. (2014) interviewed 20 women superintendents in Texas to gain a better understanding about career experiences and barriers within their profession. This phenomenological study found that women participants distinguished three aspects of leadership experiences: instructional, relational, and collaborative leadership. Instructional leadership was demonstrated through strategic plans prioritizing teaching and learning, scheduled time in classrooms to observe instruction, and improving the skillset of their leadership team to serve as instructional leaders (Kelsey et al., 2014). My study would expand on this understanding from Kelsey and colleagues' research by examining more deeply the leadership practices used by women superintendents to specifically support the improvement of instruction while navigating gender.

Instructional leadership is at the foundation of improved teacher instructional performance and student achievement (Hallinger et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2006). It is incumbent upon us to explore central office practices and structures that can increase the principal's capacity to function as an effective instructional leader (Honig, 2012). For leaders to drive change, they must be aware of the current reality and needs in their context (Horsford,

2010). To improve opportunities for all students, especially students in poverty, this begins with curriculum and instruction (Hernandez & McKenzie, 2010). Research suggests that instructional leadership is the entry point for change. When large-scale change is needed, leaders should begin with teaching and learning. "The closer educational leaders get to the core business of teaching and learning, the more likely they are to have a positive impact on students' outcomes" (Robinson et al., 2008, p. 664). Because researchers have concluded that women are situated to lead change and reform as a result of their shared leadership and relational skills, the connection to improving instruction is an area that needs to be considered more deeply by researchers.

According to Kowalski (1999) the superintendents' tasks and responsibilities can be divided into three domains: a wide range of managerial duties, instructional leadership, and analytical tasks (e.g., planning and making policy). In traditional or masculine-oriented leadership, the primary role of superintendents focused more on managerial duties and politics than on instruction (Kowalski, 1999). However, accountability has necessitated rethinking these roles and required central office leaders to adjust their practice to serve as instructional leaders building principals (Honig, 2012; Brunner et al., 2002). Mac Iver and Farley (2003) emphasized the importance of the superintendent's leadership along with the transformation of the central office culture to be more flexible and service-oriented rather than regulatory and managerial. One type of central office transformation is related to instructional leadership, which is defined by Honig (2012, 2008). Honig discussed the need for principals to work intensively and continuously with teachers to examine evidence of the quality of their teaching and to use that evidence to improve how they teach (Honig, 2012, p. 736).

While this research on central office practices is important to help leaders understand how to support schools instructionally by organizing central office structures to support principal

leadership, it does not consider the leadership capabilities of the central office leaders to support the instructional improvement of building leaders. Further, it does not provide evidence that the reorganization resulted in improved student learning. Since women superintendents typically lead from a curriculum and instruction background, a next step to further the research in the field is to specifically examine the leadership practices of women superintendents and how they improve teaching and learning. Further, it is worth noting how women superintendents organize the central office systemically to support instructional improvement. Indeed, as Knapp et al. (2010) indicated, central office actions, structures, and practices must reinforce instructional leadership by: (1) providing professional development and other forms of assistance to instructional leaders at the school level; (2) formalizing partnerships between central office staff and school principals; (3) securing resources that directly support instructional improvement; and (4) committing to continual improvement of work practices and relationships in schools (Knapp, et al., 2010).

A superintendent is a central office administrator who functions as the chief executive officer in school districts. Due to the complicated and critical nature of school improvement requiring powerful leaders, central office administrators have a critical role in building the capacity of school principals to be instructional leaders and facilitate improvement. A review of research indicated central office leaders had the most impact from the consistent use of practices that required joint work, differentiation, modeling, tools, and brokering (Honig, 2012). By leading from a teaching orientation, central office administrators were able to provide support that was viewed as valuable to developing principal leadership skills (Honig & Rainey, 2014). Honig's research revealed that central office restructuring efforts did not provide the central office supervisors with any particular training or framework for supporting principals. All

supervisors had a common understanding of the need to support principals as instructional leaders, but a common delivery system and structure were not used. Expectations for the role of the supervisor were not defined. The mixed results and findings were reliant on the specific skillset of each central office supervisor.

In recent years, central office leaders have attempted to develop the instructional leadership skills of principals by utilizing "principal professional learning communities" (PPLCs) (Honig & Rainey, 2014, p. 2). While professional learning communities have demonstrated through research that they can improve teaching and learning, when utilized as Richard DuFour (2004) and others have advocated, Hubbard et al. (2006) found that this is not necessarily the case for PPLCs: "Central office administrators appear in the few available studies of PPLCs in hands-off roles, carving out time for PPLC meetings and mandating that principals participate. Clearly, the leadership behaviors of central office either enhance or detract from the PPLC's success rate. But those roles are a far cry from the efforts of some executive-level central office administrators to convene, facilitate, and 'teach' in PPLCs" (Honig & Rainey, 2014, p. 3). In the PPLC research, the impact of a particular learning community was dependent on the skillset and background of the central office administrator overseeing the network. In both the 2012 and 2014 Honig research studies, the central office leaders were not required to have any expertise or ability to facilitate improvement of the principals under their supervision. Rather, central office personnel were assigned the work without a framework of expectations and were often lacking prerequisite skills. The gender of central office leaders was not considered as a contributing factor. There is a need to expand central office research to determine what organizational structure and practices can impact the instructional leadership skills of principals when central office leaders have the necessary prerequisite skills to engage in that work.

Moreover, it is necessary to investigate in what ways do women's leading and instructional leadership strengths intersect and allow for a superintendent to enact leadership practices to support the improvement of teaching and learning.

Women Superintendents' Ways of Leading

Thus far, I have reviewed the role of the superintendent, women superintendents, and discussed instructional leadership broadly. Next I will discuss women and their unique ways of leading. While research has identified characteristics of women's leadership, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) remind us there is "no one way that women lead" (p. 121); rather, their leadership practice is diverse and multi-faceted. Literature suggests that women adopt different leadership practices and exhibit different leadership skills than men. For example, Martineau (2018) interviewed 10 women superintendents about their leadership development and experiences as superintendents. In her study she found their experiences were complex and they shared a multifaceted approach to leadership grounded in their values and beliefs about instructional leadership, relational leadership, and collaborative leadership. These open-ended interviews provided insight into the values and beliefs of a small group of women superintendents, but the study did not address the day-to-day work and how these ways of leading translated into action in their daily leadership practices. Katz (2004) also explored educational leadership approaches and behavioral leadership theory, finding that women superintendents viewed building and cultivating relationships as an integral part of their district leadership style. Developing authentic relationships between leaders and employees is considered in the literature as an effective way to accomplish organizational goals and improve employee satisfaction and engagement (Branson & Marra, 2019; Buckingham & Goodall, 2015; Kim & Mauborgne, 2014; Robison, 2018).

Finnan et al. (2015) conducted a national study using quantitative research methods and collected data to determine the instructional leadership experiences of women superintendents. The study found that women superintendents valued their curriculum and instructional experiences and viewed them as an essential aspect of their effectiveness as district leaders.

In addition to focusing on values, relationships, and curriculum and instruction, Lemasters and Roach (2012) found that women lead in a different way than men based on physiological and socialization differences, which are viewed negatively by the male-dominated culture. This conflicts with an earlier study by Bolman and Deal (2003) that found no differences in the four frames of leadership (structural, human resources, symbolic, and political) used by male or female leaders. Bjork (2000) also concluded that women approach and experience the superintendency in significantly different ways than men and that traditional leadership theories do not accurately describe women (Bjork, 2000). The researchers did not explain how women experience the superintendency differently or how their daily leadership practices reflect their frames of leadership while navigating gender.

Brunner and Kim (2010) reviewed the literature and explored the preparation of women superintendents to lead school districts. Primarily, they examined Glass' assertions surrounding the dearth of female superintendents (Glass, et al. 2000). Through the analyses of two large national data sets collected by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Brunner and Kim (2010) concluded:

> Women central office administrators who aspire to and women already seated in the superintendency meet and even exceed all formal, experimental, and personal preparedness requirements. Further while some of the preparedness components for women are different from those gained by men, we suggest that the variation in career path and the concentration on curriculum and instruction may render women better and more thoroughly prepared than men (p. 26).

Grogan and Brunner (2005) also found that women were prepared to be instructional leaders in the superintendency because they often spent more time in the classroom, held higher degrees, and had more professional development experiences. This is also reflected in the priority women placed on belonging to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, with 73% of women participating as active members compared to 39% of men (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). While researchers agree women come into the superintendency with a longer and more thorough background in curriculum and instruction, this does not indicate how they might utilize this background differently and in service of the instructional leadership needs of the school district. Indeed, this is one of the most notable gaps in the current educational leadership literature base.

To expand the research on gender leadership practices, Fincannon (2004) employed the LPI-SELF survey to 31 Indiana women superintendents and their school boards. Although the women superintendents and board members surveyed differed in their overall beliefs of the components of successful leadership, Fincannon (2004) was able to establish that both sets of participants rated women superintendents as utilizing the leadership practice of "encouraging the heart" more effectively. Encouraging the heart was consistent with leaders who celebrated the successes of followers, either formally or informally. Additionally, several researchers concluded that women are better suited for higher administrative positions because women's leadership styles often better support democratic and participative organizational reform and development (Fresher & Fresher, 1979; Gross & Trask, 1976; Mendel & Pherwani, 2003). Women's transformational skills include a preference for collaboration. Women leaders obtain on average higher scores on collaboration scales than men (Rosenthal, 1998). According to research, women encourage the heart and celebrate successes, and support collaborative, democratic, and participative reform.

In addition to studies on women's strengths as instructional leaders and collaborators able to support democratic and participative reform, Carless (1998) and Martinek (1996) conducted studies around transformational leadership and identified differences between how men and women lead. Carless (1998) examined 120 Australian women and 184 Australian men on the same level of the same positions in a large international bank in Australia and determined women viewed themselves as transformational leaders more often than men. Martinek's national study (1996) examined 29 female superintendents and 37 male superintendents and found both genders viewed an effective superintendent as one who demonstrates transformational leadership. However, while men listed their preferences for managerial duties as personnel, budget, and goal setting, women listed preferences that displayed more instructional or transformational leadership roles: professional learning, program development, and curriculum conversations. Therefore, while both genders concluded that effective superintendents display transformational leadership behaviors, women were perceived as utilizing transformational roles and displaying transformational qualities more often than men. Women were also portrayed as being more skillful with interpersonal relationships. Supporting these findings, Eagly and Johnson (1990) and later Gibson (1995) revealed gender differences in leadership styles and indicated that "women tend to adopt a more democratic or participative style and men tend to adopt a more autocratic or directive style" (Gibson, 1995, p. 258).

To further understand women's ways of leading, Brunner (1997) conducted a qualitative study interviewing 12 women superintendents from across the nation and two other individuals who knew them and worked for them for each of the 12 identified superintendents. The data were categorized and seven gender-specific strategies were noted that successful women superintendents used. These included the following: (1) balancing both role and gender

expectations; (2) keeping their agenda simple to focus on the care of children and their academic achievement; (3) remaining feminine in their communication styles while navigating the masculinized culture; (4) disregarding the concept of acting like a man while working in what is essentially a male role; (5) removing anything that blocks success; (6) maintaining a fearless "can do" attitude while also ensuring down time to rejuvenate; and (7) sharing power and credit, much as a servant leader orients her work toward the service of others (Brunner, 1997).

Relational leadership has also been considered in the literature as an important way of leading that encourages collaboration and listening to employee voices (Branson & Marra, 2019). Further, Branson and Marra (2019) noted the shift needed in organizations to support sustainability of change, worker engagement, and relational leadership as a way to accomplish these goals. Branson and Marra (2019) described seven fundamental relational leadership principles (Browne-Ferrigno & Bjork, 2018): (1) leadership is earned—if there is no trust, there is no leadership; (2) character trumps control—competence, confidence, and empathy are the foundation of character; (3) the power of influence—people want to be guided and not directed; (4) engagement is an emotional response—employees need to be treated with respect, integrity, honesty, and transparency; (5) people make the difference—people will be fully engaged if they are utilizing their strengths and growing their skills, which encourages innovation and celebrating successes; (6) it takes a team to innovate—creative and innovative solutions are derived from teams rather than individuals; and (7) inclusion, diversity, and well-being are the new pillars of leadership—we must know more about the people we are leading and not just the work they are doing. The researchers emphasized that forming relationships is "not a moment in time but evolves over time based on the interplay of ongoing conversations, social connections and professional networking" (Branson & Marra, 2019, p. 101). Further, based on research and

experiential data, Branson and Marra (2019) concluded that being able to model and create harmonious teamwork through healthy and mutually beneficial relationships is now considered to be the epitome of good leadership. Indeed, the characteristics of relational leadership are communal in nature and aligned with women's predisposition toward transformational leadership.

It is important to study female superintendents to understand better how they enact and describe leadership and how these beliefs and values translate into their leadership practices while providing instructional leadership within their districts. Researchers have not studied how women superintendents utilize these ways of leading in day-to-day practice to improve teaching and learning. More research is needed to understand how women's different ways of leading translate into the implementation of instructional leadership and ultimately impact the lives of students.

Theoretical Framework

Since the 1970s, women and their leadership practice have been central topics in the research literature. Researchers have attempted to understand how women lead organizations and sought to define whether women lead in fundamentally different ways. A meta-analysis examining research between 1987 and 2000 concluded that "The only robust gender difference found across settings was that women led in a more democratic or participative manner than men" (Van Engen and Willemsen, 2004, p. 351). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) offer a complementary perspective, noting that women use participatory and democratic actions as a central way of leading. They see women leading in relationship with their followers instead of directing their actions authoritatively to take charge of others. This practice of working alongside employees is described as one of the primary characteristics of relational leadership (Branson &

Marra, 2019; Eagly & Johson, 1990; Gibson, 1995; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). The difference in women's professional background might hypothetically explain some of the differences in the perspectives and actions that they bring to leadership. These differences could lead to the use of different leadership processes and different ways of formulating decisions (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

Given the possible differences in leadership practice, I situate this study in the Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) framework for understanding how women engage in educational leadership. Grogan and Shakeshaft identified five approaches that largely characterize women's educational leadership. These include the use of relational leadership, an orientation to leadership for social justice, emphasis on spiritual leadership, a commitment to leadership for learning, and a willingness to engage in balanced leadership. These practices were the most common approaches among women based on their research (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). As such, these leadership approaches will collectively inform my analysis of the leadership actions taken by the two superintendents I studied.

Within this study, I adopt the view that women predominately engage in relational leadership. This approach focuses on the quality and equality of relationships with others. Further, relational leadership approaches leadership challenges without a hierarchical stance, situating leadership action within the context of social networks. Understanding of problems, opportunities, and challenges is thus socially constructed. Relational leadership "is concerned with facilitating the work of others who share the power and authority to collaboratively craft direction for the district" (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011, p. 10). Studies suggest that women leaders are more concerned with expanding power among their followers and conceptualize power differently than men (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). Women commit to improving equity

between groups by engaging stakeholders in decision-making and input into the decision-making process. Kim and Mauborgne (2014) offer perspective to support this claim in stating that, "When people value your leadership practices they in effect buy into your leadership. They're inspired to excel and act with commitment. But when employees don't buy your leadership, they disengage, becoming noncustomers of your leadership" (p. 62). This point is confirmed by Branson and Marra (2019), who note that relational leadership contributes to employee engagement and organizational improvement. As such, it may be beneficial in organizations, including school districts.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

To carry out this study, I completed a qualitative study of two women superintendents leading small, rural school districts in a Midwestern state. I used a modified version of case study methodology as it allowed me to describe the leadership practices of women superintendents based on a series of interviews conducted over a three-month period.

Research Setting

The two women superintendents were employed in rural school districts located in a Midwestern state. The two school districts ranged in size from 1,083 and 1,904 students. Both of the districts were defined as rural school districts by the state department of education, meaning that they are considered a place with all population, housing, and territory not designated as urban, including open country with population densities less than 500 people per square mile and places with fewer than 2,500 people (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). This context provides a unique setting within which to understand the interplay between women superintendents and their leadership practice. Indeed, few studies have been conducted on women who lead rural school districts, mirroring the limitations of research on rural school leadership generally.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Research District Sites

District	Rolling Hills County School Corporation	Southern Community Schools

Location	Midwest	Midwest
Superintendent	Lynn Howard	Julie Ritchey
Letter grade	B	B
Enrollment	1,904	1,083
Number of schools	6	3
Percentage Ethnicity		
White	94.7	97.8
Hispanic	1.9	.6
Multiracial	1.6	1.3
Black	.4	0
Percentage Economically disadvantaged	52.4	48.4
Percentage Students with disabilities	24.5	19.2

Note: Pseudonyms are used for the district and superintendent included in Table 1.
Source: State Department of Education Data

Research Participants

To address my research questions, I constructed a purposeful sample (Patton, 1990) of two female superintendents who are recognized by their peers as instructional leaders in their school districts and employed in rural school district settings. Each of the superintendents have four or more years of experience in their current rural districts. Both female superintendents have familiarity with the state's political and leadership context. One of the participants has earned a doctorate in education. Throughout this study, I refer to the superintendents and their districts with pseudonyms to protect their identity as research participants.

Positionality

My data collection and interpretation was informed by my identity as a practicing female superintendent in a rural school district. My interest in this topic stems from my own instructional background and my earnest desire to use this background to improve instruction in the district I lead. As I am beginning my fifth year as a superintendent, I have encountered barriers and challenges that prevent me from creating the change needed to improve instruction in my school district. I am interested in learning from other women superintendents to inform my practice. Due to the limited number of women superintendents, it is difficult to have the opportunity to engage in discussions about instructional leadership.

I separated my role of female superintendent from researcher and did not interject my own stories or experiences. I explicitly stated this researcher role to the superintendents to assist me in maintaining my role as researcher. Because I have preconceived ideas of the role of a woman superintendent and instructional leadership, I had to guard against my own biases by designing interview protocols that aligned closely with my research questions. In qualitative studies, the researcher is considered the primary instrument (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, I used the research literature review to guide my data collection, analysis, and formulation of themes. Further, I shared my interpretations with the participants to ensure their veracity and to confirm that I had represented their experience instead of my own.

Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews and retrieved documents. I discuss each of these data collection strategies below.

Semi-structured Interviews

I conducted a total of eight semi-structured interviews and collected eight hours of data. Each superintendent was interviewed four times. The first interview focused on the participant's background, particularly their work with curriculum and instruction and the roles they take in their position as superintendent. The second interview explored the women superintendents' ways of leading. The third interview explored women superintendents' ways of leading, specifically related to leadership that improves instructional practices. The fourth interview focused on the challenges each superintendent has overcome to serve as an instructional leader and enact instructional improvement in her district. I used these interviews to gain insights into their leadership practices to improve instruction. I used a semi-structured interview protocol as I wanted to obtain specific data from both participants; however, I wanted to maintain some flexibility in the wording. This format also enabled me to respond to the participants by exploring new ideas on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Yin (2014) notes that interviews are one of the most important sources for case study evidence. Merriam and Tisdell further stated that pilot interviews are essential for developing good questions. I piloted my interview questions by conducting a mock interview with a superintendent, not included in the study, to ensure I had good questions that collected the data I needed to inform my study questions. This allowed me to reword any confusing questions to ensure they were clear.

I developed my questions using insights I gleaned from the published literature. An interview protocol appears in Appendix B. I focused on the superintendents' efforts to coordinate and control curriculum and instruction, supervise and evaluate instruction, and monitor student progress to improve instruction. (Hallinger, 2016, 2003). All interviews were conducted via Zoom. I obtained permission to record the interviews by requesting it during the informed consent phase.

Documents or Artifacts

I reviewed documents from the two school districts where the women were practicing superintendents. The documents referred to their responsibilities as district executives as well as the support they provided to principals to assist with their growth as shared instructional leaders. (see Document Collection Guide and Document Collection Protocol Appendix C and D). During my interviews, I asked the superintendents to identify principal meeting agendas, copies of the district strategic plan, administrator evaluations, and other artifacts that provided evidence of their instructional practices. I reviewed these documents to determine how the women focused on instructional leadership. Throughout my analysis, I reviewed the documents repeatedly to identify recurrent themes and/or ideas about leadership. After analyzing themes as described below, I moved to interpretation and looked beyond the words to understand the underlying ideas and assumptions.

Data Analysis

I conducted an iterative thematic analysis of the qualitative data informed by the technique described by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, I uploaded the recorded transcripts into Temi, a transcription application, and reviewed the transcripts with the recorded interviews to check for accuracy and edit for clarification. Second, I became familiar with the data by reading across the transcripts to identify salient points. Third, I generated initial codes that were informed by Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) five approaches for women's leadership. Fourth, I identified related passages and used them to formulate categories. Fifth, I formulated themes based on the (inter)relationships of the categories I formulated. Finally, I read across the themes to ensure that I addressed my research questions and had formulated themes that were broadly aligned with the theoretical framework I employed.

My analytic process proceeded through successive rounds of coding which moved from descriptive codes to those with higher levels of inference. Notably, I began my analysis by reviewing the interview transcripts and documents and applying descriptive codes to highlight pertinent segments of text. A primary purpose of this step in the analysis was to narrow the data corpus. Next, I applied a second layer of codes to all selected extracts. These codes were more directly related to my study's theoretical framework (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). As such, I was particularly interested in passages that related to leadership practices that were relational, focused on social justice, oriented toward learning, focused on spirituality, and/or blended across these leadership styles as suggested by Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) description of women's ways of leading. Through my coding, I identified examples that illustrated how the women are engaged in leadership. Once coded, I produced categories based on these codes that described common patterns related to each type of leadership practice. I concluded my analysis by producing key findings that are responsive to my research questions. These findings indicated what leadership practices women superintendents engage in as well as how they address barriers to this leadership through their practice. To ensure trustworthiness in my interpretations, I provided each superintendent with the emerging findings to elicit their feedback and ensure I was capturing their views. I used member checking to ensure that my interpretations are accurate (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017; Yin, 2014).

Limitations

The study faced some significant limitations. First, due to the nature of purposeful sampling and the use of only two participants from two school districts, I am unable to generalize the findings to women superintendents beyond the two cases studied. Second, the data collection plans were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, I was unable to collect

data in person and so could not observe the superintendents' leadership first hand. The study thus relies on their recollections. Third, my background and experiences may have shaped my interpretations. I have a rich background in elementary level experience and some experience in middle schools. I also served as former state department leader of school improvement. I am a female superintendent and bring that perspective to the research study. Finally, the participants in this study were both situated within conservative rural contexts and the experiences of women superintendents in other contexts were not considered in the analysis. Thus, the findings should be viewed as a description of leaders in a rural context as opposed to a reflection of all women superintendents in all contexts.

Chapter 4

Research Findings

The two women superintendent participants in this study engage in leadership that seeks to strengthen relationships with colleagues in their district and members of their community. My analysis suggests that the superintendents' gender potentially explains their use of relational leadership. Specifically, and in keeping with previous research, women superintendents orient to leadership as a collaborative endeavor that involves cultivating authentic relationships and sharing power and leadership responsibilities with other members of their staff and community stakeholders. I find that this orientation contributes to the superintendents' tendency to engage in specific leadership actions. First, the two women superintendents describe their leadership in ways that suggest that they value and intentionally develop relationships with employees and community stakeholders. Second, as relational leaders, the two women share their power and leadership with staff and with the broader community as well. Both women create bridges for work among and between groups and in doing so create a shared sense of purpose that is often anchored in instructional leadership. As the two women facilitate collaborative work, they seek diverse ideas and opinions to inform decisions as a way of intentionally creating an inclusive culture in which they share their power and leadership.

Broadly, the two women superintendents appear to use their leadership to improve academic and equity opportunities for students. After developing strong relationships with stakeholders, the women created plans to address what they considered to be their central priorities: improving teaching and learning, expanding opportunities for students, and facilitating a process for how work was accomplished. The women provided a clear focus for district work, which prioritized student needs. Both women superintendents are driven by a heightened sense of empathy and sensitivity for students, which is consistent with their gender and relational

leadership orientation. As the women strived to accomplish their priorities, they utilized communication and listening as tools to build trust and support for the collective decisions that are enacted. Further, the women used their relational leadership methods of leading to enact their organizational priorities.

Finally, I find that these leadership actions serve an important but often-mistaken purpose in their stewardship of their school districts. Notably, I found that women utilized these leadership actions to deflect criticism and discrimination that often influences their work and may result from leading a school district in a primarily rural context. While their leadership actions reflect senior executives who strive to maintain a focus on teaching and learning, the data also suggest that gender explains and, in some cases, requires the orientations to leadership practices. Notably, the women shared that stakeholder responses to their gender prompted them to approach leadership in specific ways, including proving themselves, minimizing personal accomplishments, and ignoring criticism and gender-based jokes. While the women in this study developed deep relationships with stakeholders and strived to improve opportunities for students by sharing power and leadership with employees and community stakeholders, I found that in the background of their work they navigated gender within the context of their relationships.

Theme 1. Engaging in Relational Leadership: How They Lead

Women superintendents perform their educational and operational responsibilities for the school districts they lead by engaging in relational leadership. These leadership practices of cultivating authentic relationships, engaging employees in collaborative decision making, offering support to employees, and serving as relational connectors emphasize the strength and importance of relationships as a focus in their leadership practice. As women intentionally share their power and leadership, data suggest they intentionally create a network of supporters

through their collaborative approach to leadership. This network is comprised of community and education leaders who participate in superintendent-led collaborative work groups for the purpose of accomplishing district priorities. The supporters, who develop a positive relationship with the superintendent, later become advocates for the superintendent personally and help accomplish the district goals due to their engagement in the work.

Both superintendents, Lynn Howard (pseudonym) and Julie Ritchey (pseudonym), indicated when transitioning into their superintendent roles that their first actions included joining community groups and finding opportunities to become immersed in the community to develop their network of advocates and political connections. Interestingly, both Howard and Ritchey had been in their districts before moving into their superintendent positions and thus had existing relationships to draw upon. However, they both stated that even though they knew some individuals in their districts, stepping into the superintendent role required them to grow those relationships so that stakeholders would view them as the superintendent and not as an employee. As Ritchey explained, “They didn’t know me as the superintendent. I had to work to show them who I was as their leader.” Ritchey described groups she joined and interactions she initiated with community leaders to provide her with an opportunity to listen to others and share her ideas and leadership priorities. Howard further supported this view: “I knew some folks from a different role in the district, but I had to establish myself as the district leader.” Howard, like Ritchey, met with employees and stakeholders to hear community needs and share her values and beliefs. As such, the women intentionally worked to form deeper relationships that allowed them to present their leadership values and priorities as well as to shift the culture in the district and community. The two women prioritized the involvement of the people with whom they had not consistently interacted previously as their primary way of accomplishing this task.

While becoming immersed in the community is common for both male and female superintendents, the women specifically stated that their efforts went beyond meeting stakeholders or doing what might be termed a "community listening tour." Rather, the superintendents wanted to convey to the community's most important stakeholders that they valued the relationships they formed in a different way than their male predecessors. This involved moving beyond transactional norms, such as engaging a business owner in exchange for a better contract price, toward more authentic exchanges that allowed them to gain a much deeper knowledge of individual ideas and concerns for the district. By selecting stakeholders with connections, the superintendents were able to identify resources and remove barriers that were important to meeting the needs of students. The women specifically identified stakeholders who were politically connected and were in positions to influence others such as elected officials, business and community leaders, and members of the teachers' association. Intentionally developing relationships was important to the women as they transitioned to their new superintendent positions. Ritchey stated that in the beginning of her superintendency she went out to eat with a variety of stakeholders and worked to be in front of community groups. As she recalled, "I was already connected with the Lion's Club, American Legion, those kinds of groups, but I really wanted to discuss our goals for the district." Ritchey stated the relationships she has established since her transition to her superintendent position have allowed her to create a community initiative focused on birth to age five that allows the community to serve their young students holistically. Ritchey added, "It was really the relationships that allowed me to pull the community groups together to better serve our youngest children." Ritchey indicated that the community groups were her vehicle for accomplishing work for students.

Like Ritchey, Howard was also intentional in developing relationships as she entered her district as superintendent and sought to achieve similar goals as those described by Ritchey. Howard described her transition to her district by sharing the groups she joined and the value she found in making connections and forming relationships:

> As I was starting in the district, I became very engaged in community organizations and community groups. Rotary Club was one of my first kind of key community groups. They are just wonderful people who get together to have coffee once a week. Rotary has been an incredible gift because they brought in weekly speakers, who are people in the community. I am able to make connections that way as well. Also, serving on every board that is here in the community is very valuable. Relationships are built there.

Howard clearly described the way she developed relationships by meeting with groups, which provided connections to other influential community leaders. She also later described how she used the relationships to further her priorities such as expanding early childhood programs. As Howard discussed her community involvement, she revealed that showing up and facilitating conversations among stakeholders was exhausting, but the investment helped when support was needed during hard times for the district or when she herself was being attacked for a decision. Howard discussed one example of the support offered to her during a challenging time period. Financial shortfalls and declining enrollment necessitated closing a school, which is often an emotionally charged action for a community. Howard described how the relationships she had with stakeholders provided her with support:

> When hard times come, like closing a school, which can be really hard for a community, you can stand on those relationships that have been developed and people will say "we've got her back." This is hard but we will get through it.

While Howard described the value of developing authentic relationships in her transition meetings, it is also evident from these data that she relied on the relationships to provide support and political cover as she enacted her leadership priorities. Later, Howard described the process

she used to close a school and indicated “It was the collaborative relationships that took us two years to build that really made it possible to close a building without too much drama.” Clearly, Howard relied on the relationships to provide her with support as she enacted relational leadership priorities.

For both women, a central motivation for their leadership was to gain acceptance from their community and to position themselves and their districts to receive community resources and support for their students. Ritchey stated “It was after I developed deeper relationships that I was able to call upon some of those community leaders to help me establish a birth-to-five advisory group to provide our students with resources they were lacking.” The women felt that it was only after they had been accepted as a leader of the district that they were able to move forward with accomplishing their goals. Further, both women stated the relationships enabled them to have supporters when they initiated change or faced scrutiny within the community due to decisions or daily challenges, like closing a school or navigating a pandemic.

Beyond cultivating relationships with external stakeholders, the women also reported that they developed relationships with their teachers and classified staff within their districts. According to the women, these relationships served as important connections between their strategic goals and the day-to-day operating practices within the schools. Both women indicated that they invested in staff relationships by being visible in the buildings and regularly stopping to speak with staff members personally. For instance, Ritchey described how she had a process in place to track staff birthdays and would personally deliver cards to staff in her district. She also indicated that each day, she made it a priority to visit one of her buildings and stop and talk to staff about their families and their lives. Ritchey stated, “We can’t pay workers as much as we would like to, but we can offer them a warm environment; a place where they feel appreciated so

they will want to keep working here. Those are things you have to do every day." In this statement, Ritchey discussed her priority of creating a culture where employees feel valued as a way of improving their job satisfaction and potentially retaining them in their positions. Ritchey said taking a personal interest in her staff helped to demonstrate that she cared about them and that this has enabled her to form relationships. Ritchey continued, "Relationships allow us to get our work done collaboratively. It is really the foundation for everything." Ritchey suggested that the relationships created an organizational culture where people are willing to work collaboratively and with a shared sense of purpose, which she expressed as her fundamental goal.

In sum, the data suggest that the women used relational leadership to achieve their leadership priorities and meaningfully engage stakeholder priorities. The relationships that they cultivated allowed them to acquire support when navigating challenges as well as secure resources to support their students' learning needs. To establish relational processes for collaborative work and improve opportunities for students, the women often expressed a need to share their power and leadership with staff and community members. Sharing power created additional opportunities to engage stakeholders in meaningful conversations about the district's goals and improvement priorities.

Sharing Power and Leadership

Once the women had established relationships and rapports with members of their community, they found that they had created a culture that fueled opportunities to engage in joint work with community groups. Howard indicated the need for a district strategic plan to guide the school district into the future. She stated that she intentionally created a diverse stakeholder advisory group to assist with creating the strategic plan. "When I was thinking about our need for a strategic plan, I knew it was important to find the right people to help. I didn't want to include

only people who supported the schools. We needed different opinions and some people needed to be brought along to understand our 'why' better," Howard stated. Howard shared that she identified people who were community, business, and political leaders and often vocal about what the schools needed to be doing to prepare students for the workforce and community. By selecting group members from throughout the county, with political connections and differing opinions, she was able to build a team that had insight into community needs and the political influence to help accomplish the priorities identified. She further revealed that her role with the group was to serve as a visionary guide who supported the collaborative work. Howard described her strategic plan stakeholder advisory groups:

> It is just a mutually beneficial relationship that seems to be working for us. The advisory group members worked together to create our ten-year plan for the district. I'm able to be there just kind of from that district perspective to let our stakeholders know that we value the work that they're doing. I made sure to include a diverse group of people from the community, who are able to help us better serve our students.

In this quote, Howard indicated that her role in the advisory group meetings was more of an encourager and supporter rather than the creator of the ten-year strategic plan. Howard explained that she served as a facilitator within the groups and encouraged participation from each member, which is consistent with gender research. Later in her interview, she discussed how she provided clarity of purpose for this vision, but that the group members created the plan. Further, these advisory groups enabled Howard to advance the district's goals and priorities, such as closing a school in response to declining enrollment and funding shortfalls or repurposing space within a school to create an early childhood center.

Ritchey also discussed the need for community support and strong relationships for her to be successful in her desire to improve services to students. One way Ritchey intentionally created a network of support between school counselors, faith-based leaders, and political and

community leaders was to create a network by connecting the individual team members to one another. Ritchey described this intentional process of building relationships:

> I think having a network of support has been essential so we are able to meet the needs of our kids. We are connecting the school and the families with faith-based organizations, business, and community leaders and all coming together to provide things that kids need.

As evident in this statement, Ritchey clearly indicated that she is intentionally connecting both stakeholder organizations and individuals within the groups to provide a network of support for her leadership priorities. Ritchey further described her goal of serving as the connector for the stakeholders participating in community groups as a way of meeting the needs of students:

> I think I am a connector when I'm in those group meetings. I find I know the counselors best. So, I want our counselor to get to know the Baptist preacher. We have a school board member on the committee and I want to make sure he gets to know this business person. I feel like I'm just kind of the connector, but truthfully, I have fun with that and like to get it all together. It's when these individuals all come together that we are able to make things happen for our kids.

Ritchey clearly articulated the value and importance of relationships as a way of improving outcomes for students of all ages. Ritchey also described that her role went beyond convener of stakeholder groups and included serving as a relational connector. A relational connector refers to an individual who utilizes relationships to build consensus and support around key organizational priorities. In this role, the superintendent fostered relationships within the community that were important to advancing her leadership priorities in the long term. Ritchey later described how these groups functioned collaboratively to develop a vision statement for the district. She indicated her goal was to provide a clear direction for committees and develop a collaborative culture so that she could leave them to complete the work. "I've been able to step away because I have the people working together." Ritchey reflected in this statement her desire to allow groups to function without her. As a relational leader, Ritchey indicated she is

intentionally sharing her power and leadership with group members after connecting them. She also demonstrated trust in the group's ability to accomplish priorities and provided the space for them to innovate without her interference.

Both women expressed the intentional way they shared their power and leadership with others as they utilized collaborative stakeholder groups to accomplish their priorities. Indeed, the women indicated it is their goal to step back and allow the groups to function independently once they are capable. In this way, both women superintendents' actions of cultivating authentic relationships, engaging employees in collaborative decision making, offering support to employees, and serving as relational connectors are consistent with relational leadership behaviors.

Theme 2. Enacting Relational Leadership: What they Do

Data suggest that the two women function as relational leaders and are able to move their organizations forward by providing a clear focus for improving teaching and learning, improving opportunities for students, and focusing on the process that supports the accomplishment of district work. This appears coupled with a heightened sense of empathy and sensitivity for students, particularly those for whom the educational system has disadvantaged or disserved. Further, the women prioritized communication and active listening as a pathway to empower others. For the two women superintendents, how the work is accomplished is just as important as the actual work achieved. The women share a deep commitment to the process.

Acting as the Light Keeper: Prioritizing Teaching and Learning

The first area of work described in the data is the collaborative process the women used for creating a focus on teaching and learning for their districts. Both women stated having a clear

vision was important to them. Having a clear vision allows the women to create goals to accomplish their priorities and provides them with a direction. They wanted a clear purpose to drive the work in their districts. Ritchey added, “I’d like to say that I am the light keeper as a leader. I am the visionary for our school system.” In this quote, Ritchey indicated that her role is to provide a clear purpose for the school district’s work. As a light keeper, she identified as a guide providing direction for the collaborative groups she created. Later, she described this work as being centered around improving opportunities for students, particularly students who are disadvantaged.

Like Ritchey, Howard intentionally worked to establish a clear vision for learning for her school district. Further, Howard shared how she worked with a stakeholder advisory group to create a strategic plan with a ten-year vision for the district. She stated it is aligned with goals for the district and was adopted as the official plan by a board resolution: “I am excited that we have a long-range vision for our district that is aligned to our goals and strategies and will drive the district forward with a big picture plan.” In this quote, Howard clearly articulated that having a clear vision was a priority for her work. She stated that it was important to her to have the school board adopt the ten-year vision as the school district’s formalized plan as it made the plan official. As she discussed the ten-year plan that was completed by the group, Howard stated the plan included how staff would engage in professional learning opportunities and utilize data to improve instructional opportunities for students.

The data also revealed the women used their established relationships to assist them as they worked to address curriculum and instructional improvement. Further, as Howard explained the organization of her leadership priorities, she discussed how she enacted her vision: “I try to organize the work so that we are always focused on our end goals so that everything is about

teaching and learning. And that is what we are talking about." It is evident from this statement that Howard engaged in relational leadership as a way of prioritizing the improvement of curriculum and instruction for students. She clarified the purpose for the district and ensured the conversations were focused on improvement.

Ritchey and Howard shared many meeting agendas that included multiple opportunities for stakeholders to be involved in curriculum and instruction work and provided opportunities for discussion, feedback, and input from advisory groups. These groups assisted with strategic planning, closing a school, creating an early childhood center, and implementing a new curriculum paid for through an external grant. The review of documents also established that completed strategic plans were adopted by the districts. The data confirm the women superintendents provided stakeholders opportunities to share power and leadership and be involved in collaborative work. This commitment to process and sharing leadership with collaborative groups allowed the women to lead with a clear purpose anchored in instructional improvement.

Data indicated that both leaders incentivized participation by relying on an inclusive process. This process allowed them to garner diverse perspectives and create shared understanding of the district's vision. The women superintendents' orientation to relational leadership supports their specific leadership actions of functioning as visionaries for improved curriculum and instruction in their district leadership roles.

Improving Opportunities for Students

Although educators of all stripes support student learning, data suggest that the women focused on improving opportunities for students as one of their priorities. The commitment the

women expressed seemed to be driven by their heightened sense of empathy and sensitivity toward students. This is illustrated in Ritchey's description of her desire to make an impact with her work:

> I think it goes back to my passion. I want to make a difference in students' lives. I want to make a difference in the community in which I serve and I've felt each time I've made a move that, that calling is appropriate for me in enabling me to help others. I hope that I serve in a way that doesn't project that I think I know it all because Lord knows I don't. I'm trying to ask questions all the time of people and trying to seek information, trying to share leadership. But I guess my reason why I'm doing this job is because I wanted to continue to make a difference for students at a greater level.

In this quote, Ritchey stated that she feels compelled to serve others by listening and sharing her leadership. She further indicated her reason for serving as a superintendent was to enable her to improve opportunities for students. Ritchey also described her need to include community stakeholders as a way of providing more ideas, resources, and information to enable her to make decisions and better serve students. One example Ritchey provided for this collaborative work was a community group she formed that helps to provide resources for her preschool students, such as clothing and meals. Ritchey's focus on improving her service to students is evident in her statement describing her work in school leadership as being about "the school children. They're the heart and soul of what we do." Again, Ritchey's comments are aligned with her focus as a relational leader, which is prioritizing student needs. She discussed how her relationships with community groups and community leaders enable her to provide more services for her students.

Howard also stated that service to students meant ensuring students are prepared for their futures. She discussed that students need to be prepared through K–12 so they are ready to graduate from high school and have a pathway to employment or higher education. Howard stated "As a school system, each individual has a responsibility to make sure our kids are prepared for life. Students will take different pathways and we need to be providing options to

that end." She indicated that this is achieved by providing staff with "all the tools and resources that they need in order to be able to serve the students to ensure the end goal of having students walk across that stage at graduation is achieved." She also said that it is a "gift that we have with young people to be able to be there and witness their success as a result of the things we have done. That's why we all show up for the work." In her statement, Howard indicated a commitment to providing educators with the tools to carry out her vision of prioritizing student needs while ensuring their collective vision of improving teaching and learning are realized. Ritchey and Howard's quotes are illustrative of how they lead as relational leaders and how that intersects with leadership enactment. The data also reflect the women being compelled to be superintendents as a way of prioritizing student needs.

The data suggest that empathy was a common quality in their leadership practice. Across the data, the women suggested that their leadership prioritized concern for others. They also described actions and behaviors that supported them in "understanding and sharing the feelings of others." Howard described her superintendent role as follows: "I see it as our job to listen more, love more, and really be the caretakers for the community." Howard indicated in this statement that she has a desire to serve her community and nurture them as the superintendent. She further explained, "I guess I would say that my leadership style is more feminine and sort of nurturing." Clearly, Howard expressed in this quote an awareness of her relational leadership orientation and the influence of gender as she enacted her priorities. Ritchey displayed empathy and a sensitivity toward students when discussing her students as being from "hard places." She indicated it was her job to ensure underserved populations and students who are marginalized are provided with equity and opportunities. Ritchey recalled this example:

> We had a young man in elementary school and I was the principal. He had a rough way to go. He was a hard worker, but he had a very difficult home life. His

> mother ended up dying of an overdose and he was raised by his grandma. I have known him for many years and tried to watch out for him. He recently told me he was offered an internship and will be able to continue with this internship work after high school. This is life changing for this young man. I was giddy with excitement. For him this is survival. He will be able to take care of his family. It's absolutely a success story of what our school could do because we embraced this young man.

The quote suggests that Ritchey had a sensitivity for this student who faced challenges in his life. Later, she discussed how this student selected her to wear his jersey at a home football game as his influential educator. She described his success with enthusiasm and indicated it was these students "who made it all worthwhile." Ritchey displayed empathy and a heightened sensitivity for this student and discussed this as one example of the difference educators can make in the lives of students from difficult backgrounds.

The data revealed both women superintendents display a commitment to improving opportunities for students, particularly when discussing marginalized groups of people. Both Howard and Ritchey prioritized student needs in their leadership actions and had a heightened sense of empathy and sensitivity toward students.

Facilitating a Process for the Work

Both women superintendents focused their actions on improving teaching and learning and increasing opportunities for students, yet they also invested considerable effort facilitating a process for how work is accomplished. As I have discussed, the women used advisory groups to share leadership and power. They intentionally created collaborative processes for decision making and connected work to their vision for improving district instructional practices. In addition, as the women described their work, they reiterated that communication and listening were deeply important processes that contributed to their leadership practices.

The data suggest that the women value and intentionally plan for communication to solicit input and share information. Both women indicated they value multiple stakeholder perspectives and want stakeholders to have opportunities to express ideas. For the women, having diverse opinions and groups of people involved in providing input allowed them to connect with the individuals within their communities and make decisions that represented the priorities of the community. Howard stated that she uses collaborative groups to ensure that "everyone has a voice and a seat at the table." This indicated that Howard intentionally provided a place for the expression of diverse views. Further, Howard indicated that communication is critical in her role as the superintendent. She suggested that her non-negotiables as a leader include "the ability to communicate and to be able to establish oneself as a relationship-first leader." In this quote Howard suggested that both communication and relationships are important. Howard also explained during her interview how her hiring practices prioritized communication and relational leadership qualities in candidates for administrative positions. Ritchey's perspective aligned with Howard; she said that beyond organizational skills, communication is key for leaders to understand and secure staff buy-in. She revealed that it is a constant challenge, but necessary. "You have to communicate in a way that shows stakeholders respect for what they have done, but also encourages them to have the growth mindset to keep improving." Ritchey, in this comment, indicated that communication for her included validating stakeholders but also pushing them to continue moving forward. Ritchey's discussion of the growth mindset suggests that she values stakeholders willing to change and consider new perspectives. She did not elaborate on how she adjusts her communication practices for stakeholders who have a fixed mindset. For Ritchey it is evident that communication is more than relaying information. It is also a way of moving stakeholders forward by encouraging

growth and achievement of organizational goals. Communication was used to facilitate and enact her relational leadership priorities.

Both Howard and Ritchey also described communication as sharing district news and important updates with staff, families, and community in multiple formats. Through in-person meetings, newsletters, emails, district messaging systems, social media, and phone calls, the women regularly communicated with their staff and communities. Communication was established as a system that allowed the women to facilitate their priorities. Howard indicated that being proactive with communication is important. She frequently mentioned that it is important to "get in front of issues." She related a racial incident and discussed how she communicated widely to control the messaging in her district. In this way, she was managing communication to share factual information while also using her relational leadership skills to convey the message. Ritchey also included asking for feedback as an important component of communication. Howard revealed that she relies on her stakeholders to help share communication from the advisory teams. In this role, the stakeholders helped to buffer the messages due to their strong relationship and support of the superintendent. As the women navigated gender within the context of relationships, having stakeholders serve as buffers helped to provide them support and cover as they navigated the need to prove themselves, which was also revealed in the data.

Both superintendents expressed the importance of regular and constant communication with every group of stakeholders as a mechanism of building trust through transparency. Howard outlined processes for communication in her district. In addition to her central office leadership team, she regularly engages in meetings with the classified staff district leaders to ensure they are a part of the district's overall improvement process. She stated that this time period has become

invaluable and helps the classified staff feel "like they have a voice and they matter." Both superintendents also described the communication processes they have in place to keep the board informed, which they viewed as critical throughout their leadership enactment. Both women described regular calls, emails, and meetings to keep board members informed as they communicate updates. Ritchey stated, "I never want my board to be surprised by anything, so I communicate frequently. I think I have built up trust with the board because they know me and have seen me give them the good and not-so-good news updates." By communicating frequently, the women are being transparent and ethical with stakeholders. As a result, the women are able to build trustworthiness and credibility, which are consistent with relational leadership theory and practice.

Another way the women demonstrated a commitment to the process is by actively listening to stakeholders and then responding to the information they acquire. In addition to communication, both women superintendents engage in active listening as a process for shaping and informing their work and empowering others. By recognizing the perspective of others, both women are able to resolve conflicts and understand different viewpoints. Both women were intentional in seeking out diverse opinions and critical feedback. This allowed them to build a culture of respect, which is important to their relational leadership. Ritchey stated:

> I've learned that one of the most important qualities we can have would be that of a good listener. And also being able to reflect upon the things you hear; realizing that sometimes you have to be careful not to hear what you want to hear. You have to realize what they were saying to you. It might mean more than what it is. So, I feel like that's one of my most important roles is to listen to people and then hopefully because of that listening either make suggestions or guide a direction.

In this quote, Ritchey indicated that listening involved hearing the meaning behind the spoken words. She also relies on the input she receives to help her make decisions and provide direction to individuals and the district.

Howard indicated that in her advisory boards, listening to the input and feedback from stakeholders helped her adjust her work and priorities. Howard also shared her philosophy that group members are also more likely to be engaged and productive with group work when they see examples of how their voices are shaping the group products. Further, the women noted they did not need to know everything because they relied on others to guide their thinking and provide them with the needed background information. They also indicated that by knowing the background of issues they were able to support their staff. Ritchey stated that she often tells staff to help her understand issues so she can better advocate for them. "I say 'Explain it to me so I can support you.' I don't understand every program or course and I need the staff to help me and I listen for that information." Ritchey described how listening helped her better understand the jobs of her employees. Listening was repeated numerous times by both women in the data as the key to understanding viewpoints related to the educational and operational needs within the district and community. Ritchey added, "So, I think as leaders, we have to walk a balance of being the leader, but also willing to learn by listening because you can't fake being an expert." Ritchey revealed in this quote that listening helps her make better decisions as it gives her the background information she needs to be more informed. Both women acknowledged that they approach their role from the position of not having all of the answers. The women rely on communication with stakeholders and listening to individuals as processes that facilitate their leadership actions.

Theme 3. Navigating Gender as Relational Leaders

The data suggest that the superintendents' gender explains and, in some cases, justifies the orientations to leadership practices that both of the women took. Specifically, I found that the women were engaged in relational leadership in their districts while simultaneously navigating

their gender. Gender is woven throughout the superintendents' leadership experiences and suggests why they approached leadership in particular ways. Within the context of their leadership practices, the women responded to gender in strategic ways, including taking steps to prove themselves, minimizing personal accomplishments, and deflecting criticism and gender-based jokes. The women intentionally prioritize their relationships with others over the gender barriers they encounter in their leadership work. Both women expressed frustration that gender at times served as a barrier that interfered with their work and required them to adjust their leadership actions accordingly.

Taking Steps to Prove Oneself

As the women superintendents are engaged in relational leadership practices oriented toward shared leadership and collaborative work, both Howard and Ritchey mentioned many times in the data the need to prove themselves as district leaders. They described their commitment to working hard and revealed that working harder than others and exceeding expectations was also a response to needing to prove themselves in their roles. As a result, they indicated they commit more time and attention to details than they believe may be required of male superintendents. Ritchey said "I feel like I have to prove myself when I talk to the board… I give my best effort. That's the way my parents raised me. I just feel like we've proved ourselves in our day-to-day work with our administrative team, but it's with the board. It seems like it's an ongoing challenge." In this quote, Ritchey discussed how proving herself is an ongoing effort with her school board even though she believed she had already established her ability to lead the district with her administrative team. Ritchey stated, "When I am preparing for board meetings, I make sure I have thoroughly discussed anything that is financial with my business manager. I try to be overly prepared so I can show the board I know what I'm talking

about." Ritchey seemed particularly concerned about proving herself when finances were discussed with the board. Richey added, "Maybe it is my own insecurities, but I feel like the board really scrutinizes any of my recommendations around finance." This was an area of uncertainty for Ritchey and she reported that she often tries to show the board she understands finance by being prepared with answers to financial questions and forming a close relationship with the business manager.

Howard also described ways she works to prove herself with her board. Howard shared that she talks to her board president every morning on the way into work. Howard stated:

> Every morning the board president calls me. I don't mind. She has lots of questions and I am able to answer them and give her the background on my decisions. We have a really good relationship. I have been able to prove myself with her and she trusts my judgment. I think this has helped me establish credibility with the board.

These calls have allowed Howard to establish a strong relationship with the board president while also demonstrating that she is making good decisions. Further, Howard revealed they allowed her the time to build her credibility and thus prove her competence as the superintendent.

Ritchey also described how she worked to develop relationships with individual board members to establish credibility for her work and prove herself. She indicated she wanted the board to trust her. Ritchey shared that in her desire to have open communication, she offered to meet board members for coffee or lunch, which was a past practice with the previous male superintendent and the board. Since Ritchey was attempting to establish a collaborative relationship with her board members so she could communicate proactively and prove herself, she was concerned when she was told the male board members were not comfortable being out with "someone who wasn't their wife." As Ritchey reflected on this response, she stated:

> I just thought that was really interesting. I respected that because they're all married men and I absolutely would never want anyone to think differently, but he didn't want to be seen in the local restaurant with someone that wasn't his wife. I had not thought about that. It's just interesting.

Ritchey indicated in this statement that she had not considered that her gender would be a barrier in her plan to develop trust and credibility with individual board members. With limited ability to meet with individual board members, Ritchey is at a disadvantage in her ability to develop relationships and conduct business, particularly when this opportunity was afforded to her male predecessor. She had to find alternate ways to establish a connection with individual board members and prove herself. As a result, Ritchey emailed and called board members more frequently to communicate information and share important information. She stated, "I wanted the board to know I was making good decisions, so I made it a practice to communicate with them by weekly emails and calls if something big happened." In this statement, Ritchey suggested that communicating with the board afforded her the opportunity to prove that she was making good decisions and was functioning competently as the district leader. In the interview, Ritchey also shared that she had not considered the impact gender would have on her ability to perform her superintendent role in her small rural community. "I truly think as a woman I have to constantly prove that I know what I am doing, especially with the board," Ritchey stated.

As Howard discussed her need to prove herself, she also connected her gender to leading in a rural context. Howard opined that the rules were different for men and women. Howard described her experience with needing to prove herself:

> I think it's fair to say that the rules are different for us. And that's not meaning that the rules are in our favor. I think that leading as a woman in a small rural community is knowing that every time that you walk into a room that you have more need to prove your intellect or your value and you know just who you are. And it's surprising to me sometimes that that's still very much a thing. But, it's there. And I think it just means that women superintendents have to work harder and that is not okay. It's not okay at all.

Howard indicated in this quote that she views her gender as a barrier in her superintendent role. She expressed her frustration that she still encounters this challenge in her daily practice despite being in the superintendent role in her district for seven years. It is evident that Howard views the gender issue as an ongoing concern that interferes with her ability to enact relational leadership. Howard stated she tries to mitigate the impact of gender on her leadership by performing at high levels as a way of proving her ability to lead the school district.

The women also stated that when beginning in their roles as superintendents they especially felt the need to establish their value and prove themselves, which is typical for all superintendents, men and women. However, once relationships, credibility, and trust are established, proving oneself typically diminishes. Howard indicated that the challenge continued for her even after several years in the superintendent role:

> I don't really remember much about my first year because it was so challenging, but I think as women showing up in the superintendency that maybe our male colleagues don't have the same challenge, but there was just this ever-present dynamic of the balance between trying to prove myself and establish my value at the table and to be seen for the work we do. Just the fact of not fitting into a social construct, at least a perceived one, and it still rears up again every now and then… We're just not there yet, clearly not there. I think that is something that has just been an ever-present sort of barrier or roadblock that has gotten in the way. We could have just gotten there faster."

Howard, in this quote, described how proving herself extended beyond her intellect and credibility to also include the actual value she added to the work in the district. She clearly attributed her feeling of not fitting into the social construct as a gender barrier. Howard described the gender barrier as ever-present, which required her to navigate it on a regular basis as she also worked to prove herself. Howard indicated the barrier impedes the rate of progress she can make on her leadership priorities, since she frequently needs to reestablish trust and credibility before change can be enacted.

Both women also discussed how they must prove themselves during group work and indicated that gender caused them to feel less valued by male stakeholders during discussions. The women intentionally cultivated collaborative relationships to facilitate their leadership practices; however, for them personally, they expressed they sometimes perceived their voices may not be valued. Ritchey stated:

> There are certainly difficulties and without trying to let it get in my way, I do believe it's a man's world. And so sometimes you want that not to be a thing, but you also always have to keep it in mind as you're making comments or you're interjecting in a discussion. You just have to, no matter who we are. "We want to be valued at the table," I guess is the best way to say it for me.

Ritchey described her frustration in this quote and stated she does not always feel valued in discussions. Later, Ritchey also shared she has noticed that men will sometimes talk over her or not be open to what she is saying during discussions. Ritchey stated, "In group meetings sometimes men will want to talk over me or say things for me. I'm just not as loud as they are." Ritchey later stated that she will sometimes raise her voice to be heard. Ritchey revealed an awareness that her voice is sometimes lost in discussions. She stated this can be a barrier that interferes with her ability to facilitate discussions as she continually works to prove herself to stakeholders.

According to the women, having a strong work ethic is necessary to be successful in the superintendency. However, both women also indicated that work ethic was actually more about needing to prove themselves and was needed to mitigate the expectations they believed were placed upon them as women superintendents. Ritchey stated, "I was raised to work hard but I really think as a woman superintendent, I have to work harder than others just to prove myself." Howard also said, "As women we are scrutinized more. It isn't fair, but we are. I often feel like I have to work harder than my male colleagues just to prove I can do this job." While creating

opportunities for collaborative work and establishing deep relationships to improve opportunities for students, the women were also challenged with a continuous need to prove themselves as they enacted their leadership practices.

Minimizing Personal Accomplishments

Given the expectations of their communities, both women tended to minimize their personal accomplishments and also treated their professional success differently. They engaged in these behaviors in order to minimize the potential influence on their leadership. In particular, the women tended to refer to any successes as a team success. While this is an empowerment strategy, it is also used intentionally by the women to avoid drawing attention to themselves. They are reluctant to self-promote or take credit for accomplishments. When reviewing the transcripts from the interviews, "we," "the team," "our," and "us" were frequently used to describe the work and achievements. Ritchey stated "We worked on this plan," "Our project resulted in food for our preschool students," "The administrative team created goals for our pillars," and "It was important to us to meet the needs of all kids." Howard stated "We were successful in getting this grant," "It was so exciting to see the work our team accomplished," and "Our advisory groups accomplished so much to move our work forward with teaching and learning. I'm just so pleased to see what they have accomplished." Rarely did either woman use the word "I." In fact, Howard explained how proud of her board she was for a progressive step they had taken to respond to equity and social justice. She stated "This was such a hard thing to do but our board took a stand and made a resolution that supported equity and inclusion. They took a stand on injustice. I was just so proud of them. They really did the right thing." She gave all of the credit to her board for "doing the right thing." In this comment, Howard acknowledged the action was the appropriate behavior and praised the board for their initiative. It was only after

several probing questions that Howard revealed she had been at the center of this action and had led the work and provided the board with the resolution that was ultimately passed. Not taking credit and sharing praise with others is consistent with their orientation of leadership as a collaborative endeavor. Ritchey also discussed that she knows that she uses “we” instead of “I” and has noted other women leaders engage in this same practice. The data indicate it is an intentional decision by the women to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Ritchey added:

> I am one of those people who says “we” all the time and I felt like I was doing it to promote the team. Right. But I do understand that there's times when it has to be “I.” I believe this, or I am directing this. So there is a time that I have to be gutsy enough to stand up and be a pillar of leadership.

Ritchey indicated in this quote that she intentionally promotes the team by giving the credit to the group. She also makes it clear in this statement that she knows there are times when she does need to make a statement that is clearly about what she needs or wants. However, even in this comment, Ritchey seemed willing to take responsibility for decisions when needed but not necessarily the credit for positive outcomes.

However, the data also indicate that minimizing personal accomplishments is a response to trying to fit in and not draw too much attention to themselves. The women leaders were reluctant to self-promote or take credit for work. They assimilate within the groups. When discussing her approach to fitting in within the community and in her district, Howard shared:

> I think in order to have community support, women have to be careful. There is that fine balance, that you can't be too… you can't be too persistent or you can't be too much extra anything. Because then you're a bitch and it's just such a fine balance. It's a tricky dance that I think we have to do it in a way that our male counterparts just don't ever have to think about.

It is evident in this comment that Howard believes gender requires her to balance her personal and professional behaviors to fit into her role as a woman superintendent. By maintaining this

balance of behaviors as a way of assimilating into the group, Howard indicated she is minimizing her voice and actions. She described this behavior as necessary to fit in. Howard also stated that she is required to consider her personal behavior and how her gender impacts others in a way that men in the superintendent role are not required to consider. Ritchey also stated that she "wants to avoid being seen as too strong." It is evident from this comment that Ritchey views too much strength as being viewed negatively and she wants to avoid that perception by maintaining balance or minimizing her strength. Both women revealed in the data that they intentionally minimized personal accomplishments because they value empowering their teams and want to share credit, but it is also required to some extent as they navigate gender in their relational leadership roles. This practice of minimizing personal accomplishments is consistent with the literature; women are much less likely to self-promote themselves than men.

Deflecting Criticism and Gender-based Jokes

In addition to proving themselves and minimizing personal accomplishments, the women superintendents shared that an undercurrent of gender-related actions by stakeholders requires them to deflect gender-based jokes or references. Both Ritchey and Howard shared several examples of what they considered as inappropriate comments made by board members or community members related to their gender. One common thread is related to the women's intellect. Ritchey stated she has heard before "She loves kids, but does she know what she's doing?" Ritchey indicated that the staff, community, and board knew her before she was a superintendent and knew that she was an advocate for children. However, Ritchey also shared that she faced skepticism from staff and community members when she became the first woman superintendent for the district. Ritchey attributed that to her gender. Ritchey shared another example that occurred during a board work session. She was discussing a potential building

project and she asked “How much of a tax increase do you think our tax payers would handle?” She stated her goal with this question was to determine if the board would say “any tax increase” or stay tax neutral. According to Ritchey, one of the board members said, “that's the smartest question you've ever asked us. That just kind of disappointed me.” Ritchey stated she was not offended by the comment but she was disappointed. She was disappointed because she did not expect to encounter such a demeaning comment from a board member. Further, Ritchey expressed an insecurity about finance, which she said is outside her comfort zone, and this comment reinforced for her that this board member did not respect her financial ability. Ritchey said the board member caused her to feel inadequate in her role. “I know I can be insecure when it comes to finance, but when they make comments like this it makes me feel like they think I am not capable of doing this job.” Ritchey said she laughed off the comment at the time. She did not want to damage her relationship with the board member by responding. Ritchey also shared that in one meeting with the board, when a board member disagreed with her, he asked her “Are you going to cry?” She said, “I just laughed it off but it did make me uncomfortable. Why would he say something like that? Just because I am a woman?” Ritchey revealed in this statement that she encounters gender as a barrier in her leadership practice and it contributes to her insecurity. This may also explain to some degree her desire to prove herself and minimize her personal accomplishments.

Data from Howard also suggest that she deflected comments related to her intellect or appearance. Howard stated:

> I do think that it is even more here than some places. Some stupid comments are made coming from men, but honestly there are even value systems of women in small rural communities that are not okay. Just the other day—you just can't sometimes believe folks—someone said “You're halfway smart for a girl.” So those things are there.

Howard indicated by this comment that she believes stakeholders in rural communities are more likely to engage in inappropriate gender comments. As Howard reflected on gender comments and jokes, she was able to share several incidents where her appearance or intellect were the basis for the inappropriate interaction. Howard shared that she was once introduced as "prettier than her predecessor." Howard recalled another incident when a man said to her, "Howard, you've got a pretty good head on your shoulders… pretty head." As Howard shared these comments, she indicated that it was wrong but she was uncomfortable addressing it directly. She said she ignored it. Howard stated she also faced gender obstacles when she was negotiating her superintendent contract. As they were discussing the terms of her contract, which were nearly identical to those of her male predecessor, one of the board members stated "Well, your husband's got a good job." Howard said this comment was inappropriate, but she did not want to hurt the new relationship by replying to it. She said she decided to ignore the comment. Howard added, "I know in these small rural communities the superintendent's salary looks like a lot of money. I was only asking for the same thing that the previous male superintendent was given, but they questioned why I needed the money." Howard prioritized relationships over her own comfort. This was her strategic decision. Like Ritchey, these comments contribute to the insecurities Howard expressed about her role. She indicated they make her feel undervalued and inadequate. Howard stated "These comments aren't fair and make me doubt myself sometimes, which I hate." Both Howard and Ritchey also indicated that they have had to think about how to respond to these comments. They said they usually just ignore the comments because they don't want to hurt the relationship. Howard did indicate that as her confidence has developed, she has started to respond in a non-threatening manner. She said "I'm not really proud of myself for how I am doing it, but I have tried to start addressing comments by saying in a joking way, you can't

say that. It is baby steps and I mostly bite my tongue and then I am mad at myself for not addressing it directly." Howard revealed, "There's a tension there that, you know, you want to kind of call them out. And now I've gotten to the point where I can call them out, but I don't do it in a way that I would be proud of. It's so hard. So stupid." As Howard indicated in this quote, she struggled with how to appropriately address gender-based comments in a way that maintained the relationship with the stakeholder. She said that by laughing it off and stating "You can't say that," she is addressing the comment but not as directly as she would like. Howard and Ritchey have worked hard to develop strong relationships with stakeholders and they are concerned about damaging relationships if they address the gender bias. Deflecting or ignoring the comments is an intentional response to preserve relationships. It is an ever-present challenge to navigate as they perform their leadership responsibilities.

In addition to gender comments related to intellect or appearance, Ritchey stated that she has heard comments like "Her feelings are going to get hurt." Ritchey indicated in this comment that others perceive her to be more emotional, which is consistent with leadership theory. Ritchey stated that she deflects these comments and stays unemotional. She does not want to appear weak. For Ritchey, showing emotion is a sign of weakness. Howard and Ritchey said that there have been many examples of gender comments or jokes that they have ignored during their tenure as superintendents. Relationships trump their personal discomfort.

Gender explains some of the orientations to relational leadership practices for both women superintendents. The data also suggest that the superintendents' gender explains and, in some cases, justifies the orientations to leadership practices that both of the women took. The women superintendents responded to gender barriers by taking steps to prove themselves, minimizing personal accomplishments, and deflecting criticism and gender-based jokes.

Summary of Findings

In summary, the data suggest the two women lead their rural school districts as relational leaders. They develop relationships and value and encourage individual contributions through sharing their power and leadership. The women's description of their leadership practice is consistent with gender research and relational leadership theory and practice, which prioritizes relationships, collaboration, communication, and focusing on student needs. As the women serve in their superintendent roles, they encounter gender barriers that they must navigate throughout their leadership practice. They often must prove themselves in more significant ways than their male colleagues to demonstrate competence. They minimize their personal accomplishments to prevent themselves from being seen unfavorably by others and to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Further, they often encounter gender-based jokes and criticisms related to their intellect, emotions, or appearance. To preserve their relationships with others, the women often sacrifice their own comfort and self-respect and strategically deflect gender-based criticisms and jokes. The women revealed the gender barriers did contribute to their own insecurities and caused them to question their ability to fit within the superintendent role.

Gender appears to be woven throughout the women superintendents' leadership experience. They are relational leaders who focus on people and value collaborative work to accomplish priorities related to improving outcomes for students. They do this important work while also navigating gender barriers that permeate their leadership experiences.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications

Superintendents have innumerable responsibilities and competing priorities as they serve as the chief executive officer of a school district. According to researchers (Lemasters & Roach, 2012; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010; Bjork, 2000), women superintendents, who comprise 27% of superintendents, experience the superintendency differently from their male colleagues. This study informs practice and contributes to our understanding of the role that gender plays in leadership by investigating how two women superintendents employed in rural school districts describe and have enacted their leadership practice. Specifically, the study contributes to our understanding of women's ways of leading. Prior research by Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) argued that women engage in five primary leadership approaches, including relational leadership, leadership for social justice, spiritual leadership, leadership for learning, and balanced leadership. However, findings from this research study suggest that the two women have relied primarily on relational leadership to enact their priorities of improving teaching and learning and expanding opportunities for students. This may be explained by the fact that a woman's leadership is complicated by gender barriers and ingrained perceptions. This chapter discusses key implications for women leaders to consider as they enact leadership practices while navigating the barriers that arise given their gender. It also provides male and female superintendents with recommendations about how greater attention to relational leadership might improve and inform their leadership practices. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Women as Relational Leaders

The analysis of women's ways of leading as they navigate gender offers women entering a superintendent role some insight into the ways women build relationships and the attitudes and behaviors they may encounter as they assume their leadership role. The findings from this study contribute to our understanding of women superintendents' leadership practice. This study aligns with a few seminal pieces of research in the scholarly literature, specifically research conducted by Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011). Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) examined women's lived experiences of leading school districts and identified themes associated with women's ways of leading. Grogan (2000) also stated in the literature that women feel discomfort establishing a "power over" approach to leadership. Two kinds of power are described within organizations: personal power and position power (Katz, 2006; Northouse, 2013). Mountford (2004) explained that position power or "power over" was top down and used to control others in lower positions in organizations. Katz (2006) and Northouse (2013) described power over as a hierarchical approach to leadership. The personal power style of leadership of the women in this study may address concerns by Katz (2006) and Northouse (2013). Personal power or "power with" is defined as shared power using collaboration and communication. Further, Katz (2006) and Northouse (2013) highlighted that personal power is based on kindness, knowledge of content, and expertise of the leader to influence others. Grogan (2000) and Brunner (2000) found that women often describe power as something that increases as it is shared. Indeed, the women in this study described how collaborative work accomplished by advisory groups actually allowed them to share power with employees and stakeholders and encouraged employee and community engagement, which is consistent with the literature (Katz, 2006; Northouse, 2013; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). The superintendents demonstrated the value they placed in working alongside

employees and stakeholders and empowering others to lead groups. The practice of working alongside employees to move an organization forward is also characteristic of relational leadership as described by researchers (Branson & Marra, 2019; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Gibson, 1995; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011).

Relationships and shared power appear central to the enactment of leadership for the women superintendents. Indeed, prior research affirms that democratic or participative styles of leadership are consistent with the common ways that women often approach their work (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Gibson, 1995; Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). What is missing is a broader understanding about the ways in which women who enter the superintendency enact leadership and what strategies they adopt to be successful in doing so. This understanding is not only important to women but also to understanding leadership practice generally. As Branson and Marra (2019) also explained in their research, developing relationships with employees, getting to know them as individuals, and engaging employees in decision making is necessary to move the organization forward and encourage employee engagement and retention. During a time in education when it is difficult to fill educator vacancies, engaging in leadership practices that are more likely to attract and retain employees has implications for the field to consider.

Kim and Mauborgne's (2014) research also indicates that leadership must be thought of as an act of service. Further, the researchers argued that leaders should create the organizational conditions in which those they are leading want to accept the leadership (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014). The women in this study created the organizational conditions and culture necessary to enact leadership through facilitating collaborative processes for how work was accomplished. Specifically, they prioritized communication and listening to stakeholders. Through visiting buildings and engaging in daily personal conversations along with sharing notes of appreciation

and acknowledging birthdays, family struggles, and celebrations, the women cultivated relationships and modeled acts of service. They positioned themselves for others to accept their leadership (Kim & Mauborgne, 2014). The two women's relational leadership practices are also consistent with Finnigan and Daly's (2012) assertion that a high number of expressive relationships based on trust and social interaction within a district has a positive effect on culture and overall improvement in the district.

This study also contributes to our understanding of women superintendent leadership practice by understanding what goals the women selected for their districts and how they accomplished their goals. In my analysis, I found that as relational leaders, the women prioritized student needs. Specifically, they focused on improving teaching and learning and expanding opportunities for students, which is consistent with Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) research. Since the two women focused on curriculum and instruction, it is important to examine the background of the women superintendents to understand their capacity to enact instructional improvement. Both of the women in this study described an extensive background in leading curriculum and instruction as leaders of buildings and districts. In fact, the women shared that they both had been teachers, principals, and instructional leaders in their current districts in previous roles for more than 10 years before moving into the superintendency. Both superintendents indicated their school boards knew their background and previous work performance and later communicated to the women that this gave them an advantage during the selection process. In this way, the women's backgrounds and pathways to the superintendency were consistent with the literature, which explored the preparation of women superintendents to lead school districts (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Brunner & Grogan, 2005b; Grogan & Brunner, 2007; Brunner & Kim, 2010; Glass, et al., 2000). Through this review, the researchers

found that women superintendents focus on instructional leadership. Grogan and Brunner (2005) also found that women were better prepared to be instructional leaders in the superintendency as a result of more time in the classroom, higher degree attainment, and more current professional development experiences. Yet, while the women superintendents in this study conveyed a strong background in curriculum and instruction and this served as a pathway to their positions, the women allowed the advisory groups to develop the actual plan and action steps for instructional improvement, which challenges the assertion from Finnan et al. (2015) that women value their curriculum and instructional experiences as an essential aspect of their effectiveness as leaders. Rather, this leadership behavior illustrates the commitment to process and how these two women leaders drive change through collaborative relationships rather than imposing their own personal knowledge and instructional background. Further, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) describe within their leadership framework that instruction is central to women. However, the women in this study often deferred instructional decision making to other stakeholders and employees as a way of sharing their power. While the women in this study had strong instructional backgrounds, they viewed their role as one of creating a vision for teaching and learning improvement and establishing clarity of purpose. The advisory groups were allowed to develop the actual strategic plan and steps for instructional improvement. The women shared their power and served as group members but did not drive the work from a position of authority. As women leaders advance to the role of superintendent and develop processes for collaborative work, they possibly should consider how to balance their own knowledge and skills with their desire to share power. After relationships are established, it may be necessary to develop the capacity of stakeholders and employees to understand curriculum and instruction best practices before sharing power and

giving groups the task of creating an instructional improvement plan. It was not clear in this study if developing the capacity of group members was prioritized.

In addition to providing a clear vision for the school district anchored in curriculum and instruction, the women also discussed the importance of improving opportunities for students, which is consistent with Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) assertion that women enter teaching to change the lives of children and to make the world a better place for students who have not been served well by institutions. Both women superintendents also described a similar commitment and passion driving their work. As superintendents search for ways to meet the needs of disadvantaged students, both women could serve as models to other leaders for how to network and convene community agencies to develop a joint plan to serve students more holistically. Through collaborative relationships and sharing power, the women have prioritized student needs and relay an understanding of connectedness to others in the world, which is also consistent with the literature (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011). While practicing relational leadership and creating a vision for improved curriculum and instruction, both women superintendents also displayed a commitment to expanding opportunities for students, which is consistent with gender leadership theory and practice.

This study also expands our understanding of why and how women leaders have specific actions they take to mitigate the impact of gender. In order to understand how to increase the number of women who obtain and are successful within the superintendency, it is important to better understand women's ways of leading and how to navigate gender as it intersects with leadership practice. The women in this study revealed they were aware of the gender challenges and were able to explicitly describe the barriers. Minimizing personal accomplishments is consistent with the findings from Bowles and McGinn (2005) that women are much less likely to

self-promote than men due to being viewed negatively by colleagues and hiring committees. This study expands our understanding of why and how women leaders minimize their personal accomplishments while enacting leadership. The participants in this study specifically shared an intentional decision to share power and give credit to others in the group as a way of not drawing too much attention to themselves. The women were careful to maintain a calm demeanor. This is consistent with Brescoll's (2016) findings that gender-emotion stereotypes hinder women's ability to succeed in leadership roles within organizations. As a result, the women in this study balanced their emotions and actions to reflect a controlled response to challenges and used relationships to help provide them with support for their priorities. The relationships also provided the women with a shield when they were criticized for their decisions or actions within their leadership practice. The women consistently gave credit to team members and did not self-promote, which could have been viewed negatively. Giving credit away, controlling their emotions so they were not viewed as excessive, and refraining from self-promotion was consistent with the women's practice of minimizing their accomplishments. The women's actions and rationale behind their actions supports Bescoll's (2016) assertion that emotional control is the master stereotype for women and a fundamental barrier for women in leadership. Women's lack of emotional control is discussed as the most common reason others view women as not suited for leadership positions. The women expressed a desire to assimilate within groups and not stand out either positively or negatively; thus, they minimized their accomplishments and used relationships to provide themselves with support and cover. As women enter the superintendency, particularly in the rural context, having an awareness of these barriers, even if they cannot be changed, provides leaders with context for why they may experience the

superintendency in a certain way. It can also be reassuring to women leaders to understand they have women colleagues who are navigating the same lived experiences.

As the women described their desire to prove themselves, they indicated that proving themselves was accomplished by the perceived need to work harder to demonstrate their competency. This is consistent with gender research that concluded women must work harder or perform substantially better than their male counterparts to be considered similarly competent (Lynes & Heilman, 2006). Further, both women cultivated relationships and developed processes for collaboration because they valued the voices of their peers but also because the relationships provided them cover for gender-based barriers, such as needing to prove themselves. The relationships also provided the women with a way to establish credibility with stakeholders and employees, which supports Branson and Marra's (2019) claims that authentic relationships are one way leaders can gain the support and credibility of those they lead.

While the literature confirmed the findings that women need to work harder than men to prove themselves and minimize personal accomplishments to not be viewed negatively, the literature did not discuss gender-based comments and jokes as a threat for women in the superintendency (Lynes & Heilman, 2006). This study expanded our understanding of how gender comments and jokes negatively impacted the leadership practice of two women superintendents in a rural context. Both women revealed they encountered examples of gender-based comments and jokes on several occasions related to their appearance or intellect. Further, both women expressed insecurity based on the comments, particularly in the area of finance, and this reinforced their perceived need to prove themselves. The women shared that they were disappointed or frustrated that they needed to navigate those barriers as they enacted leadership. Further, neither woman was satisfied with how to address inappropriate language and behavior.

They were concerned about preserving relationships over their own comfort. The described experiences the women shared reinforce Grogan's (2010) claim that women are always women in the role of superintendent and their gender is not separated from the role they have assumed. Based on the experiences reported by the two women in this study, women entering the superintendency, particularly in rural contexts, need to consider a plan for how to establish boundaries regarding gender language and behavior. Further, institutions providing training to school board members and educational leaders should consider addressing gender bias. Having a female mentor to help navigate leadership and gender challenges would also provide new administrators with support and guidance.

Women Superintendents and Relational Leadership Theoretical Framework

The women in this study expand on Grogan and Shakeshaft's relational leadership theory by describing how they enact leadership as relational leaders. The findings contribute to our understanding of women superintendent leadership practice, particularly when considering how gender barriers permeate the leadership enactment of both women superintendents in this study. While the women primarily practiced relational leadership, they also practiced leadership for social justice, consistent with Grogan and Shakeshaft's framework. The women had a sensitivity toward marginalized and disadvantaged students and displayed a heightened sense of empathy. The superintendents also indicated that making a difference in students' lives was their motivation for becoming educators and leading school districts, which is consistent with social justice leadership. The women explained leadership for learning as being focused on establishing a vision and providing clarity around teaching and learning to ensure quality instruction was prioritized. While the women were focused on teaching and learning, which is consistent with

leadership for learning, they also included others in the decision making and plan development. They blended their relational leadership enactment with leadership for learning.

As the women described their ways of leading, they did not describe practices consistent with balanced leadership or spiritual leadership, which Grogan and Shakeshaft included in their framework. Neither of the women had children in their homes, and this may explain why they were not concerned about balanced leadership. Rather, the women seemed to commit fully to their positions and did not express any conflicting statements that supported their supposed struggle with striving for balance between responsibilities at work and at home. Additionally, neither woman expressed spirituality as a source of personal strength. They did not specifically mention religious beliefs and did not discuss reflecting on practices, spending time alone, retreating, or spending time seeking an understanding of connectedness, which are consistent with Grogan and Shakeshaft's (2011) spiritual leadership theme. The women in this study prioritized the relational leadership practices and processes as their primary way of leading their school districts. Due to accountability laws that shifted the prioritization of educational practice to improved student achievement, Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011) affirmed curriculum and instruction as a pathway to superintendency for women. However, Branson and Marra (2019) claim that relational leadership theory more accurately explains how leaders can impact organizational improvement by empowering and engaging individual employees to work alongside leaders in decision making. As women's ways of leading have been explored in the literature by Grogan and Shakeshaft and others, women have been found to use relational leadership practices as one of their ways of leading. It would benefit the field to better understand how women as relational leaders may actually have another pathway to the superintendency in addition to curriculum and instruction.

What cannot be Learned from this Study

Due to the small number of participants, future research is needed to understand whether the findings are consistent with a larger sample size of women participants. These findings in terms of how women superintendents lead should be explored in broader randomized sampling to determine if the findings are consistent. A quantitative study would also be helpful to determine if the findings are statistically significant. The study also needs to be expanded to include both suburban and rural school districts. While the women describe their leadership behaviors in terms of improving teaching and learning and expanding opportunities for students, from this study it is not possible to determine if the behaviors actually result in improved student outcomes. A study that correlates leadership behaviors to improved student achievement or expanded programming would provide insight into the impact of ways of leading. Further research would require more complex, longitudinal research designs that rely upon validated scales to measure leadership effectiveness. This study included two women participants who had served as employees in the districts in which they were selected to lead as superintendents. This study does not address how leadership practices, priorities, or behaviors used to mitigate gender barriers may be described differently for a leader without a background in a school district. More research is needed to more fully understand this area of study.

Recommendations

Despite the limitations, this study does offer five recommendations for higher education superintendent preparation programs and practicing superintendents, particularly women superintendents and school board members:

1. These findings suggest all leaders would benefit from establishing a process for sharing power and creating structures for communication and listening. By facilitating a process for how work is accomplished, the superintendent can model an effective way in which all stakeholders work together. After creating a strong culture for group work, leaders are able to harness the individual strengths of group members to create a shared vision for improvement. Strong relationships allow the leader to build trust and credibility within the community and move the organization forward with shared goals. Leaders who serve as connectors between individuals within the community are able to provide the community with a network of available resources that can be shared.
2. Having a clear vision for improving curriculum and instruction in school districts is one of the key responsibilities and priorities identified by women superintendents. Superintendents can accomplish improvement of curriculum and instruction if they provide a clear plan for advancing it as a priority, such as a strategic plan. Additionally, women superintendents with a background in teaching and learning could provide benefit for their teams by building the capacity of group members to understand best practices when creating plans for district improvement. Women superintendents are often able to serve as lead learners and guide district employees to improvement through modeling best instructional practices.
3. Since women experience the superintendency differently from their male colleagues, it is recommended for higher education preparation programs to share research with aspiring women superintendents and discuss the potential access points and road blocks to the superintendency. Men in leadership preparation programs would also benefit from

understanding the superintendency from different perspectives and gain a sensitivity toward gender bias in the superintendency.

4. To increase the number of women who attain superintendent positions and are successful within them, it is important to consider developing a woman-to-woman superintendent mentoring program for women entering the superintendency. Women often lack a network of support and need shepherds to navigate the politics of achieving a superintendent position and enacting change. By having experienced women leaders available to respond to questions and provide guidance, new women superintendents would have a safe place to ask for help.
5. Finally, since it is not possible to separate gender from the superintendent position, women navigating leadership and gender would benefit from having an awareness of gender-related threats. It may also be helpful to establish boundaries for stakeholder behavior and have a rehearsed plan for responses to threats or barriers.

Opportunities for Future Research

These recommendations provide opportunities for further understanding of women's leadership practices as well as potential research. Based on the findings and limitations of the study, the following are recommendations for further research topics:

1. Further research on women's ways of leading is needed by expanding the sample size and using a protocol to define leadership behaviors. A quantitative or mixed methods design would also enable the researcher to determine level of significance. Perhaps using a control group of male superintendents to examine leadership practices would be beneficial in understanding similarities and differences.

2. A study on leadership practices and employee retention would provide an opportunity to better understand the effectiveness of ways of leading and employee satisfaction and engagement. The qualitative study would provide an opportunity to better understand which leadership behaviors are most valued by employees and could potentially impact employee recruitment and retention. Leaders could take an inventory to assess leadership behaviors and employees could be interviewed to determine how those behaviors translate into their job satisfaction.
3. An examination of women superintendents' ways of leading in other contexts would help expand our understanding of similarities and differences between rural, suburban, and urban superintendent roles. This study would broaden our understanding of how much the context determines the need for leadership actions as a way of responding to each community's unique needs and challenges.
4. A study that measures the impact of leadership practices on outcomes for students is needed. It is not known whether the ways of leading actually translate into improved results for students. By examining student learning results and student growth with ways of leading, a quantitative study could help identify which leadership practices result in statistically significant improvement for students.
5. Further research is also needed to determine the differences women experience in the superintendent role when leading a district from which the superintendent did not originate. This would help to clarify whether having relationships within a district prior to a position provides the superintendent with a different experience or a more successful tenure as superintendent.

6. Future research should be conducted to consider the leadership practices with gender norms more broadly defined to include transgender. This would expand research to understand how traditional gender norms intersect with gender identity.
7. It is recommended that a study be conducted with a focus group of women superintendents to discuss gender barriers encountered in the superintendency and ways those are mitigated by the superintendents. This study would help expand our understanding of possible solutions to the gender jokes and comments experienced by the women superintendents.
8. A study of male superintendents who exhibit relational leadership practices would provide a basis of comparison for how leadership is enacted and the similarities and differences between men and women relational leaders.
9. It is recommended that a replication of the study be conducted in other states to determine whether community or political differences impact women's ways of leading.
10. Further research is needed to discover the level of satisfaction of school board members with the women superintendents they hired. By understanding the perception of the women superintendents' leadership enactment, we would better understand the value placed on women's ways of leading.
11. It is recommended that further research be conducted to better understand how mentors impact the success of women superintendents. Since women experience the superintendency differently, understanding the value of a guide or mentor to new women leaders would be beneficial.

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Appendix A

INDIANA UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR RESEARCH

How do Women Superintendents' Ways of Leading School Improvement Support Improvement of Teaching and Learning?

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Scientists do research to answer important questions that might help change or improve the way we do things in the future. This consent form will give you information about the study to help you decide whether you want to participate. Please read this form, and ask any questions you have, before agreeing to be in the study.

All research is voluntary. You can choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to participate, you can change your mind later and leave the study at any time. You will not be penalized or lose any benefits if you decide not to participate or choose to leave the study later.

The purpose of this study is to examine how women superintendents describe leadership practices that support the improvement of instruction in their districts. This study will explore the factors that influence women superintendents' instructional leadership and how they overcome barriers to serving as instructional leaders. This qualitative case study will include two women superintendents who are employed in rural school districts located in a Midwestern state.

We are asking you if you want to be in this study because you are a woman superintendent located in a rural school district in a common study council in a Midwestern state. The study is being conducted by Teresa Brown, a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program.

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things.
You will be interviewed four times for one hour each over Zoom. You can expect to be involved in the study for four months.
The researcher will ask to review documents to examine how you describe and enact instructional leadership practices that support improvement of teaching and learning.
The types of documents to be collected include:

- Principal meeting agendas
- Strategic plans
- Administrator evaluations
- Professional learning agendas
- Classroom walk-thru expectations
- School board agendas and minutes

Before agreeing to participate, please consider the risks and potential benefits of taking part in this study. As a woman superintendent representing 22% of all superintendents in the state, participant information is more easily identifiable due to the small numbers of eligible participants. The researcher will take steps to protect the identities and information by making every reasonable effort to ensure anonymity. Additionally, the participant may be concerned about the sharing of information obtained in the document review. The researcher has an ethical duty to maintain confidentiality and will do so. Participants will have an opportunity to review transcripts to seek clarifications before information is analyzed and review the data analysis.

You may be uncomfortable while answering the interview questions. While completing the interviews, you can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer.

There is a risk someone outside the study team could get access to your research information from this study. More information about how we will protect your information to reduce this risk is below.

Participants may benefit from having a better understanding of leadership practices utilized by women superintendents to improve instruction, in that it may improve participants' professional practice. We hope to gain understandings that will help researchers in the future. If the study directly benefits participants, an explanation of the benefit may be included.

You will not be paid for participating in this study**.** There is no cost to participate in the study.

We will protect your information and make every effort to keep your personal information confidential, but we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. No information that could directly identify you will be shared in publications about this study. Electronic data files will be password-protected and stored on password-protected and/or encrypted devices. Data in hardcopies will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Consent forms will be stored separately from the data. The researcher and chair of this dissertation committee will be the only two individuals with access to the data and recordings. Any archived data will be anonymized. Data will be kept for a minimum of five years.

Your personal information may be shared outside the research study if required by law. We also may need to share your research records with other groups for quality assurance or data analysis. These groups include the Indiana University Institutional Review Board and its designees, and state or federal agencies who may need to access the research records (as allowed by law).

Information collected in this study may be used for other research studies or shared with other researchers for future research. If this happens, information that could directly identify you, such

as your name and other identifiers, will be removed before any information is shared. Since identifying information will be removed, we will not ask for your additional consent.

If you have questions about the study or encounter a problem with the research, contact the researcher, Teresa Brown,.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, to discuss problems, complaints, or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information or to offer input, please contact the IU Human Research Protection Program office at 800-696-2949 or at irb@iu.edu.

If you decide to participate in this study, you can change your mind and decide to leave the study at any time in the future. If you decide to withdraw, any data collected up to that point will be destroyed. After data collection has ended, participants can request data be removed from the study until it is aggregated or anonymized.

PARTICIPANT'S CONSENT

In consideration of all of the above, I agree to participate in this research study. I will be given a copy of this informed consent document to keep for my records.

Participant's Printed Name:_____

Participant's Signature:_____**Date**:_____

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent:_____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:_____**Date**:_____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol and Questions

I would like to record the interview so that I have a complete record of our conversation. May I have your permission to do so?

Begin Recording: Verbal Consent to Record

In this case study I am examining how women superintendents describe and enact leadership practices to improve instruction in their districts.

Within this interview, I will ask you a series of questions that aim to gather your insights about your leadership practices as a woman superintendent. As a reminder, you are not required to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. You may also skip questions should you wish to return to them. After some questions I will ask you a follow-up question. These are designed to elicit more information and obtain clarification. Now I would like to begin. Please state your name, your current school district of employment, and your current position.

Background Information

- Can you describe your background and pathway to the superintendency?
- When did you decide to become a superintendent?
    - Why did you decide to become a superintendent?
- How did your professional background prepare you to be a superintendent?
- What qualities do you bring to the superintendency?
    - Which qualities do you believe contribute to your success?
    - Which qualities do you believe detract from your success?

Role of Women Superintendents

- How do you define the role of superintendent?
- What do you believe makes serving as a female superintendent unique?
- How do you engage stakeholder groups in the school district in decision making?
- How do you involve them when making key decisions about teaching and learning?
- How have you developed relationships in your position?

Way of Leading

- How do you describe your way of leading?
- What experiences of leading were most important to your development as a leader?
- What experience of leading brings you joy or satisfaction? Describe the experience.
    - Is there another experience of leading that brings you joy or satisfaction? Describe the experience.

- What experience of leading has challenged you? Describe the challenge.
    - Is there another experience of leading that challenges you?
- When comparing yourself to other women or men in the role of superintendent, how do you see yourself as the same in your leadership practices?
- When comparing yourself to other women or men in the role of superintendent, how do you see yourself as different in your leadership practices?

Instructional Leadership

- How do you describe instructional leadership?
- How important is it that a superintendent is able to provide instructional support to district leaders?
- How do you intentionally support the improvement of instruction?
- What practices should a novice superintendent employ to establish herself as an instructional leader in a school district?

Challenges

- What roadblocks or barriers have you experienced as a superintendent?
- How did you overcome the barriers you experienced as a superintendent?

Closing

- Is there anything you would like to share about your experiences of leading a school district to improve instruction that we did not cover or you would like to explain further to clarify your viewpoint?

Thank you for your time to participate in my study. I greatly appreciate it. Do you have any questions about my study?

Appendix C

Document Collection Guide

I will collect the following documents throughout the duration of the research study. These documents will be used to corroborate participants' behaviors related to ways of leading and improvement of instruction. Documents will be stored on a secure file. Personally identifiable information will be removed prior to storing the data.

Examples of documents to be collected include:

- Samples of principal meeting agendas
- Strategic plans
- Samples of administrator evaluations
- Samples of professional learning agendas
- Classroom walk-thru expectations
- Samples of school board agendas and minutes

Appendix D

Data Collection Protocol

To: Research Participants

From: Teresa A. Brown
Doctoral Candidate
Indiana University

Subj: Documents Requested for Research Study

The purpose of this exploratory case study is to examine how women superintendents describe and enact instructional leadership practices that they perceive as supporting improvement of teaching and learning in their school districts. I am requesting that you provide copies of the following documents to assist me with my research. The documentation you provide should not contain identifiable information. The information will be stored securely.

The type of documents to be collected include:

- Samples of principal meeting agendas
- Strategic plans
- Samples of administrator evaluations
- Samples of professional learning agendas
- Classroom walk-thru expectations
- Samples of school board agendas and minutes

The information can be sent to Teresa Brown via email as a PDF document or U.S. Postal mail. My contact information is provided below.

Teresa Brown

I sincerely appreciate your participation in this research study.

Curriculum Vitae

Teresa A. Brown

Education

ED. D. | NOVEMBER, 2021 | INDIANA UNIVERSITY, BLOOMINGTON, IN

Major: Educational Leadership

Minor: Learning Sciences

Honors: Fay Arganbright Scholarship Fellowship; 2021 Dean F. Berkeley Emerging Leaders Award, IUSAA

ED. S. | 2011 | INDIANA STATE UNIVERSITY, TERRE HAUTE, IN

Major: School Administration

- Superintendent's License

MA | 1995 | BUTLER UNIVERSITY, INDIANAPOLIS, IN

Major: School Administration

- Principal's License

Honors/Activities: Eva Wiles Scholarship, Phi Delta Kappa

BA | 1986 | FRANKLIN COLLEGE, FRANKLIN, IN

Major: Elementary Education

Minor: Special Education

Honors/Activities: Dean's List (4 years), National Dean's List, Rho Lambda Panhellenic Honorary, Delta Zeta Sorority Vice President, Student Entertainment Board Chairperson, Junior Class Vice President, Society for Collegiate Journalists, Yearbook Editor, Laurels Honorary, Gold Quill Honorary, Top Ten Seniors, Senior Award for highest GPA.

Professional Experience

SUPERINTENDENT OF JENNINGS COUNTY SCHOOLS (4,200 STUDENTS) | NORTH VERNON, INDIANA | 2016-PRESENT

Vision, Mission, and Innovation:

- Formed a partnership with Indiana Public Broadcasting Stations to secure a 1.3 million GEER datacasting grant for statewide pilot.
- Collaborated with stakeholders to review multiple sources of data and revise the district Strategic Plan to address three priority areas: Keeping Kids in School; Improving Academic Achievement and Growth; Educating the Whole Child
- Created Parent and Student Advisory Groups for stakeholder input. I met monthly with both groups to provide students and parents a voice in decision making.

- Established STEM advisory board to study STEM and create a plan to launch STEM labs in each of six elementary schools
- Developed community partnerships with Cummins and local business and industries to create first Advanced Manufacturing Day and expanded curriculum offerings K-12
- Attended Apple briefings in Cupertino, CA, and Chicago, IL, to expand technology offerings in JCSC
- Created a Director of Social Emotional Learning and Director of STEM to drive identified district priorities: Both positions are reflected in our strategic plan.
- Provided all district personnel training in Trust Based Relational Interventions (TBRI) to address Social Emotional Learning priorities

Secured Grants for Identified Priorities:

- Jennings County Rural Development Grant, $200,000 ($50,000 for four years) to provide coaching and professional learning for staff in partnership with Indiana University and the Indiana Department of Education
- Governor's Education Grant 1.3 million: To Establish a partnership with IPBS and provide datacasting county wide as a statewide pilot site.
- Lilly Counseling Grant, $418,000
- STEM Summit Grant, $20,000: Able to send a team from JCMS to attend a 5-day summit to explore STEM planning and professional learning needs
- STEM Acceleration Grant, $75,000
- STEM Innovation Grant, $40,000
- Indiana University Woodrow Wilson Fellows Grant, $100,000: Two JCSC educators were able to attend IU for a principal and Kelly School of Business degree at no cost.
- Cummins Grants to assist with STEM implementation $148,000: Cummins provided funding for STEM labs for each of our six schools and provided furniture, resources and technical support.
- Indiana University INSITE Data Pilot Selection; one of ten districts; provided free data dashboard for district and schools.
- Playground Grant from Culturelle for $75,000 (National Winner)
- Ten Scholarships from Cummins for Six Sigma Training for STEM leaders
- Riley Hospital provided JCSC with a $5,000 grant for counseling materials

District Operations and Financial Management Experience:

- Initiated a safety and facility audit to assist with creating a 5-year facility improvement plan
- Secured two 5 million dollar bonds for district facility improvements
- Created a District Safety Team and instituted monthly meetings
- Implemented Universal Breakfast providing a free breakfast for every student every day
- Provided teachers and support staff salary increases and insurance stipends due to efficient fiscal management
- Created partnerships with local mental health providers to expand access for students

- Purchased transportation software to enable the district to map routes and operate more efficiently
- Secured meals mailed to homes for students through Baylor University/USDA program during COVID-19

District Instructional Leader and Collaborator:

- Established a mentoring program to assist new leaders
- Presented Principles of Learning to all eight school staffs
- Instituted book studies for principals and central office leaders
- Reorganized central office to better serve students and staff
- Secured new formative assessments to monitor and respond to student progress
- Hired instructional coaches for each school and established a system of support
- Implemented district and school walk-thru and coaching conversations to improve teaching and learning
- Led district to improved student growth and achievement as measured by ISTEP
- Trained all teachers in 6+1 Writing Traits to provide a framework for writing K-12
- Created a Professional Learning Center to provide a dedicated space for professional learning
- Jennings County Schools were recognized as Top 100 in 2020.

ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT | INDIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION | 2013-2017

Leadership:

- Created the Outreach Division of School Improvement and hired staff to provide grass roots support to local schools and districts
- Combined 11 separate areas into one Division of School Improvement to enable the Department to serve schools in a more intentional manner
- Oversight of compliance of Federal and State policy implementation in eleven departments of the School Improvement Center, which included Outreach, Family and Community Engagement, Grants Management, eLearning, College and Career Readiness, Federal Title programs, Migrant Education, English Learners, Early Learning, District Improvement, and Special Education
- Assisted 155 schools in improving student achievement from a D or F to an A, B or C through the development of intentional support systems and professional development programs
- Hired, trained, supported and supervised 25 Outreach field staff and 11 directors in the Division of School Improvement to monitor and provide professional development to support all schools with school improvement initiatives
- Oversight of Federal and State grants and programs including monitoring Title and non-Title schools, school quality reviews for schools with 4 years of “F,” conducted hearings for schools with 5 years of “F,” and supervised schools under the authority of the State Board of Education due to 6 or more consecutive years of “F”

- Wrote one third of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Waiver state plan with school improvement policies and supports for schools.

System Development and Innovation:

- Provided oversight for the development of a partnership between the University of Virginia and the Darden School of Business, the IDOE, and with Indiana districts in the area of systemic leadership development
- Designed the process, protocols and documents to provide monitoring and support for Indiana's Focus and Priority Schools
- Created Indiana's Student Achievement Plan, which was a supplement to the School Improvement Plan and used by Indiana's Focus and Priority Schools
- Created the State Development Network cohort 1 and 2 to support 16 school districts with system improvement and goals to decrease the achievement gap for student groups
- Collaboratively developed the IDOE strategic plan for the Division of School Improvement.

Policy and Advocacy Experience:

- Prepared student achievement results for the state legislature; was awarded 3 million for state turnaround school support
- Appointed as chairperson of SB 251 to lead the Out of School Learning Time Advisory Board and create a report for the 2017 legislative session
- Served as the lead IDOE staff to coordinate the graduation requirements task force
- Assisted in the creation and communication of Indiana's state plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
- Co-authored an article to assist school leaders: Decker, J. Brown, T. & Eckes, S. (2017). Student substance abuse and dependency: Legal and ethical responsibilities. NAASP's Principal Leadership, 17(5), 58-59.

Finance and Budgeting Experience:

- Developed a budget for the newly formed Outreach Division of School Improvement
- Managed contracts for vendors after issuing RFPs
- Developed the budget and oversight for estimated expenditures and complete budget narratives for $3 million state turnaround funds
- Oversight of federal grants division including Title I Part A Basic Grants (256 million), Title II Teacher Quality Grants (37.8 million), Title III Migrant Grants (5 million) and the Individuals with Disabilities Act, Part B (273 million)
- Oversight of Title I 1003a and 1003 grants (25 million) to assist local schools with school improvement initiatives
- Provided technical assistance to local principals and superintendents to better understand how to align school goals to federal and state grants to maximize funding and avoid excess carryover of funds.

Collaborative Relationships:

- Collaborated with the Assistant Superintendent of Operations to ensure the program and operation areas of the Department were working together to support school districts.
- Worked with IDOE support agencies Great Lakes Comprehensive Center, Mass Insight, AdvancED, and the Center for School Turnaround on organizational systems to provide technical assistance to local districts.
- Conducted weekly meetings with Department Directors to align work and facilitate conversations across School Improvement Divisions
- Participated with internal Department staff to review requests for school accountability school reconfiguration and baseline resets

Community Engagement:

- Collaborated with over 150 community and business partners to network and provide support for Indiana Schools
- Communicated and shared IDOE school improvement work with various groups: Urban League, higher education, workforce development, state-wide Family and Community Engagement group, Educational Service Centers, Superintendent Association, Principal Association, Teacher Association, and School Board Association etc.

PRINCIPAL | FRANKLIN TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS, THOMPSON CROSSING ELEMENTARY | 2008-2013

PRINCIPAL | OKALOOSA COUNTY SCHOOLS, BOB SIKES ELEMENTARY | 2007-2008

PRINCIPAL | SPEEDWAY CITY SCHOOLS, FRANK H. WHEELER ELEMENTARY | 2006-2007

PRINCIPAL | MILL CREEK COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, CASCADE MIDDLE SCHOOL | 2004-2006

PRINCIPAL | MILL CREEK COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, MILL CREEK EAST ELEMENTARY | 2001-2004

PRINCIPAL | SHELBYVILLE CENTRAL SCHOOLS, WILLIAM F. LOPER ELEMENTARY | 1997-2001

ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL | MSD OF DECATUR TOWNSHIP | 1994-1997

SUMMER SCHOOL DIRECTOR | MSD DECATUR TOWNSHIP, DECATUR MIDDLE SCHOOL | 1994

CLASSROOM TEACHER | MSD OF DECATUR TOWNSHIP | 1988-94

CLASSROOM TEACHER | INDIANAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOL#111 | 1986-88